



Correction, Please!

Who's Besmirching John Birch's Good Name?

Item: *In a hit piece masquerading as a book review, Gabriel Schoenfeld — writing for the Weekly Standard's March 28 issue — used the occasion of John Birch: A Life by Terry Lutz to attack both The John Birch Society and its founder, Robert Welch, as belonging to "the far fringe."*

Schoenfeld claims that "the general public perceived the John Birch Society as crackpot as well as racist and antisemitic." The only evidence he offers for those audacious claims is The John Birch Society's "vigorous opposition to the nascent civil rights movement." He also asserts "that Welch, behind the scenes, was engaged in a full-bore attack on Dwight D. Eisenhower, charging the president with being 'a dedicated conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy.'" Perhaps his wildest claim, though, is: "John Birch had his name hijacked and ruined by Robert Welch. Today it evokes images of right-wing kooks huddled in secret meetings worrying feverishly about imagined enemies."

Correction: It should come as no surprise that a neoconservative would find the principles of Robert Welch and the JBS as belonging to "the far fringe." The reality, though, is that Welch did not create those principles; he got them from his well-read understanding of history, particularly from the writings of America's Founding Fathers.

Schoenfeld's claim that the JBS was seen by the general public "as crackpot as well as racist and antisemitic" is ridiculous, especially considering that in just the previous paragraph he writes that the JBS was "extraordinarily successful," having become "by the close of the 1950's ... the largest conservative grassroots organization in the country." Schoenfeld appears to want to have it both ways: The JBS was a dangerous force to be reckoned with and was a "far fringe" group of "crackpot" racists not taken seriously. Reason and logic, it seems, do not fit into his agenda of attacking the organization that has successfully kept Americanism alive for almost 60 years.

As Bill Hahn, vice president of communications for the JBS, described that success for The New American: "Many have underestimated the JBS and have not given it the proper credit. It would surprise many to learn that the quiet, but powerful, influence of the society has stretched from the very beginnings of the home-school and pro-life movements to the state houses and U.S. Congress. It has never wavered in its commitment to less government, more responsibility and — with God's help — a better world."

Schoenfeld's assertion that the JBS was — or is — a racist organization is demonstrably false. The JBS has always held that morality is opposed to racism. As such, any member of the JBS who espouses racist ideas is immediately expelled from the organization. So why did the JBS oppose the civil rights movement? Because that movement sought to grant to the federal government powers not delegated to it by the Constitution. What Schoenfeld does not mention is that it was the black members of the JBS who were the most vocal opponents of the movement.

Schoenfeld's claim that Welch accused President Dwight Eisenhower of being "a dedicated conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy" is at once an oversimplification ripped from the proper context. The quote, attributed to *The Politician*, Welch's critical biography of Eisenhower, never appeared in the published book, but it did appear in the earlier unpublished manuscript that was sent as a confidential letter to some friends prior to Welch founding The John Birch Society. In the letter, Welch concluded



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that Eisenhower's actions could be explained by his being a "stooge" unaware of how his actions were benefiting communism, an opportunistic politician, or "a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." While personally holding the latter opinion, Welch left it up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusion.

However, after The John Birch Society was founded, the media found out about the letter and made a big issue of it. Welch responded to the media attacks on *The Politician* by adding extensive documentation and then publishing it. The published version included this endnote: "At this point in the original manuscript there was one paragraph in which I expressed my own personal belief as to the most likely explanation of the events and actions which this document had tried to bring into focus. In a confidential letter, neither published nor offered for sale, and restricted to friends who were expected to respect the confidence but offer me in exchange their own points of view, this seemed entirely permissible and proper. It does not seem so for an edition of the letter that is now to be published and given, probably, fairly wide distribution. So that paragraph, and two explanatory paragraphs, connected with it, have been omitted here. And the reader is left entirely free to draw his own conclusions."

After *The Politician* was published, the media stopped talking about the book while continuing to focus on the "dedicated, conscious agent" quote, ignoring that an "agent" of the "Communist conspiracy" is not the same as a communist, and sometimes even claiming falsely that Welch had called Eisenhower a communist. Moreover, the media have ignored the tremendous evidence Welch had compiled in *The Politician* supporting the conclusion he drew.

As to Schoenfeld's assertion that "John Birch had his name hijacked and ruined by Robert Welch," John Birch's parents emphatically refuted such ludicrousness long ago. In the July 1961 JBS *Bulletin*, it was reported that one of The John Birch Society's "more ambitious critics" was claiming that the JBS had done an injustice to Captain Birch by using his name without permission. When Birch's parents learned of this, they sent a telegram to the member who had inquired about the accusation, saying, "Mr. Welch has had our full permission to use the name of our son, John Birch, for The John Birch Society since it was founded. We are proud to have been Honorary Life Members of The John Birch Society since January, 1959 and are actively supporting the work of the Society in every way that we can. We have the utmost confidence in Mr. Welch's ability and integrity, and approve most heartily of his methods."

— C. Mitchell Shaw



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