

Fringe Benefits

By Rick Perlstein



People forgot Pat. There Ralph Nader sits, despised and accursed, saddled with the blame for, as of this writing (now *there's* a phrase you've learned to hate), "stealing" some 97,000 Florida votes from Albert Gore Jr. Meanwhile Pat Buchanan has gotten off scot-free after poaching several times the margin of difference between the two major-party candidates as well. I like to speculate that he might have even gotten enough to cover the difference from members of the John Birch Society, drawn to the polls in high numbers for the historic prospect of backing one of their own: California Birch leader Ezola Foster, Buchanan's vice-presidential running mate. Think about it: The John Birch Society might have decided the fate of the Republic.

The Birchers are just the kind of persistent outliers that have always had their effect on American politics, but who must ever remained doomed—like us, we left-wing loons—to suffer only the enormous condescension of consensus-addled elites who only know how to think about political actors that poll higher than 15 percent. It is true that the John Birch Society has worked remarkably hard to make it remarkably hard for anyone but a partisan to take it seriously. But it has also put a discernable imprint on American political culture for more than 40 years.

The John Birch Society was founded by Robert Harold Winborne Welch, a rural child genius who entered the University of North Carolina at the age of 12, passed through unsuccessful stints as a Naval Academy cadet, Harvard Law

student and aspiring writer, and ended up a sales executive at his brother's candy firm in Massachusetts. There the self-evident key to human happiness was revealed to him: capitalism, pure and simple, stripped clean of any government taint. Then he looked around in the '30s and '40s and noticed that government was getting bigger, not smaller, and reacted as only a narcissistic isolated child genius could: He decided it had to be a conspiracy. Unmasking it became his life's work.

In the '50s his investigations proved agreeable to an ever growing cohort of wealthy, right-wing manufacturing entrepreneurs enraged that the first Republican president in 20 years seemed utterly uninterested in rolling back the New Deal. Instead, Dwight D. Eisenhower declared Roosevelt's reforms were here to stay—even, on occasion, expanding them. In December 1958, Welch gathered 11 of these anguished, lonely conservatives for a two-day meeting on the problem. America was already a quarter of the way to falling "like overripe fruit" into the hands of the Soviet Union, thanks to secret Communist dissemination of seductive yet poisonous concepts like "civil rights"—which make people think they're supporting something nice, when they're really being duped into an effort to establish a

totalitarian central government (Mao, Welch helpfully pointed out, had conquered China through just such a sugared lie: the slogan "agrarian reform")—and the welfare state, which acclimates people to a government paternalism that will by turns come to enslave them.

Welch proceeded to explain what he was going to do about it. The group would organize 1 million Americans for the task of exposing this truth—a simple act of mass pedagogy, he was convinced, would stop the conspiracy in its tracks. The name Welch gave the organization, the John Birch Society, was cen-

Do the John Birch Society and Ralph Nader have anything in common?

tral to this touchingly naive, if a bit touched, theory. John Birch was an American missionary and spy killed by Communists in China after World War II—killed, Welch argued, for stumbling upon the Red plan to take over the world. He was the first casualty of the Cold War. Had he survived to expose the scheme—well, then the Red advance would have stopped then and there.

His explanation was, to be sure, rather unusual. But followers were spellbound. The Republican Party was in shambles after bad losses in 1958 and 1960. Conservatism's profile in American polemical culture was at an all-time low. And for conservatives,

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