



Sworn on the Bible . . . Declared to be the Will of the Founders . . . and Wrapped in the Flag

By: Claire Conner – July 21, 2013

Six years ago, I was sure the United States was ready to embrace a new progressive era. “There’s no one left to hoist the extremist flag,” I told myself. I was so wrong.

In 2008, when the economy tanked and Barack Obama emerged as the Democratic candidate for president, the radical right went on the offense. When I heard frenzied voters at a Republican rally in Florida shouting, “Treason,” and “Kill him,” in response to one of Sarah Palin’s anti-Obama rants, I worried.

“My parents are back,” I told anyone who’d listen. People looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“For as long as I could remember, my father and my mother hated Communists and Democrats. Anyone who said “Roosevelt” or “Truman” was sure to get an earful about “Commie, socialist traitors.”

So, in 1955 when Mother and Dad met Robert Welch, a candy-company executive turned conspiracy hunter, they embraced a kindred soul. My father said Welch was “a brilliant mind and the finest patriot I’ve ever had the privilege to know.”

Three years later in December 1958, Welch founded the John Birch Society. My parents didn’t hesitate—they became the first two members in the city of Chicago. My father wrote a check for \$2,000—the equivalent of \$15,000 today—for two lifetime John Birch Society memberships.

The Birch goal: “Taking Back the Country” meshed perfectly with my parents’ ideas. Dad would serve on the JBS National Council for 32 years.

Anti-Communist was the first axe the Birchers ground, but it was internal threats to the country that became their rally cry. As my Dad often complained, “Socialism is taking over the joint.”

For my parents and their Birch allies, that evil socialism took the form of every government program not specifically mentioned in the Constitution. The only cure was to end them all, as quickly as possible.

Mother and Dad gleefully anticipated the end of Social Security, the demise of all welfare programs and the elimination of federal funding for anything. They insisted that regulation was such a threat to business that it all had to be done away with. Nothing could stand in the way of free enterprise.

The resulting utopia, according to my parents, would free business and individuals to do anything while dismantling labor unions, ending the safety net, cutting corporate taxes, and slashing taxes on the wealthy.

“What happens to the poor, the old, the unemployed, the disabled if you succeed?” I asked my mother.

“It doesn’t matter, not at all,” she told me. “It’s all about the Constitution.

“The Constitution doesn’t feed a hungry child,” I said.

“That’s not my concern,” she answered.

At first, the GOP applauded the Birchers for their patriotic zeal and embraced them as good Republicans. Then, in 1960, a political scandal revealed that Robert Welch named President Dwight D. Eisenhower a Communist and a traitor. Republican leaders along with conservatives like William F. Buckley, Jr, labeled the Birchers as crackpots and pushed them out of the party.

The effort worked. The Birchers were painted as extreme reactionaries, exiled from mainstream American politics and forgotten. Birch leaders were not defeated or deterred. Fred Koch, one of the original Birch founding members and a National Council member with my father, invested a small fortune on his pet projects, including the so-called right-to-work laws, designed to hamper union organizing.

His sons, David and Charles Koch, inherited their father’s multi-millions, turned them into multi-billions, and invested in their political creations: the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, and others. Those organizations incorporated most John Birch Society ideas and effectively increased both their reach and their impact on American politics.

The Kochs and their allies envision the same framework for American government that I heard from my father and his John Birch Society pals: the New Deal dismantled, the federal government reduced to a quarter of its current size, and most federal programs gutted.

Thus improved, America would assume its rightful place as a libertarian paradise where everyone who worked hard was rich, business had a free reign and the central government was tiny, weak and poor.

Six months after President Obama was inaugurated, a new right-wing, populist movement arose. The Tea Party, bankrolled by the Koch brothers and the Americans for Prosperity—staged rallies and protests across the country. The economic meltdown was blamed on high business taxes, too many regulations and poor people. A parade of candidates preached that government couldn’t create jobs, stimulus programs never work and a strong military had to have an ever-larger piece of the budget. They dragged out the old saw about “tax and spend liberals,” while ignoring the real dollar costs of two wars and three tax cuts.

Real Americans were encouraged to stock pile weapons as the last defense against a tyrannical liberal government. All of this was sworn on the Bible, declared to be the will of the founders and wrapped in the flag.

These ideas are old John Birch Society ideas, born again. This time around the movement has political muscle, unlimited dollars, and right-wing media support. It will take an enormous effort to awaken Americans to the dangers of the radical right wing and push fanatics to the dustbin of history where they belong.

I know all of this because I lived it. I know that extremism broke my family. I don't want it to break my country.