

# THE NEW EXTREMISTS OF THE RIGHT

Do We Have Reason to be Concerned for Democracy?

*Richard Horchler*

If the ultra-rightist balloon has not already burst, it is at least losing its air at a rapid rate. Together with the other ultra-right anti-Communist crusader groups, the John Birch Society has been condemned by every important political figure in the nation, even Barry Goldwater; by spokesmen and official bodies representing all the major religions, including Catholics, Baptists and evangelicals; by every newspaper and magazine that is not itself an avowed part of the extremist-right propaganda apparatus, even such as the New York *Daily News* and William F. Buckley's *National Review*.

This virtually unanimous repudiation of the new American ultra is good political news, and a testament to the basic good sense of the majority of our citizens. It provides reassurance in the judgment and responsibility of the American people and those who would speak for them. And yet, paradoxically, the rise of the anti-Communist crusaders, their extraordinary success, even the manner of their (let us trust) decline—these aspects of the radical-right resurgence also provide certain grounds for concern about the future of a government of, by and for the people. They recall basic questions about democracy which have yet to be adequately answered.

The fact is that the present widespread national revulsion against the excesses of the anti-Communist crusades is due almost entirely to the original Bircher, Robert Welch himself. Mr. Welch was remarkably successful in making his organization felt on the national scene, but it was not merely his administrative skill which put the radical Rightists on the front pages. Dr. Fred C. Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, Dr. George S. Benson's National Education Program, the Rev. Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade were equally flourishing, million-dollar operations. One of the factors in the rise of the Birch Society to notoriety is that, unlike most of the other anti-Communist extremist groups, it was not confined to a geographical area, a religious affiliation, a social or economic class. But the overwhelming reason for the reaction against

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the Birch Society is that its leader was guilty of going "too far."

Robert Welch attacked those who had long been fair game to Right-wingers generally—liberals, intellectuals, unions, civil libertarians, internationalists, etc.—but he did not limit himself to such a "reasonable" list of enemies of the American way. He lumped together all the foregoing unfortunates and an additional roster which included 7,000 of the Protestant clergymen in the United States; one-half of one per cent of all Catholic priests (in effect, 273); the leaders of both the Democratic and Republican Parties; almost all institutions of higher learning; the American Medical Association; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; just about every newspaper and magazine; the radio and television networks; and more. It seemed that everybody was a "comsymp" to Mr. Welch except those who were as rabid as himself.

Furthermore, Mr. Welch's accusations went far beyond the innuendoes and generalities routinely hurled at "liberals" and "pinks." Not only did he invent the term "comsymp" to destroy "useless" distinctions between Communists and those who gave them aid and comfort, but he went so far as to make accusations of downright treason. Not only that, but he made them left and right.

Welch's privately circulated book *The Politician*—or Black Book, as it is also referred to—provided the really damning evidence of his "excessive zeal," as it has been called by sorrowing conservatives. In this book, written in 1958 but circulated by the author up until last year, Welch spelled out his theories in detail and, disastrously for his cause, he named names. Everyone has read at least some of these charges—that the late John Foster Dulles was "a Communist agent," that Milton Eisenhower is "an outright Communist," that President Dwight D. Eisenhower is "a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." Less has been heard of the similar charges against other Americans, such as Philip Jessup or Charles E. Bohlen, who had been pursued by the Right wing for years.

Having attacked President Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, practically every prominent Republican and Democrat, practically every organized group and profession in the country, Welch left himself no allies at all. He attacked the major Protestant churches, outraged Catholics even with his modest one-half of one per cent comsymp accusation, and revealed himself as an associate and endorser of known anti-Semites. His statements against integration and the Negro civil rights movement were not overtly racist, but the John Birch Society included racists as officers and the direction of its policies was sufficient to antagonize any Negro.

No wonder that Robert Welch and the Birch Society were condemned on every side. No wonder that even the most conservative of politicians and political commentators hastened to divest themselves of what had clearly become an albatross. But the manner in which most of them repudiated Welch was not overly reassuring. The primary—and often the only—reason for rejecting the leadership of Welch was that he was damaging the cause of anti-Communism. And even as the “excesses” of Robert Welch were deplored by “responsible” Right-wingers, many of them indulged in their familiar dark insinuations about “Leftists,” “liberals,” the slanted press, etc. The *National Review*, for instance, disassociated itself from Robert Welch in a long and agonized editorial, but in the same issue it linked pacifists, Negro students who participated in anti-segregation demonstrations, CORE, professors who spoke against fallout shelters, SANE and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee; in view of Mrs. Sarah McClendon’s accusation of two State Department employees as security risks, it hinted that “the entire question of internal security may now be wide open. And that the hunting will be very good.”

This is not to say that the “respectable” conservatives who repudiated Robert Welch, if not the John Birch Society, were insincere. It is not to say that agreeing with Welch and other radical Rightists up to a point is not significantly different from agreeing with them beyond that point. But it is to say that many of those who rejected Birchism—because it was hurting the anti-Communist cause or even because it urged the subversion of democracy through Communist methodology—nevertheless continue to hold attitudes and presumptions which are intimately related to John Birchism.

A pertinent footnote on the rise and fall of the Birch Society was offered by Professor Alan F. Westin in his *Commentary* article of August 1961, “The John Birch Society: Fundamentalism on the Right.” Professor Westin pointed out that last April a Gallup

Poll discovered that thirty-nine million Americans had heard of the John Birch Society. Of these, 47 per cent had an unfavorable estimate of the Society; 8 per cent were favorable; and 45 per cent were undecided. As Professor Westin says, these figures indicate an overwhelming disapproval of the Birchers, but they also indicate that at the time when the Society was receiving its most damaging publicity—when Welch’s charges against President Eisenhower *et al.* were being widely publicized—there were still three million Americans who believed it to be a commendable organization. If those who were undecided are divided in the same proportion as those who had an opinion, this would add another two and a half million persons to the supporters of the Birch Society. The total makes five and a half million Americans, and not of the entire national population but of the thirty-nine million best informed, most politically conscious.

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How is this to be explained? What has happened to make these millions of Americans ready to embrace doctrines so patently hysterical and absurd? The experience of McCarthyism is barely behind us, and it was only yesterday that our political analysts were saying that the ugliness of McCarthyism was a valuable albeit painful lesson for the nation. Why was the lesson not learned?

Some commentators see the explanation for the resurgence of radical Right extremism in the growing strength of Protestant fundamentalism, and there seems to be a definite connection between them. The anti-intellectualism, anti-modernism and nativism of the radical right has much in common with fundamentalist convictions. They converse in opposition to the “social gospel,” to racial integration, to ecumenism, to internationalism, to any departure from the ways of our fathers. But religious belief will not fully explain the origins of the new anti-Communist crusaders.

It is true that Welch is a Baptist, as was the Society’s “martyr,” John Birch. It is true, too, that many radical Right leaders and followers are fundamentalists, especially in the South and West. But some of the crusaders are Methodist, some Presbyterian. Moreover, Welch claims that forty to fifty per cent of the Birch Society membership is Catholic; certainly some of his most vociferous supporters are Catholic, including some as well known as Clarence Manion and Father Richard Cinder. If it is fundamentalism which animates the radical Rightists, it is a fundamentalism which cuts across all denominational lines, and hence becomes not very useful as

an index to their origins and composition.

Other students of the radical Right movement, like Alan Westin, use the word fundamentalist to refer to a type, found on both Left and Right in the political spectrum, and explain this type in psychological and sociological terms. This seems a much more fruitful approach, but I am not content with the conclusion that fundamentalists (Left or Right) are a constant element in our society, cropping up now as Wobblies or Populists, now as Know-Nothings or Silver Shirts. The literature of the John Birch Society reveals certain characteristics, it seems to me, which are peculiarly related to contemporary life, and which contain some disturbing implications for the future.

For instance, the anxiety which is the most striking characteristic of Robert Welch's writings may be typical of men like him in any age, but certainly it is increasingly prevalent in our times. Welch and his followers are obviously frightened people, and what they are frightened of is a world which has got out of their control, a world in which the copy-book maxims they have all their lives been taught to cherish have suddenly been declared obsolete. They may say that what is threatening them is the Communist conspiracy, but what they really mean by that is the loss of American power and prestige, the decline of religion, the rise of the non-white races, thinking machines, non-objective painting, the probability of life on other planets, and so on—in one way or another, the destruction or defiance of what was, and was therefore right.

It is this fear of a world turned strange and hostile, I believe, which lies beneath every aspect of the Welch or John Birch aberration. It explains the conviction of persecution which runs through all of the John Birch Society literature, the recurring alerts to members in anticipation of attack from this or that quarter, Welch's frequently expressed fear that one day the Communists will succeed in murdering him, the fascination with "martyrdom" (is it coincidental that John Birch was a "martyr"?). It explains the unshakable belief in conspiracy and treachery on every side.

For those who are besieged, as the John Birchers say they are, eternal vigilance is the first necessity, not only against the enemy without but against the possibility of the traitor within. The second greatest virtue is steadfastness or immovability, the opposite of flexibility or changeability. In these terms the apostle of change is *ipso facto* the enemy, and the apostle of change turns out to be the liberal, the scholar, the intellectual. Since the tools of the enemy are words, logic and argument, they must be rejected out of hand by those who would resist him;

indeed, the more plausible the arguments appear the more dangerous and vicious they prove themselves to be. The true Welchite is therefore impervious to reason. An appeal to reason is itself an indication of the "comsymp," the purveyor of what Welch labels "the two sides to every argument line." Thus the unabashed, even triumphant incoherence of radical Right principles, the contempt for the laws of evidence and logic.

To those under siege, further, the worst part of their ordeal is frustration. And it is this feeling, no doubt, which impels Welch and his disciples to what he calls "direct action." Since the enemy has taken over the political parties, the government, all our social institutions, there is no hope of combating him through any normal, "peacetime" channel. The only way to strike back is through the sudden sortie out of the bastion, the hit-and-run raid on the P.T.A., the minister, the storekeeper, the school board.

Other characteristics of the Robert Welch outlook fall equally into place when these basic feelings of entrapment and menace are understood. For instance, in the desperate, all-threatening situation described by Welch, any distinction between the "comsymp" and the Communist is indeed inconsequential, a technicality without any practical significance whatever. Similarly, talk of moderation and fair play is patently ridiculous in a struggle to the death between the forces of darkness and the last desperate remnants of God's own army. From this conception of the nature of the battle comes also the obsession with manliness, toughness, the satisfaction in self-styled "dirty tactics"; ". . . this is not a cream-puff war we are in and the stakes are not those of a pillow fight." Right-wing fascination with firearms is easy to understand on a symbolic level, but Welch, like the random groups of Minutemen which have sprung up around the country, seems actually to believe that the possession of arms by private citizens will somehow deter the Communist takeover—and, of course, that government regulation of the possession of firearms is clearly Communist-inspired.

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Now this recitation of the fears and reactions discernible in the workings of the Birch Society may be counted as no more than commentary on a paranoid type, but I am struck by another conclusion. It is that, with important modifications of course, the anguish of the Welchite, and the way he tries to deal with it, are in many ways like the anguish and responses of the ordinary American citizen, or even the American people, as we sometimes use that phrase. The facts of life in the mod-

ern world—internationally, most obviously, but at home as well—are indeed radically changing the fundamental context of our lives, and the response of a great many Americans to these facts is very often as futile, irrational and destructive as the response of Robert Welch himself.

Quite apart from the “extremists,” consider the extent and character of anti-communism in our society. Consider the continued power of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the hysterical outcry over the possibility of China’s admission to the UN, the clamor against the very existence of Castro’s Cuba. Look at what fills our newspapers and magazines, any day or any week. So strong is the national preoccupation with anti-communism, in fact, that according to some of our legislators the only sure way to win public or Congressional support for such things as civil rights, health, highway construction or even school-lunch measures is to represent them as necessary in the fight against communism.

Take account too of the massive resistance to racial integration, by law in the South, by housing, job and other extra-legal forms of discrimination in the North. Consider the national impatience with civil rights protection for anyone counted “beyond the pale.” Consider the steady current of anti-intellectualism in our thought. Consider the opposition to the UN because of its alleged infringements on “national sovereignty.”

One can also note the fixation of contemporary advertising with masculinity and strength, the outdoor men of action, square-jawed and tattooed. And what of the growing national interest in firearms? Hospital statistics show a strange phenomenon for the last few years: an enormous increase in gunshot wounds of the foot or leg, self-inflicted by young men, of voting age, who have bought themselves six-guns and have been practicing the quick draw. A few weeks ago the *National Review*, Right-wing but not lunatic Right, carried an ad for a six-gun, and the advertising message was a routine claim of workmanship, balance, etc., as though a six-shooter were the most natural thing in the world to want and to buy.

Obviously, all this does not prove that we are a nation of Robert Welches or incipient Robert Welches. But it does suggest, I think, that the fears, confusions and irrationalities of the radical Right extremists are more pervasive in our society than we might like to think. And, since the pressures which have produced these conditions—the strain of living in the shadow of the Bomb, the frustrations of foreign policy objectives, racial tensions at home, living

in an ever more complicated technological culture—are likely to increase rather than decrease in future years, aberrations like these may become increasingly serious and dangerous in our national life.

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These considerations also point up, I think, an even more basic concern for the future, concern at the growing chasm in our culture between popular values and what might be called serious values. The harsh truth is that most of the traditional American myths have largely lost their relevance. The virtues of our forebears—industry, thrift, and common sense—are no longer the keys to success or even survival in the post-nuclear age. The values of the frontier—manly vigor, physical courage, self-reliance—have likewise become insufficient, even irrelevant.

Many Americans have accepted these facts and are coming to terms with the new reality of a planned, automated, “post-modern” society, and they tend to become the influentials, members of the so-called Establishment. Many more, however, will not or cannot surrender the myths and slogans of yesterday—they regard it as a betrayal to do so—and it is these latter who are chiefly determining our popular culture. Increasingly, therefore, a cleavage grows between those books, magazines, newspapers and TV programs which have anything to do with the real questions and issues of our times, and those that seek—and find—popular acceptance by limiting themselves to the unreal, the irrelevant, the trivial.

To acknowledge these various difficulties and dangers is not, I submit, to confess a loss of faith in democracy. In fact, I believe such acknowledgement demonstrates the only kind of faith in democracy which is able to protect and sustain it. And that is a faith like that of Jefferson, who believed that democracy depends on two things, full participation and an educational system—including a press—which would insure a responsible participation. Both of these elements demand continuous encouragement and development. Neither has had it, and we are now facing the consequences of our dereliction.

Concerning the John Birch Society and its counterparts, then, I believe they are a transient eruption. But I fear also that the conditions which brought about such a phenomenon are continuing and deeply rooted in our national life. If that is true, we may see for a time in America how badly democracy can work, as we have seen at other times how well it can work. Yet whatever these years bring, we will have no cause to surrender our faith in democracy. As Lincoln asked, in his First Inaugural address: “Is there any better, or equal, hope in the world?”