
OBSERVATIONS

Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and Me

William F. Buckley, Jr.

IN THE early months of 1962, there was restiveness in certain political quarters of the Right. The concern was primarily the growing strength of the Soviet Union, and the reiteration by its leaders of their designs on the free world. Some of the actors keenly concerned felt that Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was a natural leader in the days ahead.

But it seemed inconceivable that an anti-establishment gadfly like Goldwater could be nominated as the spokesman-head of a political party. And it was embarrassing that the only political organization in town that dared suggest this radical proposal—the GOP’s nominating Goldwater for President—was the John Birch Society.

The society had been founded in 1958 by an earnest and capable entrepreneur named Robert Welch, a candy man, who brought together

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little clusters of American conservatives, most of them businessmen. He demanded two undistracted days in exchange for his willingness to give his seminar on the Communist menace to the United States, which he believed was more thoroughgoing and far-reaching than anyone else in America could have conceived. His influence was near-hypnotic, and his ideas wild. He said Dwight D. Eisenhower was a “dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy,” and that the government of the United States was “under operational control of the Communist party.” It was, he said in the summer of 1961, “50-70 percent” Communist-controlled.

Welch refused to divulge the size of the society’s membership, though he suggested it was as high as 100,000 and could reach a million. His method of organization caused general alarm. The society comprised a series of cells, no more than twenty people per cell. It was said that its members were directed to run in secret for local offices and to harass school boards and librarians on the matter of the Communist nature of the textbooks and other materials they used.

The society became a national *cause célèbre*—so much so, that a few of those anxious to universalize a draft-Goldwater movement aiming at a nomination for President in 1964 thought it best to do a little conspiratorial organizing of their own against it.

IN JANUARY of that year I had a telephone call from William Baroody. It was, he said, a matter of great national importance that I spend Tuesday and Wednesday of the following week with Senator Goldwater in Palm Beach, Florida. I would be one of three—along with Russell Kirk, the philosopher and author of the seminal 1953 text *The Conservative Mind*, and public-relations man Jay Hall, who had represented General Motors in Washington. I said I could be there up until 5 p.m. on day one and all of day two. I had a speaking date in St. Augustine on the first night. Baroody simply repeated that the meeting was very important.

Baroody was the head of the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank founded in 1943. We had met only cursorily, though I knew him to be an influ-

ential figure in behind-the-scenes conservative politics. He was invigorated by meetings with small groups, which he much enjoyed dominating. It was clear that he greatly aspired to be important to Goldwater, and perhaps to a Goldwater White House.

I ARRIVED at breakfast with the other invitees at the imposing Breakers Hotel and ventilated the critical point: were we here assembled to answer Goldwater's questions, or to proffer advice on the presidential campaign two years ahead? If the latter, this had to mean that Goldwater had resolved to enter the campaign, which would be big news: so far, he had steadfastly declined to take that step.

Baroody, by nature domineering, was emphatic on the subject. *Under no circumstances* should anything be said touching on a presidential campaign, inasmuch as Goldwater had not himself decided whether to run and did not want to spend time discussing the issue.

Russell Kirk was not prepared simply to leave the matter closed. "What is more important," he asked Baroody, "than to try to get Goldwater elected President?"

Baroody was obliged to agree that this would be a wonderful national achievement. "But he has said no."

"They always say no," I volunteered.

"Bill, he has said no on at least five different occasions. If he thought we were going to spend the day on that subject, he would just walk away."

Kirk objected. "I'm the least experienced politically of the people in this room. But I've seen the polls—we've all seen the polls—and Bill has a point: why should we shrink from telling him that's what he ought to do?"

It required someone of Kirk's arant innocence in consorting with brute political forces to make his point so insistently. He let go of it

only after Baroody promised that he would seek out, some time later, an opportunity for Russell to argue it personally with Goldwater. "Maybe you can tell him something about William Pitt that will change his mind."

Kirk smiled. "Very well. So what do you have in mind for us?"

"We'll have to coast on that."

GOLDWATER WAS in Palm Beach visiting, incognito, with a sister-in-law who was resident there. He arrived at our hotel suite at about 11:00 in extravagantly informal garb, cowboy hat and dark glasses, a workman's blue shirt, and denim jeans, together with his beloved Western boots. He did bring along a weather-beaten briefcase, though I never noticed his opening it the whole day.

What followed was an hour of general discussion on the policies of President Kennedy and the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Baroody noted Kennedy's surprising drop in the polls: 61 percent of the public thought he spent money too freely, a third thought him unduly weak in opposing Soviet challenges in Berlin and elsewhere.

Moving on, Baroody brought up the John Birch Society. It was quickly obvious that this was the subject Goldwater wished counsel on.

Kirk, unimpeded by his little professorial stutter, greeted the subject with fervor. It was his opinion, he said emphatically, that Robert Welch was a man disconnected from reality. How could anyone reason, as Welch had done in *The Politician*, that President Eisenhower had been a secret agent of the Communists? This mischievous unreality was a great weight on the back of responsible conservative political thinking. The John Birch Society should be renounced by Goldwater and by everyone else—Kirk turned his eyes on me—with any influence on the conservative movement.

But that, Goldwater said, is the problem. Consider this, he exag-

gerated: "Every other person in Phoenix is a member of the John Birch Society. Russell, I'm not talking about Commie-haunted apple pickers or cactus drunks, I'm talking about the highest cast of men of affairs. Any of you know who Frank Cullen Brophy is?"

I raised my hand. "I spent a lot of time with him. He was going to contribute capital to help found *National Review*. He didn't." Brophy was a prominent Arizona banker.

Goldwater said he knew nothing about that, but added that Brophy certainly was aware of Goldwater's personal enthusiasm for the magazine and especially for its Washington editor, Brent Bozell. "Why isn't Brent here?" he turned to Baroody.

"He's in Spain."

"Well, our—my—*Conscience of a Conservative* continues to sell." Bozell, who was also my brother-in-law, had ghostwritten the book, which had given Goldwater a national profile.

Kirk said he could not imagine Bozell disagreeing on the need to excommunicate the John Birch Society from the conservative movement.

But this brought another groan from Goldwater. "You just can't do that kind of thing in Arizona. For instance, who on earth can dismiss Frank Brophy from *anything*?"

TIME WAS given to the John Birch Society lasting through lunch, and the subject came up again the next morning. We resolved that conservative leaders should do something about the John Birch Society. An allocation of responsibilities crystallized.

Goldwater would seek out an opportunity to dissociate himself from the "findings" of the Society's leader, without, however, casting any aspersions on the Society itself. I, in *National Review* and in my other writing, would continue to expose Welch and his thinking to scorn and derision. "You know how to do that," said Jay Hall.

I volunteered to go further. Unless Welch himself disowned his operative fallacy, *National Review* would oppose any support for the society.

“How would you define the Birch fallacy?” Jay Hall asked.

“The fallacy,” I said, “is the assumption that you can infer subjective intention from objective consequence: we lost China to the Communists, therefore the President of the United States and the Secretary of State wished China to go to the Communists.”

“I like that,” Goldwater said.

What would Russell Kirk do? He was straightforward. “Me? I’ll just say, if anybody gets around to asking me, that the guy is loony and should be put away.”

“Put away in Alaska?” I asked, mock-seriously. The wisecrack traced to Robert Welch’s expressed conviction, a year or so earlier, that the state of Alaska was being prepared to house anyone who doubted his doctrine that fluoridated wa-

ter was a Communist-backed plot to weaken the minds of the American public.

IN THE next issue of my magazine, *National Review*, I published a 5,000-word excoriation of Welch:

How can the John Birch Society be an effective political instrument while it is led by a man whose views on current affairs are, at so many critical points . . . so far removed from common sense? That dilemma weighs on conservatives across America. . . . The underlying problem is whether conservatives can continue to acquiesce quietly in a rendition of the causes of the decline of the Republic and the entire Western world which is false, and, besides that, crucially different in practical emphasis from their own.

In response, *National Review* received the explicit endorsement of Senator Goldwater himself, who

wrote a letter we published in the following issue:

I think you have clearly stated the problem which Mr. Welch’s continued leadership of the John Birch Society poses for sincere conservatives. . . . Mr. Welch is only one man, and I do not believe his views, far removed from reality and common sense as they are, represent the feelings of most members of the John Birch Society. . . . Because of this, I believe the best thing Mr. Welch could do to serve the cause of anti-Communism in the United States would be to resign. . . . We cannot allow the emblem of irresponsibility to attach to the conservative banner.

The wound we Palm Beach plotters delivered to the John Birch Society proved fatal over time. Barry Goldwater did not win the presidency, but he clarified the proper place of anti-Communism on the Right, with bright prospects to follow.