

Post 7.27.69

The Birch Society Is Losing Its Grip

By Gordon D. Hall

The John Birch Society's domination of the extreme Right is near an end. The umbrella under which the extreme Right had gathered for nearly a decade now belongs to George Wallace and his American Party.

No other conclusion is possible after reviewing four long days and nights with the John Birch Society at its annual July 4th weekend "Rally for God, Family and Country" in Boston. Less than a thousand "patriots" registered at the Statler Hilton Hotel this year in contrast to two and three times that number in recent years. The celebration was so quiet one could hear the Wallace-in-'72 pins dropping.

The drift to Wallace, which began well over a year ago when the former Alabama governor put scores of Birchers to work in his Presidential campaign, accelerated in the ennui enveloping the rally audience, as

(The writer is a nationally recognized expert on political fringe movements and regularly attends their political conventions. In this article he records his impressions of a far Rightist rally held in Boston over the July 4th weekend.)

Wallace professionals, shrewdly assessing the mood, buttonholed everyone in sight, signing on those who crave "action in place of talk." There was a rush to sign.

The blame for the defections to Wallace rests squarely on the rally organizers, a small hardcore of John Birch Society officials led by Laurence E. Bunker of Wellesley, Mass. Bunker, a member of the Society's National Council, regularly chairs the "God, Family and Country" rallies. From 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Bunker and his aides subjected everyone present to a continuous round of speakers, films, tapes and "patriotic" exhibits.

The oratory is the kind Senator Thomas Kuchel once called "fright peddling," but it is clear that fear-including statements begin to lose their zing the fourth and fifth time around. Christian Crusade director Billy James Hargis, for example, again went for big mileage with the charge that Playboy publisher Hugh Hefner is part of a "gigantic Communist conspiracy" to undermine public morals. No one was stirred enough this year even to register a complaint about the sale of Playboy in the hotel lobby.

There was a lot of talk again about America's lack of "intestinal fortitude," the far Right's favorite cliché. Rep. John A. Rarick and Rev. W. O. H. Garman said we ought to give the Communist enemy about "15 minutes" to shape up before "rocketing" some big babies in, but neither speaker created

THE EXTREME RIGHT reacts sharply to the charge that it is essentially humorless, but the rally humor this year served to confirm rather than dispel that charge. Gen. Edwin A. Walker of Dallas got one of the biggest laughs when he said that John, Edward and Robert Kennedy spells J.E.R.K. There were genuine touches of irony, too. Kent Courtney, a Louisiana segregationist and a big Wallace man, ended up introducing Lola Belle Holmes, a Negro from Missouri who was supposed to chair a civil rights panel. When Mrs. Holmes' three Negro panelists failed to appear, she rose to warn her white audience that the arm of the Communist conspiracy was again at work. After the speech, Mrs. Holmes, a John Birch Society member, held court on the mezzanine. In response to a question from a Mississippian, Mrs. Holmes agreed that indeed she would not want to see her daughter marry a white man.

The exhibitors from every region of the country jammed their display booths along the walls of the function rooms and corridors of the mezzanine. Liberty Lobby again got a big play, along with Bob Jones University, Christian Crusade, Let Freedom Ring, the Network of Patriotic Letter Writers and even a tiny, Memphis-based Negro group favoring racial segregation.

The exhibits lend a flavor of summer carnival midways to the mezzanine corridors. And as the number increase—there were over 60 this year—so does the hucksterism. One Chicago lady was moved to state that "this is getting to look more and more like a bookseller's convention."

THE PRESS IS kept under surveillance by "anti-Communist security guards" and photographs are taken of any reporter thought to be hostile. Look correspondent Margaret McGlynn, covering the "sex education" seminars, found invitations to private receptions for rally luminaries withdrawn because security guards had seen her "talking to the wrong people" four times.

Robert Welch wandered in unannounced about midway in the rally. Word spread quickly that the founder and head of the John Birch Society had arrived, causing a flurry of excitement along the mezzanine. Welch is so devoid of charisma it is difficult for an outsider to understand his attraction. He is short and slightly stooped, pot-bellied, sallow of complexion and a dreadful public speaker. His voice, despite decades in Boston, remains that of his North Carolina farmer-preacher ancestry. Yet the feeling between Welch and his flock borders on the religious, and is, in its own way, touching to witness. Clumps of adoring fans trail him on his travels about the hotel, and the shy ones gently reach out to touch him as he passes. There will be more of the same next year for it is not the nature of the political extremist to notice the rug that has been pulled from beneath him.

George Wallace's name is already atop the speaker's list under consideration for next year's rally. There is something akin to sweet innocence in honoring a man who has just walked away with most of your marbles.