



A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism

Edward H. Miller

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The origins of the conspiracy theories that permeate modern American politics are revealed in Edward H. Miller's biography of Robert Welch, *A Conspiratorial Life*.

Born into a family of North Carolina farmers who fought in the American Revolution, owned slaves, believed in white supremacy, supported the confederacy, disliked Yankees, and distrusted the federal government, Robert Welch made his fortune as a candy manufacturer with the purpose of supporting himself as a political writer. Hypervigilant to conspiracy theories, he found a personal outlet in the death of John Birch, an American military intelligence officer who died during World War II. He founded an anticommunist organization, The John Birch Society, to peddle his theories among American conservatives.

Welch first became known to mainstream Americans in 1964, when his accusation that former President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a communist was quoted on the floor of the United States Senate. But by then, he was already an established figure on the right. Still, just a few years later, he was excommunicated from conservative movements, and the Society lost all of its influence. He continued his work from the sidelines, influencing conservative political opinions throughout the 1970s and paving the way for the normalization of conspiracy theories of recent years.

Miller investigates the origins and survival of The John Birch Society, as well as the influence of the Society and Welch on modern American conservatism. His work is based on Welch's personal papers, but also muses on how he might have experienced his childhood, or agreed with anti-immigrant rhetoric. Welch's white supremacy is addressed in direct terms, though the book's discussions of his antisemitism are less clear.

A Conspiratorial Life is the first comprehensive biography of Robert Welch. It is revelatory about his role in the development of modern American conservatism.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (November / December 2021)

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