Welch, Robert Henry Winborne, Jr. [1]

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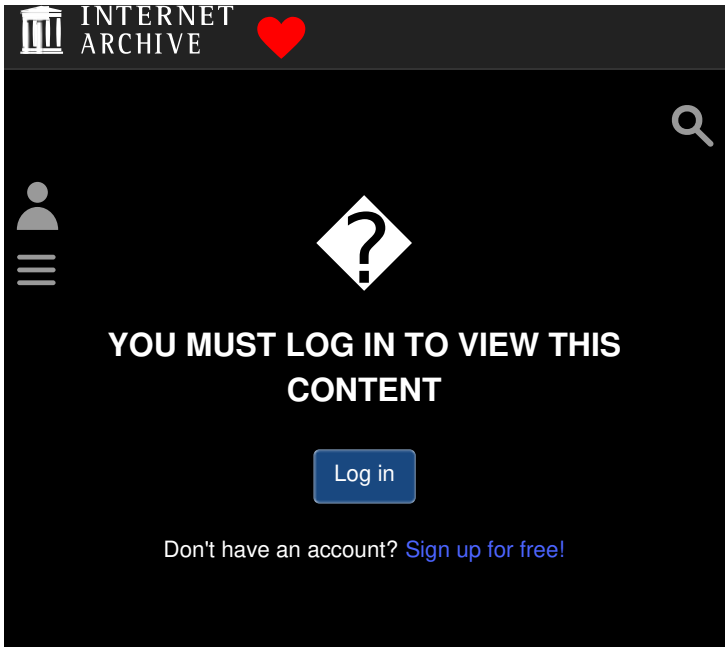
by Jonathan Houghton, 1996

1 Dec. 1899–7 Jan. 1985

Robert Henry Winborne Welch, Jr., businessman and founder of the John Birch Society [2], was born in Chowan County [3], the son of Robert H. W. and Lina V. James Welch. The first of his paternal ancestors immigrated from Wales in 1720, and his forebears worked primarily as farmers and preachers.

Young Welch showed early signs of genius. He read at age three, was graduated from high school at the top of his class at age twelve, and, still wearing knee breeches, promptly matriculated at The University of North Carolina [4], where he was dubbed a "boy wonder." He was graduated at seventeen and enrolled at the U.S. Naval Academy for two years, followed by two years of study at Harvard Law School [5], where he took courses from Felix Frankfurter, but dropped out in disgust at academia.

Welch quit Harvard to found a candy business based in a loft in Cambridge, Mass. He prospered and in 1922 married Marian Lucille Probart of Akron, Ohio. In 1932 he joined the largest candy manufacturer in the country, E. J. Brach and Sons, from which he resigned in 1934 to work as a sales manager for the James O. Welch Company, his younger brother's candy business. Over the next twenty-two years, Welch's candy sales soared from $28,000 to more than $2 million annually. Robert Welch's expertise is reflected by the powerful positions he held: OPA Advisory Committee during World War II [6], vice-president and member of the board of directors of the National Association of Manufacturers [7], and board of directors for the United Prison Association and U.S. Chess Federation [8]; he won the candy industry's Man of the Year award in 1947. In 1950 Welch ran for the Republican [9] nomination for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, placing second out of four candidates. In addition, he competed against chess masters without a handicap.



By the mid-fifties Welch was independently wealthy and obsessed with the political threat that he believed international communism posed to the country. He had already written three books. *May God Forgive Us* [10] (1952), which analyzed President Harry S Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur, sold nearly 200,000 copies in its first year. In 1956 Welch left his job to become a full-time pamphleteer against communism. He published his own magazine, *One Man's Opinion* (later, *American Opinion* [11]), and established his own publishing operations. In 1958 he delivered a marathon seventeen-hour speech to eleven followers that he later published as *The Blue Book* [12], which formed the basis for the John Birch Society.

The most commonly used word to describe Welch's conspiratorial views is "bizarre." Books, magazine articles, and roughly one thousand newspaper stories a day in 1963 reported on the John Birch Society and its founder. Welch set off a political storm by crusading against the Communist conspiracy. His bleak assessment of Communist penetration into the U.S. government made Joseph McCarthy's indictments appear tame. The original version of his *Blue Book* reached the unlikely conclusion that President Dwight D. Eisenhower "is a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." This phrase generated so much controversy that Welch changed it in later editions, saying that Eisenhower "has been sympathetic to ultimate Communist aims." Welch thereby offered two possibilities: either "he is a mere stooge or . . . he is a Communist." Welch believed that Communists controlled 60 to 80 percent of the United States.

Welch founded the John Birch Society to defeat this threat. Thriving on secrecy, the society created a disciplined following of its absolute leader, Robert Welch. Members studied Welch's monthly *Bulletin* in their meetings, seeking to counter Moscow's advances by implementing his prescribed agenda. Bircher recorded what activities they had completed and sent their sealed reports to Welch's headquarters in Belmont, Mass., for review. A member completing less than 50 percent of Welch's directives could be dismissed. This self-styled counterrevolutionary vanguard prized vigilance and devotion. The *Bulletin* included demands for letter-writing campaigns to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren, infiltration of organizations like the PTA and the Republican party, and censorship of suspect library books; members displayed an intense commitment to stamp out communism, which Welch saw permeating most of American society. Copying

Communist organizational tactics, he had associates form small "cells" of roughly twelve members each.

As the press launched an exposé-style attack on the Birch Society, observers feared that the organization posed a threat to democracy—a value that Welch roundly assaulted. Tapping into North Carolina's political culture, the society's motto proclaimed: "A republic, not a democracy." In his *Blue Book*, he argued that democracy was merely a deceptive phase, a weapon of demagoguery. The authoritarian structure and potentially subversive ends to which the society's efforts could be directed fed media charges of extremism. Yet right-wing apologists such as WRAL radio editorialist Jesse Helms (later a U.S. senator) countered these indictments with regular defenses of the organization.

The John Birch Society's membership peaked in the mid-1960s, with many ultraconservative enthusiasts joining during Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. Its roughly 100,000 members supported an $8 million budget, 270 paid employees, 400 bookstores, and a publishing house. Welch never drew a dime's salary for his crusading efforts.

He retired as chairman of the John Birch Society in March 1983 after suffering a stroke. The ever energetic Welch had published seven books, edited the *American Opinion* for twenty-seven years, and produced innumerable films, pamphlets, and radio programs. He died almost two years later in the Winchester Nursing Home in Winchester, Mass. Welch was survived by his wife, two sons, Hillard Walmer and Robert H. W. III, and six grandchildren.

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