

McCarthyism, The John Birch Society and Nationalism in the United States

The paranoia and suspicion of the Cold War perpetuated an extreme form of nationalist sentiment that exists even today in the United States. During the 1950s, many Americans began to feel a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear, as the United States, becoming further enmeshed in its conflict with the Communist Soviet Union, seemed to be losing the war. At a time when most were seeking answers, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin provided an explanation. In February 1950, McCarthy named Communist infiltration and espionage in the U.S. as the culprits of the failing struggle. The transcript of this speech at Wheeling, West Virginia points out the need to preserve American “national identity” by weeding out “suspicious” aspects of American society. Although McCarthy would later lose momentum, similar efforts to preserve “American ideals” would prove more successful and long lasting. Less ruinous and calculating than McCarthy, the John Birch Society and its publication, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, play on the xenophobic sentiments that still exist today by placing them in a language that defends and seeks to protect American “freedoms”. Essentially, both Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society represent radical expressions of nationalism in the United States.

American national identity can often be defined by a strong pride and appreciation for the security and democratic liberties of the United States. In fact, many Americans believe they live in the greatest nation in the world. This optimistic view was none the more evident than in the years following World War II. The U.S. victory overseas and

peaceful wartime alliance with the Soviet Union afforded Americans with a strong sense of confidence in the safety of their future. By the 1950s, however, great uncertainty and anxiety had replaced this post-war optimism, as relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union turned hostile. Unlike past enemies, the United States could not quickly overtake the large Soviet Union and the Cold War emerged as an armed struggle between *two* superpowers. As time went on, Communist fears materialized in the U.S., as did suspicions about the Soviet aspects in American society. Moreover, the presence of a Communist Party of the U.S.A. (C.P.U.S.A) made the Soviet threat all the more real. Author Robbie Lieberman surmises, “[Such] hopes for a flourishing of global peace, democracy and prosperity were shattered by the cold war”.¹ Soon, many Americans began seeking answers as to why the “greatest nation in the world” was not conquering this enemy. Senator Joseph McCarthy called on nationalism in providing his answer.

“I have in my hand 57 cases of individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy”, Joseph McCarthy told an audience at Wheeling, West Virginia.² The then little-known junior senator from Wisconsin was able to quickly gain popularity by projecting American’s fears and vulnerabilities on its Cold War enemy. Ellen Schrecker writes, “Historians have noted the roots of American anticommunism in what they refer to as the nation’s countersubversive tradition: the [irrational] notion that outsiders (who could be political dissidents, foreigners or members

¹ Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 10.

² Joseph McCarthy. *Joseph McCarthy’s speech on Communists in the State Department (excerpt)*. (Wheeling, West Virginia, February 1950). Internet on-line. Available from <<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/06/documents.mccarthy>>.

of radical and religious minorities) threatened the nation from within”.³ Essentially, McCarthy let this “countersubversive tradition” motivate what would become a very unique nationalist campaign.

During his speech, McCarthy identified the strong possibility that a subversive network of Communists existed in the U.S. and that it was working to undermine American democracy. Furthermore, according to McCarthy, this network extended into all areas of society, going even as far as the State Department of the U.S. McCarthy appealed to patriotic sentiments and said, “At [World War II’s] end we were physically the strongest nation on Earth and, at least potentially, the most powerful intellectually and morally”. He continued on to point out that the failure of the U.S. to fulfill its potential was the result of these “traitorous actions”. McCarthy drew support for his argument by making wide-ranging comparisons. Specifically, McCarthy used everything from the Communist takeover of China to the perjury conviction of State Department member Alger Hiss (who had been on trial for espionage) to legitimize his explanation.⁴ In regards to the Hiss case, Ellen Schrecker says, “Because it produced a guilty verdict...it gave credibility to the issue of Communists-in-government...”.⁵ Ultimately, through his speech, McCarthy had perfected the paranoid style of politics – although he had exaggerated the connection between these events and his claims about Communists in the U.S. government, the element of truth helped the senator gain popular support for his ideas. Also, the uncertainty of the Cold War left Americans feeling very fragile; and as

³ Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, 2 ed. (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 12-13.

⁴ Joseph McCarthy, 2-5.

⁵ Ellen Schrecker, 37.

Schrecker points out, the long-standing tendency towards xenophobia in the U.S. made McCarthy's explanation all the more attractive.

After explaining his claims, McCarthy made his appeal to nationalist sentiment. He stated, "...Ladies and gentlemen, one of the important reasons for the graft, the corruption, the dishonesty, the disloyalty, the treason in high government positions – one of the most important reasons why this continues – is a lack of moral uprising on the part of the 140 million American people". McCarthy continued, "However, the morals of our people have not been destroyed. They still exist. This cloak of numbness and apathy has only needed a spark to rekindle them. Happily this spark has finally been supplied". Clearly, McCarthy believes he has ignited this "spark" and is asking Americans to defend and seek to protect "Christian democracy" against "communistic atheism".

In the final words of his speech, McCarthy said, "[This moral uprising] will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted warped thinkers are swept from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of national honesty and decency in government".⁶ In effect, McCarthy asked Americans to revive their strong pride and loyalty to their country and work to "weed out" any suspicious aspects of American society – namely, any of those having to do with Communism. In the beginning, many people believed McCarthy. He had placed his argument in the context of actual events, which made them seem less absurd. Because McCarthy essentially said that a "good American" would defend against such a threat, he motivated an upsurge in nationalist sentiment. Moreover, McCarthy used this rise in nationalism to help validate his intrusion into the lives of many Americans during much of the 1950s.

⁶ Joseph McCarthy, 1, 6.

For McCarthy, nationalism was both a purpose and a defense. As early as 1950, the senator had, in the most basic sense, convinced Americans that the pride he felt for his country was so strong that he would actively defend it from anything dangerous (in this case, the danger was Communism). This would later serve as his justification when he persecuted many for their political beliefs in the House Un-American Activities Committee. Furthermore, McCarthy encouraged others to join in the “fight”. Ultimately, McCarthy made it seem as if this was the true test of patriotism. Although the “era of McCarthy” was short-lived, its effects would prove more long lasting. Other groups, seemingly guided by this notion of the “countersubversive tradition”, would also use nationalism to gain popularity and mask their own xenophobic sentiments.⁷

The Blue Book of the John Birch Society was first published early on in the Cold War period. It functioned much like a handbook for the original members, whose main concern was “the threat of Communist conspiracy”. Nationalistic fervor was also at the heart of this organization. In the book, founder Robert Welch states, “Our very goal is to save an Americanist system and a civilization in which a person’s individual purposes, needs, and desires, and those of his family, are given first consideration”.⁸ In addition, the John Birch Society was unlike any other grassroots organization at the time. Author Donald Critchlow maintains, “The founding of the [JBS]...provided the first anticommunist organization with a nationally based membership and a centrally directed program”.⁹

⁷ Ellen Schrecker, 37.

⁸ Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*. (Belmont, Mass.: Western Islands, 1959,1961), xiv, 115-116.

⁹ David Farber, Jeff Roche and others, eds., *The Conservative Sixties*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 116.

In the beginning, this ultra-conservative organization seemed to have the same purpose as Joseph McCarthy and other anticommunist groups – to eliminate a secret network of Communists in the U.S. In its introduction, Welch writes, “[A]lmost everyday I run into some whole new area, where the Communists have been penetrating and working quietly for years, until now they are in virtual control of everything that is done in that slice or corner of our national life”.¹⁰ Like McCarthy, Welch drew support for his cause from actual events. In *The Conservative Sixties*, Jonathan Schoenwald asserts, “[T]he society tapped into contemporary suspicions born out of a series of Cold War events (such as...the creation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955, and Nikita Khrushchev’s 1959 visit to the United States) that seemed to indicate that the federal government could be aiding and abetting the Communist cause”.¹¹

Like McCarthy, the book utilized the paranoid style of politics to make its claims seem more plausible. By discussing the slow and subtle Communist takeover of Asia, Welch’s rhetoric made it seem as if the U.S. was also at risk. In the book, Welch also calls on religious faith as motivation to defend against “communistic atheism”. Like McCarthy, Welch made a plea to nationalism in the book. He says, “In the political arena we shall try to make the word Americanism useful as a constructive opposite of Communism, and attract many Americanists who may not be members of our Society”. Welch continues, “Members of the John Birch Society...not only *can* be good patriots in their respective countries, but necessarily *will* be”.¹²

Over time, The John Birch Society has, for the most part, grown into the mainstream as a political organization “dedicated to restoring and preserving freedom

¹⁰ Robert Welch, xv.

¹¹ David Farber, Jeff Roche and others, eds., 23.

¹² Robert Welch, 6-7, 150.

under the United States Constitution”. The nationalist spirit is echoed in the group’s mission statement: “United by a sense of duty and a strong belief in personal freedom and limited government, members of the John Birch Society have educated millions of Americans on the proper role of government...members have played a pivotal role in halting dangerous legislation and federal policies which threaten America’s independence”.¹³ Its ability to survive, however, can most likely be attributed to a shift in its language.

At its conception in 1958, the John Birch Society was able to defend its nationalist exploits by associating itself with the anti-communist cause. Today, members of the John Birch Society make the more general claim that they are seeking to protect American freedoms and avoid naming a specific “enemy”. However, the mission statement serves as a link between present and past. In the most basic way, the John Birch Society of both yesterday and today holds strong to the patriotic values that have helped shape American national identity for centuries. Furthermore, the patriotism that it espouses seems to favor “American ideals” to such a large extent that anything “foreign” is seen as a threat. In this way, the John Birch Society has been able today to hide its xenophobic ideas in language of tolerance.

Clearly, both Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society supported a strong, but atypical form of nationalism. McCarthy’s speech in Wheeling and *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* provide concrete evidence to support this claim. The stated purpose of both McCarthy and Welch (and their followers) was to secure American democracy, safety and freedoms. Nationalism was the channel through which to do this. Ironically,

¹³ The John Birch Society Web site. Internet on-line. Available from <<http://www.jbs/org>>. (The John Birch Society, Inc., 2003)

however, this form of nationalism was so extreme that it defeated its own purpose. While McCarthy and the John Birch Society worked to preserve these “freedoms” and “liberties”, they undercut individual rights to freedom of expression. Ellen Schrecker says, “The political repression of the McCarthy era fostered the growth of the national security state and facilitated its expansion into the rest of civil society”.¹⁴ The democratic freedom of being able to belong to a certain organization or the right to choose one’s own political beliefs was essentially taken away in the presence of such extreme nationalism. In effect, McCarthy and the John Birch Society were advocating such a radical form of nationalism that it essentially contradicted itself.

This “countersubversive tradition” still exists. A recent *Raleigh News & Observer* article discussed the strong opposition by the right-leaning Traditional Values Coalition towards government-funded health research of certain “questionable” studies like sex and drug use among truck drivers. Democrat house representative Henry Waxman of California deemed this “scientific McCarthyism” and many others criticized the efforts of such groups to limit scientific research.¹⁵ While McCarthy’s speech in West Virginia and *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* promote nationalism to vanquish the supposed “other” (in both instances, Communism), the more recent case shows that the roots of all of these movements and arguments are the same. The xenophobic sentiments in all three cases motivated some kind of action. For McCarthy and the John Birch Society a revival of national identity was the answer.

¹⁴ Ellen Schrecker, 106.

¹⁵ David Wahlberg, “Conservative group slams studies: ‘Questionable’ researchers listed,” *The Raleigh News & Observer*, 2 November 2003, 5A

