

12/21/63
The Birch Advertisement

In the Western edition of The Times of last Monday, Dec. 16, there appeared a full-page advertisement of the John Birch Society, entitled "The Time Has Come." The publication of this advertisement has evoked from our readers a large number of protests, some of which we publish in our Letters to the Editor column today.

Many of the communications take strong exception to the actual content of the advertisement. So does The Times, and we said so in an editorial earlier this week. But many other letter writers aim their fire not so much at the Birch Society as at The Times itself for having permitted the Society to present its message to the public through paid advertising space in this newspaper. The issue thus raised involves, in our view, the responsibility that a free press owes to its readers and to the public at large.

Just two years ago, a similar question arose in connection with our publishing the advertisement of a book that strongly criticized the policy of the United States in the Caribbean. At that time (Dec. 28, 1961) we stated on this page some principles that we think are highly relevant to our acceptance for publication of the Birch advertising. We said then, and repeat today:

The Times believes that, in furtherance of the objectives of the First Amendment of the Constitution, it should keep its advertising columns open to all points of view, no matter how strongly it disapproves of them.

Subject, of course, to the laws of libel and the bounds of decency and good taste and the requirements of factual accuracy, we think the principle of freedom of the press not only requires us to report events and occurrences of which we disapprove . . . but also imposes on us the obligation to accept advertising of books whose contents we reject and of political parties and movements whose goals we despise.

The guarantees of the First Amendment are not mere guarantees of the publishers' right to publish. They are, more importantly, guarantees of the public's right to know. We consider that that is what a free press truly means: the maintenance of open communication in the realm of ideas.

The political and other opinions of The New York Times—that is, our editorial policies—are expressed daily and exclusively in the editorial columns of this page. Our policy on "Letters to the Editor" is to print communications from our readers of general interest and of all shades of opinion. Our news policy is "to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved." . . . Our policy with respect to political advertising is to keep our columns open to those who wish to express a particular point of view, no matter how widely divergent it may be from our own.

These policies, as we see them, comprise the essence of the freedom and responsibility of the press.

We think that statement is appropriate to the issue raised by the Birch advertisement, and we reaffirm it today.

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Letters

Comments on Birch Ad

What the Far Right Fears

To The Editor of The New York Times:

In the grand tradition of journalism at its best you presented the American public on Dec. 15 with its proper alternatives. On the one hand was James Reston's observation that in Washington the shock of the late President's death has "created a new receptivity for new ideas and a new concern for the nation." On the other hand was the full-page spread of the John Birch Society showing that this particular brand of extremism has learned nothing.

By emphasizing the Communist affiliations of the assassin the Birchers are blind to the basic fact that it was an extremist who did the job. Having watched Hitler grasp power in Germany in 1932-33 on the pretext of protecting the nation from the "menace" of Communism, I am less than convinced that right-wing extremism is any less dangerous here than left-wing extremism.

It is very doubtful that what the Communists fear most is that the American people will learn the truth about their purposes, their methods, and their progress." This is already as clear as daylight to any high school pupil.

What the Communists want is for the American people to be misled by right-wing propaganda, and thus diverted from their main task.

In 1947 Henry L. Stimson stated clearly what that is: "The problem of Russia is thus reduced to a question of our own fitness to survive. I do not mean to belittle the Communist challenge. I only mean that the essential question is one which we should have to answer if there were not a Communist alive. Can we make freedom and prosperity real in the present world? If we can, Communism is no threat. If not, with or without Communism, our own civilization would ultimately fail."

It is not Communism which in reality the right-wing fringe fears; it is a fully democratic society which takes seriously the challenge of the civil rights crisis and related social concerns. Let's at least call things by the right name.

DONALD T. ROWLINGSON,
Professor of New Testament,
Boston University,
Boston, Dec. 15, 1963.

No Proved Facts

To The Editor of The New York Times:

For many years on the front page of your paper there appears a slogan "All the News That's Fit to Print." Why is it not possible to practice the same diligence in your advertising copy? I refer to the John Birch ad.

A greater disservice to the late President John Fitzgerald Kennedy could hardly be rendered. The ad refers to a statement by Martin Dies and infers, all the way through, that Harvey Oswald was employed in some way by the Soviet Government to assassinate our President.

Inasmuch as there is no proof of such an allegation and inasmuch as two investigations are being conducted, one by a committee of inquiry headed by Chief Justice Warren and one by the F.B.I., it seems that your paper has given substantial aid to an organization whose policy is inflammatory and tries to promote the kind of propaganda John Kennedy worked so hard to prevent. Surely you must agree that advertising should be supported by proved facts.

I feel this is unworthy of your great paper.

JESSE S. MOORE,
Scarsdale, N. Y., Dec. 15, 1963.