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The second Red Scare in the United States mostly calmed down with the censuring and eventual downfall of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the mid-1950s. Following McCarthy’s death, the nature of the anti-Communist discourse changed as Americans became less worried about internal subversion. D. J. Mulloy, in his interesting work about the John Birch Society, tackles the not-well-understood ideals of this anti-Communist organization whose founder believed that McCarthy was a great American and that a Communist conspiracy contributed to McCarthy’s downfall. *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* explains how anti-Communism helped fuel this right-wing group’s conspiracy theories in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though Mulloy places the John Birch Society within the context of Americans’ long-standing love of conspiracy theories, he also notes how it originated in the culture of Cold War America.

The John Birch Society is a right-wing organization whose founding goal was to prevent the United States’ defeat in the Cold War. Unlike most Cold War organizations during the 1950s and 1960s, which usually focused on the fight against external enemies, the Society focused more on internal enemies and saw conspiracies lurking in the shadows, protecting domestic Communists. At its peak, in 1965, the society had 100,000 members nationally with as much name recognition among the American public as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] (2-3). The organization was founded in 1958 by Robert Welch, a former candy manufacturer and high-level officer in the Boston Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturerers. Mulloy’s work focuses on the first decade of the Society’s founding, when it was at its peak in terms of membership and cultural influence. Anti-communism and Cold War hysteria were the driving forces behind the Society’s agenda.
The World of the John Birch Society is one of the first scholarly accounts of the group. Mulloy, a historian of American extremism, does a fine job of placing the Society in the context of both the Cold War and the history of conspiracy. He documents some outlandish statements made by the Society, including the often-repeated and ridiculed accusation by Welch that President Dwight Eisenhower was a “dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy” (18). In addition, the Society believed that the Civil Rights Movement, the Watts riot of 1965, the firing of anti-Communist hero Major General Edwin A. Walker in 1959, and the failure of the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion could all be connected to the world-wide Communist conspiracy. Welch’s conspiracy-focused mind even blamed Communists for the John F. Kennedy assassination and connected it to those in Iraq, South Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic. In short, Welch and many of the members of the John Birch Society believed many things which were clearly false.

The mindset of the Society was that the battle against Communism would require a focus on the “long haul” (120). The anti-Communist right, which was the group most closely associated with the John Birch Society, had long believed that the Cold War would be a decades-long fight for the future of mankind. Because of this worldview, the Society’s leadership argued that members must avoid getting drawn into every fight as they could be Communist ploys to weaken American society by sowing chaos at home and abroad. Welch, for instance, argued that the Communists were behind civil rights advocate James Meredith’s forced integration of the University of Mississippi and the subsequent riots. According to the Society’s founder, the Communists were simply trying to create chaos which might be a trial run for their revolution. This belief that the Civil Rights Movement was fermenting chaos on behalf of the Communists fit into the Society’s world view that saw Communism as a conspiracy which had survived since the time of Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. These conspiracies, which tended to be “fantastical” are quite interesting and help historians better understand the post-Red Scare, Cold War-era anti-Communist discourse (145). Unfortunately Mulloy doesn’t make any attempt to try to understand how many members of the Society actually believed the conspiracies as compared to those who simple liked the aggressive anti-Communism and stayed silent during the Society’s more outlandish moments.

The anti-Communist rhetoric which Mulloy writes about is well known among historians of American conservatism in the 1960s, however, this work is the first to bring most of the Society’s claims together in one clear and cogent work. In addition, Mulloy does a wonderful job of placing these outlandish statements of the Society in the proper context of the Cold War. He demonstrates how the comments made by the “extremist” John Birch Society and the “mainstream” political leaders such as Kennedy were different by only “a matter of degree and emphasis rather than basic understanding” (171-172). By writing about the society and explaining its relationship with the public discourse surrounding anti-Communism and the Cold War, Mulloy is helping historians gain a clearer understanding of this tumultuous period.

While The World of the John Birch Society contextualizes the Society, Mulloy’s aims are not to write a biography of either its founder or the organization itself. This means that
his work leaves the topic open to other scholars, and I must echo his claim that a proper history of the John Birch Society “certainly needs to be written” (14). Still, this work is the “first extensive study of the Birch Society to appear since the 1960s” and it helps scholars place it within the broader context of the period (13). His work, which totals only 185 pages of text, is easy to read and would work well in undergraduate or graduate classes about the domestic side of the Cold War in the United States. It would also compliment any reading list about the birth of modern conservatism, though the publisher’s claim on the back cover of the book that this is the “blueprint of the modern Tea Party” lacks merit. The World of the John Birch Society is a good source of information for anyone looking to gain a complete picture of what became of some of McCarthy’s most fervent supporters and how American society perpetuated the anti-Communist message throughout the middle years of the Cold War.

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