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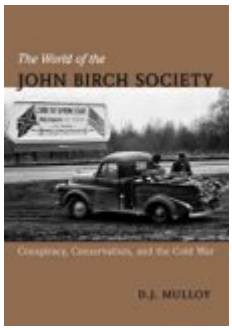
D. J. Mulloy. *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014. 296 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8265-1981-8.



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In *The World of the John Birch Society*, D. J. Mulloy, associate professor of history at Wilfrid Laurier University, offers a concise examination of the ideology of the infamous, conspiracy-minded right-wing organization. While in no way endorsing the ideas of the John Birch Society (JBS), Mulloy offers an empathetic look at the group and places it within the context of post-World War II American society.

The arrangement of *The World of the John Birch Society* is clear and simple. The book is organized into six chapters. The first three chapters trace the organization from its beginning in 1958 to its expulsion from the conservative movement by William F. Buckley Jr. and *National Review* in 1965. The final three chapters take a thematic approach, covering such topics as civil rights, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and conspiracy theories.

Much of Mulloy's account will be familiar to scholars of the JBS and conservatism. He examines the rise of JBS founder Robert Welch, a child prodigy turned candy manufacturer turned crusading anti-Communist. Welch regarded the death of missionary John Birch at the hands of the Chinese Communists in 1945 as the beginning of the Cold War. In 1958, he formed the John Birch Society and dedicated it to challenging the ubiquitous threat of Communism. To Welch, the Communists had infiltrated every aspect of American life and were clearly winning the Cold War. Signs of Communist infiltration could be seen in the White House (Dwight D. Eisenhower was a Communist agent, according to Welch), the Supreme Court, public education, the civil rights movement, and the United Nations.

Mulloy recounts the various responses to the John Birch Society. Such responses ranged from ridicule (such as Bob Dylan's classic song "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues") to attacking its members as representing what historian Richard Hofstadter termed the "paranoid style in American politics."[1] Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright worried about the John Birch Society indoctrinating the military (especially right-wing army offi-

cer Edwin Walker), and John F. Kennedy clearly considered the organization a threat to national security. Some conservative politicians were slow to distance themselves from the organization, because though they had some disagreements with Welch, they did not want to offend the rank-and-file members whom they regarded as patriotic Americans. Other conservatives, such as Buckley, condemned the conspiratorial thinking of the JBS and wrote the organization out of the conservative movement. Ronald Reagan successfully deflected efforts to link him to the Birchers during his 1966 campaign for governor of California by insisting that anyone who voted for him supported his agenda and that he did not support theirs.

Mulloy notes that the turning point in the fortunes of the JBS occurred during the 1964 campaign when the Republican presidential candidate (and devout conservative) Barry Goldwater failed to renounce the JBS. Mulloy cites a number of reasons for Goldwater's decision, including his friendship with a number of JBS leaders, his admiration for its members, the need to take advantage of Birchers' energy and enthusiasm for his campaign, and Goldwater's belief that charges of extremism against the organization were politically motivated. Goldwater's failure to denounce right-wing extremism and the JBS was one of many reasons why he lost the 1964 campaign. In the aftermath of the election, Buckley and *National Review* denounced the JBS and formally wrote it out of the conservative movement. The organization never recovered from the 1964 campaign and Buckley's repudiation.

To his credit, Mulloy does not fall into the trap of dismissing the John Birch Society and its members as "paranoid" and suffering from "status anxiety," as does Hofstadter. Instead, while acknowledging them as conspiratorial, he seeks to place their ideas within the context of the times. He shows that there was a gloss of plausibility to Welch's views that made them appealing to many Americans in the 1960s. For example, while the civil rights movement was not controlled by the Communist Party, some of Martin Luther King Jr.'s associates (including Stanley Levinson and Jack O'Dell) were former members of the Communist Party.

Mulloy also defends the JBS against charges of Fascism. He contends that "the Birch Society failed to manifest enough of what might be the generally agreed upon characteristics of Fascism to warrant the classification." Mulloy points out that Welch did not fit the criteria of "the fascist charismatic leader" and the John Birch Society was not anti-Semitic (p. 63). On the other hand, he asserts that it is "entirely understandable" why Americans worried about a Fascist takeover in the early 1960s (p. 64).

On the issue of civil rights, Mulloy rejects the notion that Welch and the JBS were overt racists. He believes that their opposition to the civil rights movement was motivated by their obsession with Communism and their belief in states' rights. He points out that their analysis of the Watts riots and King's assassination reflected their conspiratorial views of Communism rather than rank bigotry.

On the issue of the Cold War, Mulloy maintains that there is some merit within Welch's conspiratorial thinking. In the aftermath of the Soviet launch of *Sputnik* and amid charges of a "missile gap" that favored the Soviet Union, Welch was one of the few to insist that Soviet gains were illusory. In retrospect, it is clear that Soviet gains were overestimated. However, Welch's insights were undermined by his conspiratorial assertions about the Soviet Union, such as his charge that Nikita Khrushchev was not in charge of the USSR.

Without a doubt, *The World of the John Birch Society* is a thorough, fair, and nuanced examination of the controversial organization. While many readers will be familiar with most of Mulloy's story, his book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the mind-set of the JBS.

Note

[1]. Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” ***Harper's Magazine*** (November 1964): 77-86.