

# Extremist Takeover of the Right has Roots in the Past

Founded in secret in 1958 by a wealthy, retired candy manufacturer Robert Welch. **The John Birch Society**, at its peak, had about sixty to a hundred thousand members, combining wealthy manufacturers, businesspeople and elites with upwardly mobile suburbanites. They viewed themselves, essentially, as shock troops trying to educate the public about the alleged communist conspiracy that they said was destroying the United States. Also known for its opposition to the civil rights movement, antisemitism, a willingness to harass and intimidate political enemies and spreading conspiracy theories.

With their activism, money, and energy they pushed issues onto the agenda that others were not talking about. They could dominate news cycles. They could get people to respond to them and their ideas. They could be a kind of force and people would have to take notice.

The Birchers combined right-wing politics with culture wars and helped forge an alternative political tradition on the far right. Core ideas were an anti-establishment, apocalyptic, more violent mode of politics, conspiracy theories, anti-interventionism and a more explicit racism and they were some of the first people on the right to take up questions of public morality, of Christian evangelical politics - banning sex education in schools, trying to insert what they called patriotic texts into libraries and into the classroom. And so they were quite early to the issue of abortion and a set of issues that would become known as the culture wars, trying to teach the public about the threats from a liberalizing culture.

Birch women capitalized on changes in the culture. It became more acceptable, for women to go outside of the home to work not just in the workforce but to be active politically. Opposing busing in the schools, opposing civil rights, they were trying to take over PTAs and local school boards to take down mainstream conservatives allied with Richard Nixon - their ends, essentially reactionary, harkened back to an early 20th century notion of culture and gender identity - but at the same time, they were extremely active in the struggle for power in the United States. And, of course, that's one of the interesting paradoxes or contradictions at the core of the movement.

The John Birch Society did not have an explicit business agenda, although about half of the founders came out of the **National Association of Manufacturers**, and they came out of this ultra-conservative wing. They had a fairly radical vision of the free market. They were deeply opposed to labor unions. They wanted a free enterprise system that was unencumbered by government regulations, where the New Deal, essentially, did not exist. And they viewed these rules and regulations as part of a creeping communist plot, essentially, that was slowly moving the United States toward where the Soviet Union was.

They were not all business executives. They were interested in issues of morality and changes in the culture. They wanted to fight the **United Nations**. One of their slogans was get the U.S. out of the U.N. And so they thought that the whole post-World War II international order was corrupt and also dominated by international socialists, that the United States had, essentially, ceded its sovereignty to these international bodies. And they had a whole - and they were Christian, and they believed in imposing a Christian morality on the culture at large. So they had a number of ideas that were driving them but all labeled under the idea that they were communist-inspired.

One of the things and the far right today has in common is conspiracy theories.

The most infamous conspiracy theory was something that Welch promoted, although he did try to later walk it back to some extent or distance it from the Birch Society. And that was, of course, his charge that Dwight Eisenhower, the hero of D-Day, was a dedicated agent of the communist conspiracy.

Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement - and this was, I think, a more successful example - that King and civil rights was directed by the Kremlin, that it was a plot - a communist plot, not an organic struggle on the part of African Americans and some white Americans to achieve racial justice and social equality. It was actually a foreign movement and that African Americans were being manipulated, essentially, by the Kremlin in support of civil rights.

They opposed civil rights on many levels. Their most hated decision was - **Brown v. Board of Education**, which mandated desegregation of schools. They opposed busing. They opposed the whole civil rights movement.

The Birch Society denied emphatically that they were racist, and they denied emphatically that they were antisemitic. They pointed to the existence of a handful of African Americans and Jewish Americans who were members of the movement. And it's true that they did have some Jewish Americans, they had some African Americans in the Birch Society. They also occasionally tried to police their ranks. There were times where they did try to expel people, but they also drew a lot of racists and a lot of antisemites to their ranks.

The conspiracy theories were of a piece with what the **KKK** and white supremacists were arguing.

One conspiracy theory was fluoride in the water. In the 1950s, there were fears about government regulation of the public health, the government oversight and really the idea that government was going to tell you what to put in your body. Conspiracy theorists usually do not have a single conspiracy theory, they are often conspiracy entrepreneurs. They are selling a product. And they are very effective salespeople. It's no accident that a salesperson headed this organization, he understood how to market a product.

They saw this as part of a larger federal leviathan - a federal effort to run and ruin the lives of Americans and tell them basically what to put inside their bodies. And so they viewed it as



socialism run amok; what they saw as the conspiracy, the communist conspiracy inside America.

It occurs in the context of proliferating theories about the federal government and about what the federal government was doing to destroy America, to destroy American liberties. And it was also very localized. It was right in everyone's community. So it was, in some ways, a perfect issue for the Birch Society.

Welch and many of his fellow founders looked around them, and they estimated that communists dominated 60, 70% of American life and major American institutions, including the federal government. So the idea was that they were going to take the fight to the communists, but not through the two-party political system. They were going to primarily take the fight through a mass education campaign because it was only by educating the masses that they felt they could save the country in time.

Welch organized the John Birch Society in secret, and invited several wealthy white men to be founding members. And he told them, this is totally off the record. It's totally in secret. You can't tell anybody. At one point he told them not to coordinate their hotels and if anyone asked, to just say they were there on business. He saw communists everywhere, more or less, and he did not want what he saw as his enemies and the enemies of this burgeoning movement to get wind of this movement, because he wanted this movement to be the most forceful, strongest anti-communist movement in the United States. And he wanted to build it up, to get it up to speed before the communists got wind of it and could destroy it. And so he believed that it had to be secret. And that's in part why they set up front groups so that they could hit the enemy, through individual issues on individual campaigns without exposing the larger effort, that John Birch Society, that was behind the front.

Impeach Justice Earl Warren was one of their most successful. The chief justice of the Supreme Court - they saw him as not only the architect of the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision, but as responsible for a number of decisions that gave the communists inroads into America, including a ban on prayer in public schools or giving more rights to criminal defendants. The Birch Society, through this front group, was able to erect billboards set all around the country that said, help save our republic - impeach Earl Warren. And these became sort of iconic. They failed in impeaching him.

Welch understood that they were not going to impeach him. As Welch said of the campaign:

**"We knew we weren't going to win,  
or it was unlikely that we were going  
to achieve a victory.  
But by the time we're finished,  
the enemy will know that we were there."**

But again, as he said time and again, whether the front group was support your local police or committee against summit entanglements, which was an effort to oppose and disrupt the Dwight Eisenhower-Nikita Khrushchev summit in late 1950s America, they wanted to take the fight to the enemy, let the enemy know that they were there and they wanted to build momentum for their cause. And so the billboards became iconic because people who - it was a firm minority of the country, who felt that way could rally behind what they saw as this almost shocking, grassroots, in-your-face campaign to completely upend the New Deal and what was seen as, at the time, as the liberal consensus.

The Birch Society wanted to make inroads into politics, with an emphasis, at least early on, on local and state politics. They didn't get that far, although they did have a number of wins. They were able to win some local races for school boards. Welch had advised people to take over the local PTA. They were able to do that. There were a small handful of Birchers who were members of Congress - John Rousselot, Edgar Hiestand. I think, in total, over its history, Birch members maybe had four or five members of Congress. The greatest success, though happened in the 1962 midterm campaigns and then in 1964. They were able to help defeat Richard Nixon, the former vice president running for California governor. They were able to back one of his opponents, a guy named Joe Shell, and take about a third of the primary vote. And that really hurt Nixon in the general election in '62.

And then, of course, most famously, in '64, many Birchers loved Barry Goldwater. They saw him as a true conservative. And Goldwater, of course - his famous proclamation from the San Francisco Cow Palace Convention stage in 1964 - **extremism in defense of liberty is no vice**. That really spoke to the Birchers, and they thrilled to that. But even though they helped nominate Barry Goldwater, some of them, quickly soured on Barry Goldwater and other more mainstream conservatives, and by the late '60s, they were backing a third-party candidate, George Wallace. And by 1972, they were backing other third-party candidates, Birch Society leaders - John Schmitz and Tom Anderson, who received about 1% of the 1972 presidential vote - did not do very well. But they were really on the outskirts, in a sense, of the two-party system at that point.

They used hate and harassment to intimidate political opponents. The Birchers hated Richard Nixon. An aide to Nixon and a very prominent supporter, Patricia Hitt, who was on a Republican county committee in Southern California, described in an oral history being the target of late-night phone calls harassing her, phone calls at all hours of the day. She and her husband had to switch to an unlisted number. They were getting hate mail. And she said that Birch members were calling people - voters in the community - and calling her, branding her a socialist, a communist, a pinko. And she was defeated. And she described them actually as,

**"haters beyond anything I've ever seen in my life."**

Because of so much antisemitism within the Birch Society it was infiltrated by the **Anti-Defamation League** with a spy operation known as the Birch Watchers. To the ADL, the Birchers harkened back to authoritarian movements in Nazi Germany, but also McCarthyism. And to a lot of leaders of the ADL, in the 1950s and '60s, inaction was not acceptable because they had seen what had happened, of course, when brownshirts were allowed to basically run amok. The ADL was tracking a lot of people on the far right, including white supremacists, and they got wind of a new organization that was becoming active, especially in the northeastern United States, where the Birchers were being tracked. And the ADL was looking for examples of antisemitism, of anti-Black racism, threats of violence, statements against democracy. And they wanted to expose what they saw as this kind of cesspool of hate.

And, as one of the anti-defamation leaders said in the early '50s, we need, **"ammunition in the war for democracy."** And they viewed it as a war to safeguard democracy where Jewish Americans and other minority groups could be safe.

The ADL found out that the Birchers were going to a gun store and purchasing large caches of weapons. There were instances of Birch members giving speeches or talks in which, for example, they said the bones found at Buchenwald there were actually U.S. soldiers killed by Soviet communists, not Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The John Birch Society originally was organized into chapters of no more than 20 people modeled after communist cells. Welch and some of the other founders were fairly open about how they would mimic some of the tactics of their enemies, which they thought were quite effective. They thought that communists had succeeded in taking over much of the United States, so they wanted to steal a page from their playbook.

Any time a chapter hit 20 people, a new chapter had to be formed. And the chapters were not allowed to talk to each other. So the idea was that chapters could not get into fights with one another, they couldn't overlap, that it would all be kind of controlled from the top. It didn't work out that way in practice, but that was the theory at least.

The Birch Society still exists. But it starts to fade as an organization in the early '70s. Two things contributed to its demise. One was the pushback from liberals, groups like the Anti-Defamation League, the NAACP, the mass media, politicians from both parties. I do think that they had an effect. The second thing, though, was that the Birch Society became more radical and more beset by internal dissension. And it had more white supremacists, more violent individuals. And it essentially burned itself out.

The assumption a lot of people had, is that if **MAGA** Republicans, Trump Republicans, if they lose enough elections, they might get pushed to the side because the only thing that will do that is enough defeat. And yet, three election defeats in a row and they're still not pushed aside.

Extracted from an interview with author and historian

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## Who was John Birch?

On Aug. 25, 1945— a 26-year-old Army Air Force captain named John Birch was killed by communists in China at the twilight of World War II, after Japan announced its surrender. Some 13 years later, the John Birch Society—named for the young soldier—was founded to expose what they saw as rampant communism within the United States.

Born in Landour, India, to missionary parents, his family returned to the U.S. in 1939 when he was two.

Birch graduated from Georgia's Baptist-controlled Mercer University. **"He was always an angry young man, always a zealot,"** says a classmate. **"He felt he was called to defend the faith, and he alone knew what it was."** Says a psychology professor: **"He was like a one-way valve: everything coming out and no room to take anything in."**