

John Birch Society Devoted To Exposing Communism in U.S.

Editor's note: The John Birch Society is a semi-secret organization with a noble aim: Fighting Communism. But its methods have stirred controversy in many U.S. cities. A UPI special reporting team was assigned to assist Barbara Bundschu, New York staff correspondent, in researching and investigating the organization, its purposes, operations and opposition across the nation. Following is the first of three dispatches on their findings.

By BARBARA BUNDSCHU
UPI Correspondent

Residents of Santa Barbara, Calif., were in for a surprise when they stepped out into the bright and blowy morning of Feb. 26 to pick up their Sunday newspapers. In that quiet and beautiful city of about 60,000, a respected fellow citizen had discovered what he felt was an outrage.

"The editor and publisher of the News-Press is in his 85th year," began a two-column editorial on the front page.

"His entire life has been spent in this community... he lived when conditions were rugged. When West was West and men were men. He lived through the days when if a man or a group of men openly by word or mouth, or the printed work, called our President... and others at the head of our government, traitors, they were made to answer. Such slanders often called for a visit from a courageous and irate group which brought with them a barrel of tar and a few feathers..."

Thomas More Stork, rancher and citrus grower, owner of a newspaper since 1900, briefly by interim appointment a United States senator, regent of the University of California, was taking a stand against the John Birch Society and its founder and leader, Robert Welch of Belmont, Mass.

Welch, 61, retired from a candy firm four years ago to devote his life to fighting Communism. What bothered Stork was the way Welch was fighting it.

In a letter written before he set up the society late in 1958 and still in limited circulation, Welch told friends that President Eisenhower; his brother, Dr. Milton Eisenhower; the late Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen Dulles, then and now head of the Central Intelligence Agency, were members of the Communist underground.

But the statement about Eisenhower wasn't all Stork had on his mind. In Santa Barbara itself, blessed as few communities in the nation with the comforts of both nature and material wealth, lives a member of the society's 26-man council, Dr. Granville Knight, a physician. Several active chapters of the semi-secret society were studying Communism at private meetings and looking around town for Communists to expose.

"The secret Communist looks and acts just like anybody else, only more so," Welch had instructed them in the society's "Blue Book." He could be anybody you know. In fact, Welch said, one of his prime suspects is "one of the nicest men you ever met. Most of them are."

Effective Means
Exposure of such persons, even through "mean and dirty" techniques, Welch said, is one of the most effective means of shocking the American people awake in time to save themselves from Communism. He also advises members to set up front groups, to infiltrate community organizations and to engage in directed letter writing to promote specific campaigns of his ultra-conservative society.

It was to protest what these tactics were doing to Santa Barbara that editor Stork raised his editorial voice.

"The News-Press condemns the tactics that have brought anonymous telephone calls of denunciation to Santa Barbarans in recent weeks from members of the John Birch Society or their sympathizers," Stork's editorial said. "The News-Press condemns the pressures on wealthy residents who fear and abhor Communism, to contribute money to an organization whose leader has said that 'for reasons you will understand, there can be no accounting of funds'..."

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"The John Birch Society already has done a grave disservice to Santa Barbara by arousing suspicions and a mutual distrust among men of goodwill. The organization's adherents, since in their opposition to Communism, do not seem to understand the dangers of the totalitarian dynasty with which they are tampering.

"The News-Press challenges them: Come up from underground.

"And if they believe that in being challenged they have grounds for suit — let them sue. The News-Press would welcome a suit as a means of shedding more light on the John Birch Society."

What is the real nature of this relatively new group on the American political scene? Political scientists would classify it as ultra-conservative. It is and will remain a subject of controversy, however, over whether its tactics are compatible with American democratic principles as they are most popularly understood.

It is, in itself, an authoritarian society. Editor Stork's adjective was "totalitarian." Welch does not say the United States should have a similarly authoritarian form of government. But he is far from completely sold on the form we now have. And as for the political concept of a democracy, he regards it frankly as a "weapon of demagoguery, and a perennial fraud."

Standards Not Accepted
By Welch's political standards Dwight Eisenhower is a Communist, and so are many others in high government places, past and present. These are standards not everyone accepts. The U.S. Senate on March 8 heard Sen. Milton R. Young, North Dakota Republican, declare that Welch's accusations against Eisenhower and others had gone "beyond anything the late Joe McCarthy ever thought of..."

On the other hand a Senate internal affairs subcommittee has described Welch's John Birch Society as a "patriotic organization."

And because there is evidence to support the society's claim that it is growing, the controversy around it is also bound to grow in the months ahead.

A little over three weeks after Stork's editorial, Chancellor Samuel B. Gould of the University of California at Santa Barbara, speaking at a university banquet, said a "new type" of secret student organization had been set up



SOCIETY'S FOUNDER—Robert W. Welch, above, is founder and leader of the John Birch Society which is a semi-secret organization with a noble aim: Fighting Communism. But its methods have stirred controversy in many sections of the United States. (UPI Telephoto)

on the campus and "unless it is checked, can destroy the university." Another official said "it was understood" Gould referred to the Birch Society.

Gould said the organization to which he referred encourages students to become informers and "take on the tasks of security agencies." He said the university and its officials "have been labeled and vilified in whispering campaigns, all purporting to prove that we are not only less than loyal to America but are downright subversive."

Embroidered in Controversy
Santa Barbara was not the first or the last — although it would seem among the most unlikely — community to have been torn by the society's activities nor to have seen it assailed by its newspapers. The organization has become embroiled in controversy in many states, including Wisconsin, Ohio, Kansas, California and North Dakota.

Articles and editorial comment on the organization have been carried by a number of newspapers and magazines including the Chicago Daily News, the Milwaukee Journal, the Louisville Courier Journal, the Boston Herald, the Los Angeles Times, the Racine, Wis., Journal-Times, Time magazine and The Nation.

The amount of secrecy surrounding its operations has varied considerably from community to community, and Welch has given up his fight to avoid publicity about the group.

At issue between the society and many who might otherwise share Welch's conservative political and economic views is his persistent reasoning that everything he personally considers wrong is a Communist plot.

At issue between the society and those who condemn it is the tendency of its activities to suppress, if not the right, at least the respectability, of dissent.

This question has split the Supreme Court itself in decisions which have qualified the First Amendment rights of witnesses before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Inhibition of free speech caused by such private organizations as the Birch Society, have had no judicial role. Editor Stork's statement of principles said: "We believe... that traitors should be dealt with by the courts, not by vigilante groups."

John Birch had nothing to do with the group which bears his name. He was a young fundamentalist Baptist missionary from Georgia who served as an intelligence officer in China during World War II and was killed 10 days after V-J Day by Chinese Communists. He was 27 when he died.

Robert Welch never heard of Birch until after his death, but he has researched and written his life story. Welch has memorialized Birch as "probably the first American casualty in that third world war, between Communists and the ever-shrinking 'free world,' which is still being waged against us." And when he came to found a Communist-fighting organization, he called it the John Birch Society.

In Birch's name, members of the society are asked to write letters to congressmen and others, operate in "front" organizations and through established community groups such as PTAs and Chambers of Commerce to push campaigns conceived by Welch as anti-Communist. These include movements to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren, to repeal the income tax law, to rout the social gospel from the churches, to oppose the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Alliance, foreign aid, the United Nations and cultural, or any other, exchanges with Russia.

At her farm home near Macon, Ga., Birch's mother, Mrs. George S. Birch, said she and her husband are "heartily in accord" with Welch's organization "and we are proud for it to bear our son's name."

Welch also is a native southerner, born in North Carolina Dec. 1, 1899. He was reared in what he now calls "the intellectually restricting bonds of the unusually narrow Southern Baptist fundamentalism." He spent four years at the University of North Carolina, two at the Naval Academy and

two at Harvard Law School before going into the candy business. He was for years vice president of the James O. Welch Company, headed by his brother, which has factories in Massachusetts and in Los Angeles.

Welch was interviewed by United Press International and documents of the society were made available to UPI by him.

In his own words — a biographical sketch Welch wrote in the third person for society members — he "has one wife, two sons, a Golden Retriever dog, and 14 golf clubs — none of which he understands, but all of which he loves."

He is an affable man who smiles easily and exhibits in his writings a sense of humor, love of poetry and wide knowledge of history and literature.

He was a director of the National Association of Manufacturers for seven years, serving also as a vice president of the organization, and three former presidents of the NAM are or have been on the Birch Society's council.

On Jan. 1, 1957, his biography says, he "gave up most of his business responsibilities — and most of his income — in order to devote practically all of his time and energy to the anti-Communist cause."

The John Birch Society was founded almost two years later, on Dec. 9, 1958, at Indianapolis, after Welch delivered a two-day speech to 11 men he had invited to hear it. That speech is today the "Blue Book" of the society, the official statement of its aims and methods. It is supplemented by monthly bulletins to members and the magazine "American Opinion," which Welch founded before the society and of which he is editor.

The message and aim is: "Less government, more responsibility and a better world."

Sinister Conspiracy
Welch quite literally wants to repeal the 20th Century. But unlike many who share this desire, either politically or nostalgically, he views its trend toward "collectivism" not simply as a mistake but as a sinister conspiracy to change the economic and political structure of the United States so that this nation can be merged with the Soviet Union without a fight.

"You have only a few more years," he told his listeners at Indianapolis. "We are living... in such a fool's paradise as

the people of China lived in 20 years ago."

"The danger is almost entirely internal," Welch said, "from Communist influences right in our midst and treason right in our government."

The idea that the nation must mobilize its resources to combat the external danger of Soviet military might and Sputnik supremacy is, in Welch's view, a part of the Communist plot. "In other words, under the guise of fighting Communism, we are being stamped into the biggest jump ever towards, and perhaps the final jump right into, socialism and then the Communist camp."

Welch would repeal virtually all of the social and economic legislation of the last 30 years.

"The greatest enemy of man is, and always has been, government," he said.

Slipped Over Gradually
"We are not beginning any revolution, nor even a counter-revolution in any technical sense..." he said. "Yet our determination to overthrow an entrenched tyranny is the very stuff of which revolutions are made."

He warned that Communism is being slipped over on the American people so gradually and insidiously that before long "they can no longer resist the Communist conspiracy as free citizens, but can resist the communist tyranny only by themselves becoming conspirators against established government."

The Los Angeles Times, in an editorial signed by publisher Otis Chandler on March 12, saw an implication of sedition in Welch's statements. And, like many others, it deplored the identification of conservatism with extremism.

"The Times believes implicitly in the conservative philosophy," the editorial said. "It has challenged all these men and most of these institutions (which Welch attacks) on the soundness of one or more issues. But the Times does not believe that the argument for conservatism can be won — and we do believe it can be won — by smearing as enemies and traitors those with whom we sometimes disagree."

"Subversion, whether of the left or the right, is still subversion."

Not Disturbed by Criticism
Criticism from the press is not likely to disturb Welch. He has already told his followers that "the domination

of our press, television and radio by Communist influences is now so great that you simply are not allowed to learn or be reminded of the real nature of the beasts to whom we are losing." An editorial in "American Opinion" for February said the long-insolvent Communist newspaper, The Daily Worker, quit publication because "the 'line' taken by the New York Times long ago made it unnecessary, superfluous, and probably embarrassing to the Times."

"When you hear Welch's charges out of context... their absurdity is plain enough," said the Rev. John A. Crane to his congregation at Santa Barbara's Unitarian church one February Sunday.

Absurdity Concealed
"But when you come upon them in the publications of the society, surrounded and supported by Welch's rich, flowing language and ideas, their absurdity is well concealed."

"The man is a marvelously gifted demagogue..."

"There is another factor apart from the magic of Robert Welch that lends power to the movement... both Welch and his people are genuinely afraid... driven by an almost wild fear of a persistent and pervasive sort.

Because of the peculiar nature of their understanding of what it means to be an American, everywhere they look, in our society, they see signs of an incredibly devious subversion..."

Thursday: The society's doctrine and membership.

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