



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 16, 2010

Benson Letter Backed Welch Against “Ike”

It should surprise no one that someone who had served in the Eisenhower administration would call FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s attention to the charge made by John Birch Society founder Robert Welch that President Dwight Eisenhower was aiding and abetting the worldwide Communist conspiracy. But it might be surprising to learn that the cabinet official thought Welch was right, at least in the effect the Eisenhower policies were having in advancing rather than containing Communism and ultimately “rolling back the Iron Curtain” — as Republicans said they would do in winning the White House and gaining effective control of Congress in the 1952 elections.



Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, the only official to serve in the President’s cabinet through all eight years of the Eisenhower administration, called Hoover’s attention to Welch’s statements about Eisenhower and [strongly suggested Welch was right](#) about the *effect*, if not the intent, of the Eisenhower response to Communist expansion.

“In my study of the conspiracy, which I am sure is weak compared with your own, the consequences of Mr. Eisenhower’s actions in dealing with the communists have been tragic,” Benson wrote in a “personal and confidential” letter to the FBI director. Eisenhower’s motives were not the issue, he insisted.

“What difference does it make if your house is burned down by an ignorant man, a person who wants to get warm fast, or an arsonist?” Benson asked Hoover, the *Salt Lake Tribune* in Salt Lake City, Utah, [reported](#) on Monday, November 15. The letter, obtained through a request under the Freedom of Information Act, sheds new light on an old controversy about the Communist conspiracy and, in particular, the claims made by The John Birch Society founder (initially, in private correspondence only) and others that if Eisenhower were truly trying to fight Communism, he was the political equivalent of the famous lost aviator Douglas “Wrong-way” Corrigan.

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The pledge to “roll back the Iron Curtain” fell by the wayside early in the Eisenhower administration and by the time “Ike” left office, the Iron Curtain had been extended into Latin America, with the communist Castro installed as the dictator of Cuba, just 90 miles from Key West, Florida. The Kremlin had also been given free rein to crush rebellions in Poland and Hungary, to foment insurrection and revolution in the Third World, capture part of Indochina and threaten to annex West Berlin. Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration was increasing trade and aid with countries in the Soviet bloc, ostensibly to encourage their independence from Moscow.

The growing communist power and influence in the world and the subsequent damage to American prestige was a theme Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts made the centerpiece of his campaign



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against Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, when Kennedy won the 1960 presidential campaign. It also further aggravated those on the Right and helped fuel the campaign of Arizona Senator Barry M. Goldwater for the Republican presidential nomination in 1964, in what might be called the high-water mark of conservative anti-communism in America.

In his letter to Hoover, Benson said he was considering going public with his concerns "even at the risk of destroying the influence of men who are widely respected and loved" — including Eisenhower, the Salt Lake City paper reported. The *Tribune* story credits Benson, who might otherwise be largely forgotten as an Agriculture Secretary in an administration that ended 50 years ago, with being an inspiration to today's Tea Party movement, since he was concerned about presidential power and constitutional government as well as security from external threats. Benson was also, the paper noted, the only cabinet member to lead a worldwide church. After his government service, Benson became head of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, members of which are commonly known as Mormons. He and fellow Utah author and anti-communist activist Cleon Skousen are among the controversial figures of the 1950s and 60s extolled by current TV and radio commentator and author Glenn Beck, who is also a Mormon and is a favorite with today's Tea Party movement.

The letter adds fuel to a controversy, never quite ended, over who was right in the era known as the Cold War. Those who favored a more hard-line policy toward the Soviet Union and its allies and a more vigorous investigation into communist activities at home can turn to the Venona papers and other documents unearthed since the fall of the Soviet Union and make the case that the late Sen. Joe McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) has been vindicated by the corroboration from the Soviet files of many of the claims McCarthy made about Soviet spies in the U.S. government. Similarly, Benson's letter may help rehabilitate the reputation of The John Birch Society and its late founder among those who remain skeptical about the Society's worth.

Goldwater won the Republican presidential nomination in 1964 with the heavy backing of many JBS members. The Senate's leading spokesman for conservatism, Goldwater had captured national attention with his 1960 bestseller, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and followed that with a book specifically about the Cold War, entitled *Why Not Victory?* Supporters of the plain-spoken Arizonan believed he would lead a renaissance of anti-Communism in Washington policy and in the nation at large, reverse the fortunes of the free world and bring about an end to Communism. Critics charged that Goldwater's policy of "brinkmanship" was reckless and dangerous and could easily lead to a nuclear world war.

The John Birch Society was then a young and rapidly growing organization, having been founded by Welch in December of 1958. The Birchers became the subject of a sustained media and public relations attack, however, when it was learned the founder and president had previously circulated a yet-unpublished manuscript describing Eisenhower as a politically ambitious general who had become a "conscious and articulate" ally of the Communist conspiracy. The manuscript, self-published as *The Politician* in 1963, portrayed the former President as a willing tool of the enemies of American freedom. The charge, though rigorously argued and heavily documented, shocked the nation and most of the journalistic establishment of the day and has haunted The John Birch Society ever since. At the convention that nominated Goldwater in 1964, liberal and "moderate" Republicans offered a plank to the party platform condemning the extremism of the Communist Party, the Ku Klux Klan — and The John Birch Society. It was rejected by the delegates, who cheered mightily when Goldwater in his acceptance speech declared: "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of freedom is no vice...."



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Yet Eisenhower was also applauded at the same convention when he deplored “sensation-seeking columnists and commentators” attempting to sow discord within the Republican ranks — something the Republicans were doing rather thoroughly on their own. Goldwater sought and received Eisenhower’s endorsement, but the Arizonan went down to defeat anyway, winning only his home state and five Southern states in a Lyndon Johnson 44-state landslide. John Birch Society President John F. McManus recalls the turmoil of the Goldwater campaign, the attack on the Society and the loyalty of Benson, who had remained a friend of the Birchers and a personal friend of McManus long after leaving government. Benson would write long letters to Welch, who asked McManus to answer in his stead, since the correspondence had become time consuming.

“I became the pen pal,” McManus recalls. “I could go into Salt Lake City, tell him I’m coming into town and he would say, ‘You come right over.’ ” Benson’s influence might have had the effect of keeping Hoover and the FBI from condemning The John Birch Society, as some liberal organizations had urged, the *Tribune* reported. McManus also recalls the Society published a lengthy article containing quotations from the FBI director, entitled “The Wisdom and the Warning of J. Edgar Hoover.” He recalls that the official position of the FBI, given to anyone who wrote, was that the bureau had no reason to investigate the Society.

The long and warm friendship with Benson also helped McManus and the Society establish contacts in Utah and other part of the West, a distant stretch from Belmont, Massachusetts, the JBS headquarters at the time. McManus recalls speaking to a gathering of about 300 people one evening in Utah, where the population is heavily Mormon. The John Birch Society is not affiliated with any church and is open to persons of all races and faiths, but one member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints asked the speaker afterward, “Are you LDS?”

“No, I’m RC,” answered McManus, who is Roman Catholic.

“What’s that?” was the gentleman’s response, McManus recalls with a laugh.

Photo: Ezra Taft Benson, left, Secretary of Agriculture, reaches over to get some papers as he meets with President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the president’s temporary offices in the Gettysburg Hotel, Aug. 19, 1959: AP Images



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