



It is often in the excuses and in the apologies that one finds the real offense. Looking back on the domestic political “surge” which the populist right has been celebrating since last month, I found myself most dispirited by the manner in which the more sophisticated conservatives attempted to conjure the nasty bits away.

Here, for example, was Ross Douthat, the voice of moderate conservatism on the New York Times op-ed page. He was replying to a number of critics who had pointed out that Glenn Beck, in his rallies and broadcasts, had been channeling the forgotten voice of the John Birch Society, megaphone of Strangelovian paranoia from the 1950s and 1960s. His soothing message:

These parallels are real. But there’s a crucial difference. The Birchers only had a crackpot message; they never had a mainstream one. The Tea Party marries fringe concerns (repeal the 17th Amendment!) to a timely, responsible-seeming message about spending and deficits. The more one looks at this, the more wrong it becomes (as does that giveaway phrase “responsible-seeming”). The John Birch Society possessed such a mainstream message—the existence of a Communist world system with tentacles in the United States—that it had a potent influence over whole sections of the Republican Party. It managed this even after its leader and founder, Robert Welch, had denounced President Dwight D. Eisenhower as a “dedicated, conscious agent” of that same Communist apparatus. Right up to the defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964, and despite the efforts of such conservatives as William F. Buckley Jr. to dislodge them, the Birchers were a feature of conservative politics well beyond the crackpot fringe.

Christopher Hitchens

Now, here is the difference. Glenn Beck has not even been encouraging his audiences to reread Robert Welch. No, he has been inciting them to read the work of W. Cleon Skousen, a man more insane and nasty than Welch and a figure so extreme that ultimately even the Birch-supporting leadership of the Mormon Church had to distance itself from him.

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