

THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY: ITS HISTORY, PLATFORM, AND IMPACT

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This essay uses existing scholarship to examine the founding, rise, and current standing of the ultra-conservative group known as the John Birch Society. At its inception, the John Birch society prioritized isolationist, protectionist policy to secure the United States against communism, alleging communist plots even within the government. These accusations secured its status as a conspiracist group early in its lifetime. The Society found the majority of its support and lobbying through grassroots organizing by using local factions of the group to encourage members to engage. Today, they still work to combat “Big Government” and encourage economic protectionism and isolationism through grassroots campaigns. Although the John Birch Society began as an extremist offshoot of the Republican Party, this essay demonstrates that the modern Republican Party has shifted to the point that the two are indistinguishable, signaling a massive ideological shift in the Republican Party and the significance of extremist groups. This research could be used as a broader study to understand the rise of ultra-right conspiracy groups and their role in the increasing radicalism in the American right.

I. Introduction

The objective of this paper, broadly speaking, is to provide a comprehensive outline of the conservative American political advocacy group known as the John Birch Society. In order to fulfill this task, the report will inspect the founding and history of the John Birch Society, the current status of the group, how such a status has evolved over time, the political presence and activity of the Society, and its central legislative priorities. It is imperative to note at the outset of this paper that the John Birch Society's influence as a political advocacy group has waned considerably since its heyday; despite this, recent ideological and electoral shifts in the Republican Party, and on the political right at-large, have been reflective of numerous ideologies espoused by the group. This report will thus pay special attention to that which propelled the John Birch Society into existence, and how a group often confined to the fringe continues to affect policymaking in the present day, even if this influence is less direct than that of other groups.

II. The Early History and Founding Ideology of the John Birch Society

While most reports concerning a certain interest group are more likely to speak of the nature of that group as it exists in the present day, a study of the John Birch Society warrants a closer look at its foundational ideologies and early growth patterns. Much of what drove the Society into being remains instrumental to its functioning today. In a broader sense, an examination of how this interest group contributed to policymaking and political rhetoric, some of which exists beyond the efforts of their direct involvement, demands a look at what caused these views to first become embedded.

Robert W. Welch, Jr. (1899-1985), made his fortune working for his brother's confectionery manufacturing firm, the James O. Welch Company. Beyond the candy-making

industry, Welch was a political activist and organizer who devoted much of his resources to the promotion of his staunchly conservative, anti-communist views. The John Birch Society was founded by Welch and a small group of men in December of 1958 at a conference in Indianapolis; Welch had elected to name the group, and thus center its whole identity, around the then little-known John Birch, a Baptist missionary and American Air Force officer. Birch had been stationed in China when, for reasons not entirely known, he was executed by officers of the Chinese Communist Party. Welch thus regarded Birch as the first American casualty of the Cold War, and claimed the federal government had attempted to conceal the details of his death from the public. It was this attitude, one of grave distrust and suspicion toward institutions of government, of constant unrest about the security of the nation and the loyalties of those within, which would characterize the John Birch Society as the group became politically active.

The John Birch Society immediately benefited from the wealth of several of its founding members; the oil engineer Fred C. Koch, father of Charles and David Koch, was influential in the founding of the group, as were other affluent industrialists, such as Harry Lynde Bradley and Robert Waring Stoddard. The Society's ideological positions were protectionist, isolationist, and apocalyptic from the outset. Welch alleged the existence of a "conspiratorial cabal of internationalists, greedy bankers, and corrupt politicians"¹ who were endeavoring to relinquish American sovereignty in favor of a socialist New World Order. Traitorous actors within the American government were suspected of acting in concert with the Soviet Union, in order to turn the nation over to a collectivist, worldwide government controlled by the latter. Welch thus viewed any evidence indicating collectivism and socialism in society as a gradual step in the process to this ultimate conversion to communism. According to Welch, "You have only a few more years before the country in which you live will become four separate provinces in a

¹ Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, (Western Islands, 1961), Introduction.

world-wide Communist dominion ruled by police state methods from the Kremlin.”² In this way, the John Birch Society can be seen as having formed under the “disturbance theory” of interest groups: it assumed a covert operation to betray the United States to this international “uniparty,” and sought to deploy the resources of its prominent members to counter this internal invasion.

The Society’s membership grew quite rapidly as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, this is attributable to a twofold series of developments. The first pertains to the manner in which Welch and other founding Birchers endeavored to organize and structure the group. Power was to be concentrated heavily at the top and distributed downwards in a highly-controlled manner. Local chapters of the John Birch Society were intended to be very small in number and meet frequently; if a chapter became too large, it was supposed to splinter into two. Ironically, the tightly-regulated nature which Welch first brought to the John Birch Society resembled the strictness of the anathematic communist regimes. Welch’s ability to effectively organize and mobilize people to work on the ground was instrumental in the J.B.S. ’s proliferation into the political arena. The Society did rely upon methods of spreading information not unseen in other groups, such as pamphleteering and public speaking engagements; but it is the unconventional nature of their platform which distinguished them from most political advocacy organizations. Thus is the nature of the second factor which the Society’s rapid growth can be attributed to: the propagation of ideas so conservative that they were radical and conspiratorial in nature, but which nonetheless caused membership to blossom at the same time. One prominent effort of the J.B.S. was, and continues to be, voracious resistance to international organizations such as the United Nations, in the form of their long-running “Get US Out! Of the U.N.” rallying cry. But it was not merely within large, influential groups or associations that the Society detected a degree

² Charles J Stewart, “The Master Conspiracy of the John Birch Society: From Communism to the New World Order,” *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 4 (2002): 423, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310209374748>.

of perversion and anti-American sentiment. Various campaigns were also concentrated at the state and local levels of politics and government. J.B.S. leadership began what was then the novel practice of encouraging members to become involved in their local Parent-Teacher Associations and school board elections, so as to prevent these groups from also becoming infiltrated with collectivist and communist positions. It is clear then, that the John Birch Society detected the opportunity for treachery in any place where political organization occurred, no matter how large or small the issue or forum may have been.

The most controversial belief espoused by the Society came into public view by the summer of 1960, when it was revealed that Welch had implicated President Eisenhower in his assertion of a communist conspiracy. He wrote: “With regard to Eisenhower, it is difficult to avoid raising the question of deliberate treason.”³ One can detect parallels between the boldness of this claim and the charges leveled by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Where they differ, though, is in the resultant effects of these assertions. McCarthy eventually fell from power and was censured by the Senate before dying young in relative disgrace. Both Welch and the John Birch Society, however, were able to withstand the torrent of criticism which came with accusing the honorable Eisenhower of treason. This is not to say that there was not some fallout; William F. Buckley, Jr. swiftly disavowed the group and became a prominent critic of the Society and its ideology as he attempted to rid the political right of its influence.

The post-World War II political climate was marked saliently by the Red Scare and the United States’ policy of containment toward the Soviet Union, developments which precipitated the Society’s founding. However, the communist paranoia had died down to a certain degree, and men such as Buckley endeavored to make the conservative movement more politically viable,

³ Lisa Graves, “The Koch Brothers: The Extremist Roots Run Deep,” *The Progressive Magazine*, July 10, 2014, <https://progressive.org/latest/koch-brothers-extremist-roots-run-deep/>.

such that it represented a stable force born out of legitimate political tradition, rather than a hastily-deployed reactionary weapon. The question which remains, is how the John Birch Society was able to remain prominent enough, despite criticism from Buckley and others, such that its membership continued to expand throughout the 1960s. Certain political scientists and historians have charged that the Society's presence in this decade was formidable enough to grant it unofficial third-party status, due to its influence upon political discourse in general. Despite its overtly conservative position, it did not always align with the traditional conservative causes of the time. For example, the Society believed the country's involvement in Vietnam to be another element of the planned communist takeover, and urged the United States to remove itself from the war. One can detect a similarity between this rhetoric and the isolationist bent of the Republican Party today, and thus also the beginning of a serious divergence about foreign policy within the political right.

In looking at the development pattern of the John Birch Society throughout the 1960s, an observer will find that much of its growth can be attributed to its enhancement and expansion of usual ways in which interest groups reached the public, and also to the deployment of new strategies. The Society organized various grassroots lobbying campaigns to rally citizens around a myriad of issues, all of which linked back to the grand conspiracy which Welch and the Birchers alleged. Several letter-writing campaigns and petition drives were initiated to spread awareness about particular concerns, and a robust publishing arm of the Society emerged so that the platform could be better understood by the public. The J.B.S. launched a magazine known as *American Opinion*, whose publication continues today under the name *The New American*. Its purpose is to cover the same issues which a Society meeting or other engagement would highlight, and the magazine soon became a ubiquitous presence around the country. It also

established a publishing subsidiary known as Western Islands, which continues to produce the aforementioned magazine and other literature relevant to the J.B.S. platform, along with various books which align with the Society's views. The subject matters driving these political mobilization attempts and literature publications ran the gamut from large to small, federal to local. One prominent and long-running campaign was centered around identifying grounds of impeachment for Chief Justice Earl Warren, a prime target of the Society. Another long-running campaign endeavored to deploy resources and people at the local, school board level to oppose the introduction of sexual education into the curriculum. Some of the causes almost seem facetious; the Society at one point alleged that the government-mandated fluoridation of drinking water was part of a communist mind-control plot; they were also against the establishment of Earth Day, claiming it too was a communist scheme.

Despite the varying nature of the issues at hand, they were each held in common through their role in the great conspiracy: an invasion of the Soviet Union's communist doctrine systematically carried out from within the country, from both the Chief Justice's bench and the kitchen faucet. Welch and the J.B.S. were thus successful in broadening the scope of conflict around the Red Scare; the issue became salient in every aspect of American political and social life, and outlived the lifespan it had within the political mainstream through the John Birch Society. In this way, the Society was in some ways a single-issue group at this time, since countering the communist infiltration was its principal goal. However, the far-reaching nature of this supposed invasion plunged the J.B.S. into the center of multiple issues. This helps explain why the Society was never restricted in its membership; there were never racial or religious barriers to entry, since Welch perceived this threat great enough to involve all citizens, regardless

of sectional or personal affiliations. This was commonly utilized as the grounds for a defense against charges that the J.B.S. was a racially prejudiced or antisemitic organization.

III. Later History and Present Status

By the end of the 1960s, the John Birch Society had arguably matured into its place among conservative political advocacy groups in the United States. Though its membership information is not readily available, it is thought to have peaked in the middle of that decade at about one hundred thousand. The social upheaval which marked the 1960s provided the Society with plenty of material to continue its assertion of the communist conspiracy. During this time period, the nature of the conspiracy was altered, as the necessary foundation was already set. One example of this widening can be observed as the civil rights movement unfolded; the Society charged not that the effort had fallen victim to communist infiltration, but was entirely manufactured by them from the outset. Thus, the urgency of the J.B.S.'s message assumed new significance here. The subversion was not confined merely to a charge leveled against a sitting public official; rather, an entire social movement, in which various groups and entities participated in at differing levels, was implicated. This is the manner in which the John Birch Society has been able to remain influential in some ways: by arousing suspicion and concern over an issue for which the entire potential is uncertain and remains to be fleshed out. It is not difficult to radicalize people against a possibly destructive cause, especially when different motives and approaches exist within that cause, as seen in the civil rights issue. The John Birch Society today ardently combats that which it perceives as "big government" intervention and obstruction in the lives of ordinary American citizens. It also advocates for economic protectionism and isolationism. To create national civil rights legislation is an example of the federal government's potential to overreach, just as a free trade agreement or international

security organization is. There is clearly an emphasis placed on highlighting how dangerous policies contradicting their political philosophy are. In this way, the underlying mission and the means utilized to effect it have not changed since the Society's founding.

It can be said that the history of the John Birch Society can be divided into two periods: before and after the death of Robert Welch in 1985. Much of the J.B.S.'s expansion can be attributed to Welch's tight organizational style and promotion of then-new grassroots lobbying efforts. After his death, the Society vacated its headquarters in the Boston suburb of Belmont, Massachusetts, in favor of a new location in Appleton, Wisconsin. This move was quite symbolic, considering Appleton was Senator Joseph McCarthy's hometown. Today, the J.B.S. occupies a small complex there, wherein very little has changed since its founding over six decades ago. The Chief Executive Officer at the time of this report, Bill Hahn, reports that the Society "continues to be a growing operation,"⁴ despite the ostensibly small nature of the group and its limited physical plant. One may argue, though, that a group such as the John Birch Society need not possess a large or impressive headquarters at all. Its power is concentrated in its ability to disseminate its platform, which has become easier with the emergence of modern media. The small newsroom in the basement of the headquarters, utilized for producing online news reports, is indicative of this. Steve Bonta, the editor of their long-running *New American* magazine, believes that the Society has embraced a more mainstream position.⁵ Perhaps the overtly conspiratorial nature of its messaging has been subdued in some respects. However, Mr. Bonta's assertion can also be flipped on its head: the John Birch Society has not altered its platform in any significant way such that its position fits more within the conservative

⁴ Tim Sullivan, "At Birch Society headquarters, looking for the roots of the modern American conspiracy theory," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2024-01-21/birch-society-headquarters-modern-american-conspiracy-theory>.

⁵ Tim Sullivan, "At Birch Society headquarters, looking for the roots of the modern American conspiracy theory," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/lifestyle/story/2024-01-21/birch-society-headquarters-modern-american-conspiracy-theory>.

mainstream, but that what actually constitutes the conservative “mainstream” has shifted to the point that the Society neatly conforms with it.

One of the principal challenges which arises when studying the John Birch Society is the closely-guarded nature of much of its membership and financial information. As stated previously, the Society reached its highest membership levels in the mid to late 1960s, and the number has been declining ever since. The extent of this decline, and the present figure, have not been reported by the J.B.S., nor by any reputable external source. Such is also the nature of how the Society derives much of its funding; its establishment was financed by wealthy businessmen and, of course, Welch himself, though there is scant information about who contributes or donates directly to the Society. As with many other interest groups, one can elect to join the Society by contributing annual dues, which would ostensibly provide much of their organizational maintenance. At the time of this report, three membership categories existed: a standard level with a print subscription to the Society’s newsletter (The J.B.S. Bulletin) and *The New American* magazine, a slightly less-expensive version which provides only digital access to these publications, and a lifetime membership which can be acquired for a flat fee of five-thousand dollars. It is of note that the membership dues are significantly reduced should a married couple apply together.⁶ This promotional measure appears to conform to the platform of the J.B.S. at-large: an encouragement of the traditional family structure, despite what it sees as society’s attempts to undermine this institution. Any donations directed to the Society are not eligible for tax-exempt status, since the J.B.S. is not registered as a 501(c)(3) organization; this tradition began with Welch, who sought to protect member interests by not revealing to the federal government who contributed.⁷ This represents how the Society’s attitude of deep

⁶ “Join the John Birch Society,” John Birch Society, JBS.org.

⁷ JBS, “Donate to JBS.”

suspicion towards government entities is reflected not only in their messaging, but in the organizational structure and operations of the group itself.

IV. Platform and Legislative Priorities

Since the advent of the World Wide Web, interest groups have been given the means to promulgate their message in a more streamlined and readily-accessible fashion. The John Birch Society is no exception: its webpage reveals much about the current status and legislative priorities of the group. The nature of the Society's primary message has not evolved much since 1958; but it has expanded to include different actors and ideologies which reflect the changing nature of political discourse. The webpage's front section begins with a call to action. It reads: "Now, more than ever, your patriotic leadership is needed. Is this the America our Founders envisioned? Their principles, and the Constitution itself, are under attack by forces that include socialists, Marxists, globalists, and the Deep State."⁸ The urgency with which the Society views its message is evident here; the conspiracy appears as powerful as it was at the founding, poised to infringe upon individual liberties and the founding documents which undergird these rights. One notable shift in the rhetoric which the Society employs is the increasingly ambiguous nature of this conspiracy. Welch believed it to be a mechanism of the communists and the Soviet Union, which he clearly identified; this strategy was of course less effective after the Cold War. Today, the J.B.S. publishes statements like the following:

America has been moving away from its founding principles of protecting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today, many of the forces that have done this operate in the open. Deep State, Big Government, the Establishment, the Insiders, the Conspiracy, or whatever name is attached, these forces have driven America \$20+ trillion into debt, while trampling our liberties, our country's independence, and our way of life.⁹

⁸ JBS, main page.

⁹ JBS, main page.

Despite the ambiguity of this statement, the Society maintains with conviction that it knows precisely what is damaging the country, and possesses the necessary remedies. It thus sees the conspiracy in any effort that either seeks to draw power away from the local level in favor of a larger overseer, or is in opposition to a strict, states-rights interpretation of the Constitution.

The John Birch Society is claiming, in effect, that it is the sole conservative political advocacy group that detects the complete scope of this issue. It presents itself as a sort of underground, omniscient society that is identifying and countering the threats of other secret organizations. However, this particular secret society is also ever-seeking to expand and evangelize. There is great emphasis placed on the publication and media branches of the group; the primary benefit to membership is access to these subscriptions. In effect, then, the Society's air of superiority is rooted in the knowledge which they believe to possess. In keeping with Welch's philosophy, the J.B.S. endeavors to educate and inform people on the ground. They must be in it for the right reasons, though. Individual membership in the Society must be approved by a Local Coordinator, another vestige of Welch's desire to control all aspects of the group. Furthermore, a clause in the application states explicitly that a membership may be revoked at any time, "without stated cause."¹⁰ Once a member is admitted, he is expected to participate in his local chapter, which subscribes to the national group in its adherence to the platform and protocol of the "National Agenda." In the words of the Society, the group is structured as such so that: "members create great pressure and influence originates locally and is felt nationally."¹¹

The extent to which the John Birch Society's influence is felt nationally is a matter of debate. As previously stated, a distinguishing factor of this group is that it does not advocate on behalf of one cause, as to not restrict the scope of their agenda. Rather, it focuses on anything

¹⁰ JBS, "Member application form."

¹¹ JBS, "Who We Are: About the John Birch Society."

which can be deemed a threat to American liberty and constitutionality. This net continues to be cast wide, just as in Welch's day. The J.B.S website includes a section delineating various "action projects"; these categories each represent a salient talking point for the Society, and for each section corresponding resources are provided. At the time of this report, the following can be identified as the most pressing concerns for the J.B.S., based on their presence here and plethora of literature, videos, and other resources provided. Namely, they are: "To Expose the Deep State," "Save Our Children," "Restore Election Integrity," "Covid-19 Overreach," "Stop a Constitutional Convention," "Stop the Globalists' Trade Agenda," "Get US Out! Of the UN," "Support Your Local Police," "The Constitution is the Solution," "Get US Out! Of the USMCA," "Make America States Again," "Stop the NAU," "Stop Mass Migration," "End the Fed," and lastly, "Stop Agenda 2030"¹². Some of these, such as "Covid-19 Overreach" or "Stop Agenda 2030," are priorities reacting to more recent political developments, but still correspond to the overarching platform. Others, such as "Save Our Children," "Get US Out! Of the UN," and "Support Your Local Police," have always been prominent in the J.B.S. agenda.

Each of these categories seem to offer resources which attempt to educate concerned citizens and provide them with tools to translate their knowledge into action; such is the twofold mission of the Society. An inspection of the Deep State section is particularly enlightening, since this sort of language has essentially replaced the original communist threat. A page known as "Action Tools" begins with a definition of the concept:

The Deep State's globalist plan for what insiders refer to as the 'New World Order'- basically, a global government controlled by themselves- begins with submerging the sovereignty of nation-states into regional 'orders'. These are better understood as regional governments built using 'free trade' deals as the foundation, with the European Union serving as the premier example.¹³

¹² JBS, "Action Projects."

¹³ JBS, "Expose the Deep State: Deep State Action Tools."

This is helpful for understanding the Society's platform in several ways: it alleges a great conspiracy, advocates for economic protectionism, and derides the European model, wherein individual liberties have been sacrificed for an internationalist, secular government. The section also includes a *New American* publication entitled "What is Biden's 'New World Order'? Deep State Tyranny, Worldwide"¹⁴; while this references a sitting politician, it also reflects tradition. The Society was also highly critical of the first George Bush presidency. Not only did Bush represent the anathematic establishment Republicanism, but the "New World Order" aspect of 1991 State of the Union address was major fodder for the J.B.S. Thus, the Society cannot be called an entirely partisan organization, given its tendency to attack any member of the two-party system who seems to further the conspiracy in some manner.

In terms of its lobbying activities and expenditures, the John Birch Society does not have a particularly notable presence. Much of its lobbying efforts are centered around its grassroots strategy: informing citizens such that they can mobilize and inform other citizens. This practice is referred to as "Birching,"¹⁵ and it relies upon direct, local methods, including door-knocking and literature dropping, and lately, utilization of social media platforms. The Society employs Field Coordinators, whose function is to oversee these activities in individual districts. It also encourages a program known as the "Power of 500," which endeavors to see at least five-hundred dedicated Birchers within each Congressional district, since they believe this number to be a minimum threshold for maintaining an informed, constitutionally-bound electorate in that area.¹⁶ The structure begins to resemble a sort of multi-level marketing arrangement in this way, since a local chapter is charged with evangelizing the Birch message so it reaches a greater audience, who in turn do the same. At the surface, Birching maintains the

¹⁴ JBS, "Expose the Deep State: Deep State Action Tools."

¹⁵ JBS, "John Birch Society Agenda."

¹⁶ JBS, "The Power of 500."

appearance of a home-grown effort, but it is controlled quite closely by the national organization with the parameters set forth in the Society's agenda. It seems unlikely that an organization such as the J.B.S. would rely upon any high-powered Washington lobbyists, given their role in consorting with "Deep State" actors. To this effect, the Society explicitly prohibits itself from seeking out regular lobbying at all,¹⁷ further evidence of its refusal to participate in the traditional political channels.

It is quite active, however, in terms of its electoral activity. Following in the model of other interest groups, the Society ranks elected officials based on how well they conform to its platform and mission. Unlike some other groups, it neither endorses nor opposes specific candidates. The rating scorecard is published every year in the *New American*, and is based on a system known as the "Freedom Index." Per the most recent edition: "The Freedom Index rates members of Congress based on their adherence to constitutional principles of limited government, fiscal responsibility, national sovereignty, and a traditional foreign policy of avoiding foreign entanglements."¹⁸ In determining its ratings, the Freedom Index catalogues the important matters which come to a vote in both the House and Senate, and advises a "yea" or "nay" based on the Society's policy goals. Legislators are then assigned a percentage score based on how well they conformed to the index. In keeping with the J.B.S.'s emphasis on local matters, the *New American* produces the same scorecard for members of the state legislatures. The Society also maintains a system for sending "Legislative Action Alerts," which are intended to inform citizens of impending legislation which is potentially infringing. Further, it provides several resources for effectively contacting elected officials.¹⁹ All of these undertakings are

¹⁷ JBS, "John Birch Society Agenda."

¹⁸ *The New American*, "Freedom Index: A Congressional Scorecard Based on the U.S. Constitution", (John Birch Society, 2024).

¹⁹ JBS, "Legislative Action Alerts."

indicative of local, citizen-oriented, “men on the ground” methods of political organization and maneuvering.

V. The John Birch Society’s Influence on Conservatism Today

It is the view of several political scientists and historians that the present nature of the Republican Party, and the conservative right in general, is more reflective of the platform of the John Birch Society than ever before. It no longer serves as a sometimes-influential but sometimes-derided faction capable of affecting some elements of the system, as it was in previous decades. It has merged with the conservative movement to the point that it is no longer as distinguishable in its subversiveness. The group seems to be keenly aware of this, one former C.E.O., Art Thompson, offered the following comment: “The bulk of Trump’s campaign was Birch. All he did was bring it out into the open.”²⁰ Much of what Thompson claims here can be observed in the approach which Trump and his brand of Republicanism utilize. As *The Los Angeles Times* writes: “The Society had spent decades calling for a populist president who would preach patriotism, oppose immigration, pull out of international treaties, and root out the forces trying to undermine America.”²¹ One of the most salient points of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign was to “drain the swamp” in Washington. A more restrained interpretation may read this as a pledge to rid the federal government of bureaucratic inefficiency and excess; some analysts, however, have likened this to the Bircher allegation that an unseen group holds immeasurable political influence, and will use it to further internationalist causes at the expense of the people. Should the latter hold true, this is quite an accomplishment for a group which has largely existed at the fringes of the political right, no matter how much coverage its activities may have generated. What William F. Buckley denounced as a group “far removed from

²⁰ Sullivan, “Headquarters.”

²¹ Sullivan, “Headquarters.”

common sense”²² who would “anathematize the entire right wing”²³ appears to have slid into the center of the Republican platform, even if this development can be said to exist outside of the Society’s direct involvement.

Much of the resemblance between the longstanding traditions of the J.B.S. and conservatism today is attributable to the former’s insistence upon waging a “culture war” in American politics. Most analysts pinpoint the culture war’s intensification in the United States in the 1990s. The emergence of paleoconservatives such as Pat Buchanan, and their growing influence in the party, reflects this trend of issue-framing in moral or religious terms. An examination of the root of this phenomenon, however, must not overlook the role of the John Birch Society, which was waging a “culture war” of its own before the phrase was ever coined. The platform advanced by the Society was noteworthy from the beginning, since it sought to apply the argument that the religious and moral character of the United States was imperiled by the various bad actors who would relinquish the country to communist forces. The growing prominence of this position came to pass with the emergence of the Christian Right by the 1980s, and the political influence which this faction continues to hold. Thus, they served as the forerunners in expanding the scope of conflict for this issue: the threat which they perceived is not only an economic one, but it also threatens to erode the fundamental character of the United States if left unchecked, such that the nation becomes susceptible to internationalism and Godlessness. As a result, much of the J.B.S. platform finds its justification in a Republican Party which is increasingly isolationist, and is concerned far more with the changing nature of the country than it is changing the nature of governments abroad.

²² William F. Buckley, “Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and Me”, *Commentary Magazine*, March 1, 2008, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/william-buckley-jr/goldwater-the-john-birch-society-and-me/>.

²³ John Savage, “The John Birch Society Is Back,” *Politico Magazine*, July 16, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/16/the-john-birch-society-is-alive-and-well-in-the-lone-star-state-215377/>.

VI. Conclusion

A close examination of the John Birch Society reveals five salient points about the nature of this organization: vis-à-vis its history, current status, legislative priorities, methods employed to achieve said priorities, and influence upon politics in general. Firstly, the Society was born out of a desire to cordon off the United States from communist influence, opposing both small and large policy points, and the local and national politicians who would seemingly bring this effect about. Secondly, the Society has shifted from its communist bent with the end of the Cold War, such that it now alleges a conspiracy which is just as broad yet less defined. It thus opposes any international organization, anything which could be seen as “big government” intervention, and any policy which threatens a strict reading of the founding documents. Thirdly, the Society is an ardent believer in political education and mobilization, since it believes a well-informed citizenry is the only effective means to combatting this conspiracy. It does not rely upon traditional, Washington-based methods of interest group politicking as a result. Fourthly, the Society views itself as patriotic rather than partisan in its refusal to participate with the two-party system. It also sees itself as politically mainstream, despite some characterizations saying otherwise. Lastly, the G.O.P. and general conservative movement have relied less upon their moderate or neoconservative factions, in favor of a platform which more closely resembles the Society’s in several key aspects. This is principally an effect of the Society having asserted the existence of a “culture war” before most others found it politically useful to do so, and it has thus contributed to their seemingly outsized influence in policymaking and political rhetoric, especially given the limited nature of the group.

Whether the John Birch Society will reap the benefits of its apparent effect in shaping the conservative movement as it stands today remains to be seen. The Society has recently reported

an increase in membership in its Texas chapters. What this may indicate is some sort of feedback loop, wherein people become attracted to the Society's platform as politics become more accommodating to it, even though this shift in politics is itself the result of ideological and priority realignment which occurred over several decades and went through various iterations, but ultimately found its origin in the John Birch Society. In the present day, the Society's influence is felt well beyond the confines of the organization proper. Donald Trump's victory in the last presidential election should be taken as a sign that the John Birch Society's platform is more salient than any other brand of conservatism in today's Republican Party. At the broadest level, the election result signaled the G.O.P.'s general affirmation of the interesting brand of conservatism which endeavors to utilize the spirit of the founding and the presumed morality of the public as a means to overcoming both deep-seated forces of internal opposition and the sense of an overwhelming external threat.

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