

The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle: David O. McKay's Confrontation with Communism

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THROUGHOUT HIS LONG TENURE as a General Authority, David O. McKay was consistently opposed to Communism, as were his fellow General Authorities. Ironically, once he had become president of the Church, opposition to Communism became a seriously divisive issue among the Mormons. On the one hand, McKay gave his special blessing to Ezra Taft Benson as an opponent of Communism, enabling this strong-willed apostle to propagate his ultra-right-wing views among Church members—views that included an endorsement of the John Birch Society, founded by candy maker Robert Welch. On the other hand, McKay also responded to General Authorities who, despite their own opposition to Communism, took exception to the extremism of Benson and the John Birch Society. These included Apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee, as well as Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner, McKay's counselors in the First Presidency. Neither the strong-willed Benson nor his protesting colleagues among the apostles ever achieved a clear upper hand with the aging prophet. As a result, Latter-day Saints who endorsed the extreme views of

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the John Birch Society and those who opposed them found reason to believe that the prophet was on their side, and the divisive issue remained unresolved until the death of McKay in 1970.

McKay initially greeted the Russian revolution of 1917 with optimism, telling a general conference audience, "It looks as if Russia will have a government 'by the people, of the people, and for the people.'"¹ However, he quickly became convinced that Communism was a threat to democracy and freedom. As he assumed his duties within the First Presidency in 1934, he was tutored on this threat by his ecclesiastical superior, First Counselor J. Reuben Clark, Jr., whose many years of service in the State Department gave him a broad exposure to world politics. In 1936 the two counselors joined with President Heber J. Grant to issue the first LDS policy statement regarding Communism, a statement that would be cited repeatedly in coming decades:

The Church does not interfere, and has no intention of trying to interfere, with the fullest and freest exercise of the political franchise of its members, under and within our Constitution. . . .

But Communism is not a political party nor a political plan under the Constitution; it is a system of government that is the opposite of our Constitutional government, and it would be necessary to destroy our government before communism could be set up in the United States.

Since Communism, established, would destroy our American Constitutional government, to support communism is treasonable to our free institutions, and no patriotic American citizen may become either a communist or supporter of communism. . . .

Communism being thus hostile to loyal American citizenship and incompatible with true Church membership, of necessity no loyal American citizen and no faithful Church member can be a Communist.²

Throughout the decade, McKay remained convinced that Communism was a greater threat than the rising power of Germany. Writing to a colleague as the 1940s dawned, he made it clear that he saw Communism as a clear and present danger, one that had already begun to infiltrate

1. David O. McKay, Address, *Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, April 7, 1917 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semi-annual), 49; hereafter cited as *Conference Report*.

2. First Presidency, "Warning to Church Members," July 3, 1936, *Improvement Era* 39, no. 8 (August 1936): 488.

American society: “Communist rats are working here in the United States and are gnawing at the very vitals of our government, and I wish every one of them could be sent to Russia where he belongs.”³

When the attack on Pearl Harbor brought World War II to the United States, Japan and Germany became an immediate threat and McKay’s wartime rhetoric focused on them. In the first general conference after the attack, McKay decried war in principle but noted that there is one condition in which a righteous nation is justified in going to war: “To deprive an intelligent human being of his free agency is to commit the crime of the ages. . . . So fundamental in man’s eternal progress is his inherent right to choose, that the Lord would defend it even at the price of war.”⁴ A common thread connecting wartime Germany and Japan with Soviet Communism was that all three systems deprived humankind of free agency, a gift from God that in McKay’s view was second only to life itself. Time after time over the next three decades, McKay returned to the theme that the primary evil of Communism was its denial to the individual of free agency.

Following the war, McKay resumed his anti-Soviet rhetoric. Speaking on the “Church-of-the-Air” program in 1947 he said, “Today America is reputedly the only nation in the world capable of sustaining western civilization. Opposed to her is Russia. . . . There can be no question about the outcome of the anticipated ominous clash, which we earnestly hope and pray will never come.”⁵ Addressing general conference the following year, he said, “The choice today is between dictatorship with the atheistic teachings of communism, and the doctrine of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, obedience to which alone can make us free.”⁶

McKay’s primary responsibility as second counselor in the First Presidency was the supervision of the Church’s forty-six worldwide missions; and as the 1940s came to a close, he watched anxiously as the Iron

3. David O. McKay, Letter to Jeremiah Stokes, April 19, 1940, quoted in D. Michael Quinn: *J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1983), 190.

4. *Conference Report*, April 5, 1942, 71–73.

5. “Faith Triumphant,” Church-of-the-Air address, July 20, 1947, David O. McKay Scrapbook #12, Archives, Family and Church History Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter LDS Church Archives.

6. *Conference Report*, April 5, 1948, 70.

Curtain began to choke off Church activity in Czechoslovakia, the only mission headquartered in a Communist bloc country.⁷ In a move that forced the Church's hand, Czech police arrested two LDS missionaries early in 1950, alleging that they had entered a restricted area.⁸ The missionaries were held incommunicado for three weeks, and it gradually became apparent that their release was contingent upon the Church's closing the mission.⁹ This quid pro quo was a bitter pill for McKay; and a month after closing the mission, he remarked in a general conference address, "Every member of the Church should take a lesson from what has occurred in that communistically dominated land."¹⁰

The memory of Czechoslovakia was still fresh when McKay received news that carried even more ominous implications for his missionary portfolio: the invasion of South Korea by Communist North Korea on June 25, 1950. The drafting of young men greatly reduced the supply of missionaries, and the threat of an invasion of Hong Kong obliged McKay to instruct the mission president to abandon the Chinese Mission and move his remaining missionaries to Hawaii.¹¹ Furthermore, fear of an imminent Russian invasion of western Europe clouded McKay's plans for missionaries there.

Thus, in the year preceding his becoming president of the Church, McKay had been forced to take three reluctant steps backward because of Communism: the forced abandonment of the Czechoslovak Mission, the preemptive abandonment of the Chinese Mission, and the reduction by over two-thirds of the missionary force. In his first interview after becoming president, he warned, "A third World War is inevitable unless Communism is soon subdued. Communism yields to nothing but force."¹²

During the first year of his presidency, 1951–52, McKay traveled to Europe to select sites in England and Switzerland for the first LDS tem-

7. A mission also operated at this time in the Soviet sector of Germany.

8. Senator Elbert D. Thomas, Letter to David O. McKay, February 14, 1950, in McKay, *Diary*, typescript, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. These diaries are not paginated nor are there numbers for the different volumes. They are photocopies, made by Clare Middlemiss, of the originals.

9. Elbert D. Thomas, Letter to David O. McKay, February 23, 1950, in *ibid.*

10. *Conference Report*, April 8, 1950, 175.

11. McKay, *Diary*, January 13, 1951.

12. "LDS President Concerned over Red Attitude toward Christianity,"

ples outside of North America. Upon his return he reported that the trip “was a glorious one and that everything is promising and hopeful except for the threat of Communism.”¹³ Speaking to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, he used strong rhetoric. According to the minutes, “President McKay said we are facing Satan himself. They are anti-Christ. They want to destroy Christianity . . . [and] it looked to him as though there is only one way to meet them and that is by force, the only thing they understand.”¹⁴

The year 1952 had dual significance for McKay’s confrontation with Communism. During that year, his trip to Europe made him an eyewitness to the ills of Communism and socialism and strengthened his resolve to battle both systems. Also during that year, the apostle destined to become McKay’s staunchest ally in the battle, Ezra Taft Benson, began his political ascendancy.

Benson had entered the national spotlight in 1939 when he accepted a position in Washington, D.C., as executive secretary of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives.¹⁵ He rose in prominence over the next four years, at one point being featured on the cover of *Business Week*’s October 30, 1943, issue; but his political career was temporarily curtailed by a call, in July 1943, to serve in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Benson’s desire to combine political activities with his Church calling was not unprecedented, for Apostle Reed Smoot had earlier been elected to five terms in the United States Senate (1903-33) after being called to the Quorum of the Twelve. In August 1952, Benson requested permission from the First Presidency to serve as chairman of the American Institute of Cooperation. His request was approved, on the condition

Salt Lake Telegram, April 26, 1951. All newspaper articles cited are photocopied and inserted in the McKay diaries under the date of publication.

13. “Church Leader Tells Rotary Club of Trip to European Missions,” *Deseret News*, August 6, 1952.

14. First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Meeting, Minutes, August 28, 1952, in McKay, Diary.

15. For an account of Benson’s life, see Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book, 1987). Although otherwise detailed (565 pages in length), the biography skirts the issue of Benson and Communism to the point where the terms “Communism,” “John Birch Society” and “Robert Welch” do not appear in its index.

that “he does not devote so much of his time to other interests that the Twelve would be deprived of his help.”¹⁶ It would not be long, however, before Benson received permission without restriction for an even more prestigious position in the cabinet of the newly elected U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The latitude McKay allowed Benson in this position is explained by his fervor for Eisenhower. That McKay was a Republican was not widely known. Only a week prior to the 1952 presidential election, a Church member called McKay’s secretary, Clare Middlemiss, and said, “A group of us have had an argument regarding whether President McKay is a Republican or a Democrat, and we wonder if you will tell us.” She referred to McKay’s nonpartisan statement at the conclusion of the October general conference and added, “Therefore he is not proclaiming himself publicly.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, McKay was a Republican and privately rejoiced when Dwight Eisenhower won the election. The morning after the election he noted, “We were all thrilled with the News. In my opinion, it is the greatest thing that has happened in a hundred years for our country.”¹⁸ It was not surprising, then, that McKay reacted favorably to Eisenhower’s request two weeks later, transmitted through newly reelected Senator Arthur V. Watkins (R-Utah), who “told me that Elder Ezra Taft Benson is being considered by General Eisenhower for the position of Secretary of Agriculture, and wondered if he would be permitted to accept the position should it be offered to him. I said yes that I thought he would be permitted to accept.”¹⁹

The following morning McKay and Benson arrived in the parking lot of the Church Administration Building at the same time. According to Benson’s son, “President McKay spotted my father and said to him, ‘Elder Benson, I received a very important phone call last night, and my mind is clear on this matter. If this job is offered to you in the proper spirit, you are to take it.’”²⁰ Three days later, President-elect Eisenhower announced his selection of Benson; and in January 1953, Benson began an eight-year term as Secretary of Agriculture. Upon hearing the news, a reporter called

16. McKay, *Diary*, August 1, 5, 1952.

17. McKay, *Diary*, October 27, 1952.

18. McKay, *Diary*, November 5, 1952.

19. McKay, *Diary*, November 20, 1952.

20. Reed Benson, Interview, Provo, Utah, September 15, 1999. Unless otherwise noted, I conducted all interviews; typescripts in my possession.

McKay. "He desired to know if the report were true that Brother Benson would be given a leave of absence from his Church duties. I told him this was correct."²¹

At Benson's request, McKay gave him a blessing that Benson would thereafter consider a mandate to fight Communism by whatever means he chose: "We seal upon you the blessings of . . . sound judgment, clear vision, that you might see afar the needs of this country; vision that you might see, too, the enemies who would thwart the freedoms of the individual as vouchsafed by the Constitution, . . . and may you be fearless in the condemnation of these subversive influences, and strong in your defense of the rights and privileges of the Constitution."²²

During the years he served in Eisenhower's cabinet, Benson avoided controversy regarding Communism, although he quickly became a lightning rod over agricultural policy. Often under fire from others,²³ he nonetheless had McKay's unwavering support and admiration. Indeed, McKay wrote in his diary, "I suppose it is not overstating the fact when I say that only the present responsibilities of the President himself exceed those which Brother Benson is carrying."²⁴

During the eight years that Benson worked in Washington on agricultural matters, McKay's focus on Communism remained sharp. At a 1953 meeting of national executives of the Boy Scouts of America, he spoke of a death struggle between religion and Communism: "Today two mighty forces are battling for the supremacy for the world. The destiny of mankind is in the balance. It is a question of God and liberty, or atheism and slavery. The success of Communism means the destruction of Religion."²⁵

The following year, at a time when the anti-Communist crusade reached a fever pitch, McKay gained national attention with a statement

21. Notes on telephone conversation between David O. McKay and Ned Redding, publisher of the *California Intermountain News*, McKay Diary, November 25, 1952.

22. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 259.

23. Benson's autobiographical account of his cabinet years is *Crossfire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

24. McKay, Diary, August 19, 1954.

25. David O. McKay, "Forward in Spiritual Ideas," address delivered to the Executives of the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America, Statler Hotel,

that ultimately proved prophetic. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, he told Church members gathered in Wisconsin for a chapel dedication: "People under Communist domination will some day rise against their rulers, the world leader of the Mormon church predicted today. White-haired Elder David O. McKay, Salt Lake City, said free will—the freedom to choose between right and wrong—is the people's most valuable possession. 'No power on earth,' he said, 'can take this freedom away.'"²⁶

At the same time McKay made this statement, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin), came under attack for going too far in his crusade against Communism. McKay initially had been in favor of McCarthy's extremism. Referring to what he termed "the farce that is going on now in Washington between McCarthy and the Army," he told his counselors and the Quorum of the Twelve that "the Communistic influence is being exerted there to lessen the influence of men who would ferret out the enemies in the high places of our government."²⁷ As the summer of 1954 wore on, however, and the extent of McCarthy's improprieties became evident, McKay switched sides on the issue.

Perhaps McKay's switch was facilitated by the fact that one of his Mormon friends, Senator Arthur V. Watkins (R-Utah), reluctantly accepted from Vice President Richard M. Nixon the assignment to chair the bipartisan committee investigating the censure charges against McCarthy. "In my more than 80 years with daily encounters and exchanges with people of diverse opinions," Watkins wrote in his memoirs, "I have never suffered such intense and continuing distress."²⁸ Nonetheless, Watkins's fairness in chairing the committee engendered respect in many quarters. None of his supporters was more sincere than McKay who, shortly after the censure vote in early December, wrote to Watkins:

Los Angeles, July 17, 1953, David O. McKay, Discourses, LDS Church Archives. These discourses are, like the diaries, filed chronologically in binders 8.5" x 14".

26. "Head of Mormons Predicts Revolt in Red Countries," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1954.

27. McKay, Diary, June 3, 1954.

28. Arthur V. Watkins, *Enough Rope: The Inside Story of the Censure of Senator Joe McCarthy by His Colleagues—The Controversial Hearings That Signaled the End of a Turbulent Career and a Fearsome Era in American Public Life* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), ix.

“Now that your victory is won, permit me to extend to you many hearty congratulations and high commendation for your clarity, sound judgment, and true dignity manifested throughout the entire hearing and the final disposition of this most difficult case. You have won merited honor to yourself, retained the prestige of the Senate, and brought credit to your State and to the Nation.”²⁹ Watkins, in return, paid McKay the highest tribute: “In all sincerity I want you to know that I appreciate that expression from you more than anyone in the country, not even excluding President Eisenhower.”³⁰

While McKay backed away from the extremism of McCarthy, he was no less fervent in his own opposition to Communism. When the Soviets forcefully put down the Hungarian revolt of 1956, McKay sided with the Hungarians, who “should be called ‘patriots’ rather than ‘rebels.’”³¹

In 1957 McKay was visited by Senator John F. Kennedy, who had already made known his intention to run for President in 1960. McKay asked Kennedy about the future of the Soviet Union. “Would the system break up first, or would it have to come to a clash of arms?” Kennedy replied that he expected to see continuing Soviet expansionism and that he did not expect to see Communism break up, since there was no alternative system to replace it. McKay responded that he could not see how the system could continue indefinitely. “They are fundamentally wrong. Free agency is inherent in every individual. Rule by force has been fought against by men throughout history.” Kennedy responded by noting “they have the power to continue. Their prospects for the immediate future are bright.”³²

McKay’s philosophical objections to Communism were two-fold: It was atheistic, and it robbed humankind of free agency, a principle that for McKay was of fundamental importance. Even free agency, however, was subject to some restrictions if necessitated by the fight against Communism. Meeting with Stanley Tracy, a former assistant to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, McKay lamented Chief Justice Earl Warren’s recent condem-

29. McKay, Letter to Arthur V. Watkins, December 11, 1954, quoted in *ibid.*, 195.

30. Arthur V. Watkins, Letter to McKay, December 31, 1954, in McKay, *Diary*, December 13, 1954.

31. McKay, *Diary*, November 15, 1956.

32. McKay, *Diary*, November 12, 1957.

nation of Hoover for engaging in wiretapping: "I stated that I am in sympathy with Hoover in this regard, and think that sometimes it is necessary. I told Mr. Tracy that I look upon Communism as an enemy, whose sole purpose is destruction of Capitalism and our form of government, and the use of wiretapping is justifiable in the preservation of our government."³³

McKay's opposition to Communism was soon to become more complicated because of the activities of Ezra Taft Benson. Benson returned to full-time activity as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1961 but did not abandon his political activities. Ernest L. Wilkinson, president of Brigham Young University, commented after Benson spoke at the university in May of that year: "Presided at devotional, at which I introduced Elder Ezra Taft Benson. He gave a fine talk. It is apparent, however, it is very difficult for him to divorce himself from the active politics in which he has been engaged, and get into his work again as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. While I agreed with every word that he said, I suspect there were some Democrats who did not, and he took one-third of his time talking on current political problems."³⁴

The following month, McKay had to rein in Benson's political activities. "Brother Benson has received an invitation from the senators and congressmen to go back to Washington as an adviser. I feel that if this matter comes up again that Brother Benson should remain here; that we need him at home."³⁵ Benson did remain "at home," but a few months later he entered an arena of political activity that would occupy much of McKay's attention for the remaining decade of his life and that would cause acrimony and division among the Church's highest leaders.

In December 1958, a Massachusetts candy maker, Robert Welch, founded a right-wing extremist organization that took up where Joseph McCarthy left off in attacking Communism but went beyond McCarthyism to target civil rights and government in general, proclaiming that "the greatest enemy of man is, and always has been, government; and the larger, the more extensive that government, the greater the en-

33. McKay, *Diary*, June 6, 1958.

34. Ernest L. Wilkinson, *Diary*, May 24, 1961, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Wilkinson dictated this diary to his secretary, who typed it. I made a word-for-word typescript copy.

35. McKay, *Diary*, June 29, 1961.

emy.”³⁶ Welch named the organization after an American soldier, John Birch, who was killed by Chinese Communists ten days after the end of World War II. Within a year, Ezra Taft Benson had a close association with one of the society’s national leaders. During 1961 he became personally acquainted with Welch,³⁷ and the two men’s political agendas quickly aligned. Benson’s son recalled: “After his cabinet years, when he came back to Utah, he could see things happening in this country that put him on alert. He saw it with his eyes in Washington, but his focus was so much in the Department of Agriculture that he had enough problems there without him trying to take care of the problems in a lot of other areas.”³⁸

Four days after the Soviets began constructing the Berlin Wall, Benson spoke out in a meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, saying “that personally he thought the Communism threat is very real and very dangerous, and that there is need for some organized effort to meet this great threat.” His colleagues, while acknowledging that Communism should be fought, warned against extreme measures, particularly the use of the Church as a platform. McKay, while agreeing that “our Sacrament meetings should be reserved for spiritual enrichment and spiritual instruction,” cautioned that “we must be careful about condemning any efforts that are anti-Communitic because Communism is a real danger in our country.”³⁹ In taking this stand, McKay implicitly endorsed Benson’s position, as he would do regularly in the future. Benson, in turn, never hesitated to remind people of McKay’s support. “When the flak began to fly, my father, who didn’t want to do anything to harm the Church, would constantly be in touch with President McKay, and President McKay would *consistently* encourage him to keep speaking out.”⁴⁰

By September, Benson’s outspokenness was causing enough turmoil that some Church members began to complain to Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency. Brown, a Democrat who in earlier years had been po-

36. Robert Welch, *The Blue Book* (Belmont, Mass.: Robert Welch, 1961), 108. For an overview of the John Birch Society, see Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

37. D. Michael Quinn, “Ezra Taft Benson and Mormon Political Conflicts,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 7–8.

38. Reed Benson, interview, September 15, 1999.

39. McKay, *Diary*, August 17, 1961.

40. Reed Benson, interview, September 15, 1999; emphasis his.

littically active, quickly became a sounding board for Latter-day Saints who felt that Benson's message and tactics were too extreme. Benson, undaunted by the criticism, lashed out strongly in the October general conference, linking socialism directly to Communism: "Communism is fundamentally socialism. We will never win our fight against communism by making concessions to socialism. Communism and socialism, closely related, must be defeated on principle. . . . No true Latter-day Saint and no true American can be a socialist or a communist or support programs leading in that direction."⁴¹

The conflict between Benson and moderate Church leaders, particularly Hugh B. Brown, was tactical rather than strategic. "Certainly all of us are against Communism," Brown wrote late in 1961. But that end did not justify certain means, and he was overtly critical of the means of the John Birch Society in a personal letter:

The Church has not taken any stand officially relating to these various groups who nominate themselves as guardians of our freedom, except in the case of the John Birch Society, and we are definitely against their methods. . . . We do not think dividing our own people, casting reflections on our government officials, or calling everybody Communists who do not agree with the political views of certain individuals is the proper way to fight Communism. We think the Church should be a modifying, steadying institution and our leaders, or even members, should not become hysterical or take hasty action.⁴²

The day after Brown wrote this letter, Ernest Wilkinson met sequentially with Benson and Brown, and captured in his diary the essence of the conflict between the two men: "I then had a conference with Brother Benson, who is very much concerned over the socialistic tendencies of Brother Brown. I then had a conference with President Brown, who is very much concerned over the super-patriotic tendencies of Brother Benson. It is apparent that I am caught in the center. I think Brother

41. Benson, Address, September 30, 1961, *Conference Report*, October 1961, 73-74.

42. Hugh B. Brown, Letter to Alicia Bingham, December 28, 1961, Edwin B. Firmage Papers, Accession 1074, Box 48, fd. 21, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Benson, as a matter of principle, is right, but he has made some strategic mistakes.”⁴³

By early 1962, Benson’s anti-Communist activities became the focus of an hour-long discussion within the First Presidency. McKay’s two counselors, both of whom were Democrats, felt that Benson was too extreme in his tactics. Henry D. Moyle, McKay’s other counselor, felt that it was not proper to discuss such controversial matters in Church meetings, particularly when “the people were not well enough informed to discuss it” and when there had not yet been an official First Presidency statement on the subject to guide Church members. Referring to Benson’s talk at October general conference, he noted that it had assumed something of official stature without having received formal endorsement. McKay, who was consistently more concerned with the overall fight against Communism than with tactics, replied that he “knew nothing wrong with Elder Benson’s talk, and thought it to be very good.” Brown then said that his only objection to Benson’s talk was that it placed socialism and Communism in the same category: “All the people in Scandinavia and other European countries are under Socialistic governments and certainly are not Communists. Brother Benson’s talk ties them together and makes them equally abominable. If this is true, our people in Europe who are living under a Socialist government are living out of harmony with the Church.”⁴⁴

The meeting ended with the decision to have Benson meet with the First Presidency the following Monday, with the hope of reaching a consensus that would result in an official policy statement. After meeting with Benson, however, “the First Presidency agreed that now was not the time for the Church to make a statement as to its stand against Communism, but that such a statement could be made at a later date.”⁴⁵

As 1962 progressed, tension within the hierarchy over the John Birch Society increased. On the one hand, McKay became more supportive of a hard-line approach towards Communism, while on the other, Brown continued to criticize extremism. Yet the public perception was that Brown reflected McKay’s beliefs, as shown in a newspaper report of a general conference address in April:

43. Wilkinson, *Diary*, December 29, 1961.

44. McKay, *Diary*, February 15, 1962.

45. McKay, *Diary*, February 19, 1962.

The First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Saturday reaffirmed the Church's long standing opposition to the evils of communism in the world today, but denounced extreme anti-Communist movements as more of a hindrance than a help. Speaking for the presiding body of the church, Hugh B. Brown, second counselor in the First Presidency, told a packed Tabernacle crowd of priesthood bearers "the leaders of the church now, as has always been the case, stand squarely against the ideals of communism. We'd like the world to know that. However," he added, "we urge you not to become extremists on either side. There is no place in the church or the priesthood of God for men to be fighting each other over a menace such as communism."⁴⁶

Those who took offense at Benson received Brown's words gratefully. A UCLA graduate student wrote that the speeches and writings of Benson "have been the object of derision by competent scholars—not for being anti-Communitic, but rather because of apparent lack of scholarship in their analysis of current politics." Noting that he had occasionally been placed in the uncomfortable position of disagreeing with "what has appeared (until recently) to be the position of the Church," he complimented Brown for his general conference address, "which I interpreted to be a general censure of the 'Right Wing' trend in the Church." He acknowledged, however, that some of his fellow Church members "refuse to see extremism in these movements,"⁴⁷ thus correctly characterizing a growing rift within the Church.

Brown wrote in response, "It is encouraging to some of us who are on the firing line to find that our attempts to stem an undesirable tide of emotionalism are considered partially successful." However, he also acknowledged the rift by noting that letters received since general conference had come down on both sides of the issue. "The differences between some of the talks given in Priesthood Meeting and others in the general conference leave some of the readers and listeners a bit confused. This I very much regret." Nonetheless, he did not apologize for his remarks, which clearly had been aimed at the Birch Society. "While we do not think it wise to name names in our statements of Church policy, the cries which come from certain sources would indicate that some-

46. "LDS Hits Extremes in Anti-Red Battle," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 7, 1962.

47. Harley R. Hammond, Letter to Hugh B. Brown, April 24, 1962; photocopy in my possession.

body was hit by some of our statements and that was what we hoped would be the result."⁴⁸

However, while many complained to Brown, many others, perhaps indicative of the majority of Latter-day Saints, were comfortable with Benson's approach. And knowing that he had McKay's explicit approval, Benson plunged forward fearlessly, occasionally requesting McKay's direct intervention to stem criticism. A month after Brown's general conference address, Benson phoned McKay to tell him that he would be traveling to Seattle for a Church conference, where "there has been some reflection cast on him." McKay thereupon called the stake president in Seattle and said, "All I wish to say to you is that Brother Benson is not under any cloud whatever regarding his attitude towards communism."⁴⁹

In October 1962, the world came to the brink of nuclear war over the issue of long-range missiles being deployed in Cuba. In the midst of this crisis, Ezra Taft Benson made his boldest move yet, attempting to solicit McKay's endorsement of the John Birch Society. Benson explained that his son Reed, "after spending a year in studying the aims and purposes of the John Birch Society," wished to accept the position of coordinator for Utah, and wanted McKay to bless the move. McKay's response was not what Benson had hoped to hear. "I have heard about the John Birch Society, and everything so far has been negative, so it is up to you and Reed as to whether or not this position is accepted." Pressing the issue further, Benson said that he had read the *Blue Book*, Robert Welch's manifesto and, in meeting with Welch, found him to be "a fine Christian gentleman." He referred to the Birch Society as "the most effective organization we have in the country in fighting Communism and Socialism," adding that Reed "is convinced that he can best serve his country by working with this organization." McKay was adamant in his refusal to become involved. "I said, 'I have nothing whatever to do with it.' Brother Benson said that Reed would not go into this if I told him not to, and I said that this is a matter that I shall leave entirely with him and Reed."⁵⁰ The following day, Reed Benson announced his acceptance of the position with the John Birch Society, and his father's endorsement of the society thus

48. Hugh B. Brown, Letter to Harley R. Hammond, April 25, 1962; photocopy in my possession.

49. McKay, Diary, May 18, 1962.

50. McKay, Diary, October 26, 1962.

became public.⁵¹ Newspapers across the country reported the story, and headlines such as “Ezra Benson’s Son Takes Birch Society Post,” and “Benson Birch Tie Disturbs Utahans”⁵² heightened the controversy.

Although Ezra Taft Benson never joined the John Birch Society, his position as a senior apostle gave his public endorsement of the society the flavor of official Church endorsement, a situation that infuriated many Mormons. In a rare acknowledgement that public opinion can influence Church policy, Moyle wrote to a political science professor at the University of Utah: “When we pursue any course which results in numerous letters being written to the Presidency critical of our work, it should be some evidence we should change our course.”⁵³ As a result, on January 3, 1963, the First Presidency issued its first policy statement dealing with the society:

The following statement is made to correct the false statements and unwarranted assumptions regarding the position allegedly taken by the leaders of the Church on political questions in general and the John Birch Society in particular. . . . We deplore the presumption of some politicians, especially officers, co-ordinators and members of the John Birch Society, who undertake to align the Church or its leadership with their partisan views. We encourage our members to exercise the right of citizenship, to vote according to their own convictions, but no one should seek or pretend to have our approval of their adherence to any extremist ideologies. We denounce communism as being anti-Christian, anti-American, and the enemy of freedom, but we think they who pretend to fight it by casting aspersions on our elected officers or other fellow citizens do the anti-Communist cause a great disservice.⁵⁴

Many Church members welcomed the statement. One bishop wrote to the First Presidency: “May this Bishop express heartfelt gratitude for your forthright policy statement of January 3 on the Birch Society. President Brown’s declaration for the First Presidency at the Priesthood session of April Conference, 1962, decrying extremist groups of all sorts,

51. “Reed A. Benson Takes Post in Birch Society,” *Deseret News*, October 27, 1962.

52. “Ezra Benson’s Son Takes Birch Society Post,” *Sacramento Bee*, October 27, 1962; “Benson Birch Tie Disturbs Utahans,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1962.

53. Henry D. Moyle, Letter to J. D. Williams, January 9, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

54. “Church Sets Policy on Birch Society,” *Deseret News*, January 3, 1963.

seemed plain enough. But apparently some of our number either refused to listen or could not read.”⁵⁵

Benson was blindsided by the statement. The day after it was issued, he called McKay, who was at his farm in Huntsville, and asked for an audience. McKay demurred, telling him “to call my counselors [both of whom were Democrats] and tell them to hold a meeting with him this morning in the office of the First Presidency.”⁵⁶ Two days after Benson’s phone call, Brown visited McKay in Huntsville to discuss the matter and, at McKay’s request, wrote a memorandum describing the meeting with Benson:

The first subject under discussion was the recent declaration made by the First Presidency and published in the newspapers regarding the John Birch Society and its officers, stating that the Church does not endorse them. You asked that I read a number of opinions from various sources, including the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the Attorney General of the State of California, the Ministerial Association of California, and others. After reading and discussing these, we agreed that we had done the right thing in letting the members of the Church and the world know that the Church does not in any way endorse or subscribe to the John Birch Society. You mentioned that we might have erred in that we did not call the Bensons in before making the announcement. I called your attention to the fact that we had called Brother Benson in and discussed Reed’s activities during the campaign in disregarding our former statement regarding the use of our chapels and meeting places for political purposes. At that same meeting we discussed the John Birch Society, and Brother Benson denied having any association with them.⁵⁷

Benson’s denial of “any association” with the Birch Society, if not overtly duplicitous, indicates that he was using the words in their narrowest possible sense, such that, in his view, not being a card-carrying member of the society allowed him to deny having “any association.” He used a similar tactic several years later when he nearly succeeded in getting McKay’s photograph on the cover of *American Opinion*, the Birch Society’s monthly magazine.

In late January, McKay finally met with Benson to discuss the First Presidency statement. It was one of the rare instances in which McKay

55. J. D. Williams, Letter to the First Presidency, January 4, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

56. McKay, Diary, January 4, 1963.

57. McKay, Diary, January 6, 1963.

came down hard on him—albeit in private—for his political activities: “Elder Benson said the statement seemed to be leveled against him and his son, Reed, and also Brother [W. Cleon] Skousen. I told Brother Benson that it was intended to apply to them. I said that the statement made by him (Elder Benson) in favor of the John Birch Society was made by him, one of the Twelve, who is an international character and received international publicity, and that that is one reason the Presidency had to make the announcement in the newspapers.”⁵⁸

A week later, Ernest Wilkinson met with McKay’s secretary, Clare Middlemiss, and discussed the First Presidency statement. Wilkinson was sympathetic to the John Birch Society and, at one point, traveled to Illinois for a multi-day society meeting before deciding not to join. Middlemiss, who also never joined, was even more sympathetic to the society and to Benson, so much so that Hugh B. Brown concluded that she was the conduit through which information flowed from Benson and the society to McKay.⁵⁹ Middlemiss told Wilkinson that McKay had received “at least 25 letters vigorously protesting the statement of the First Presidency, many of them very intelligent letters.” She then informed Wilkinson “that the President, himself, thinks that the First Presidency probably went a little too far.”⁶⁰

Four days later, Middlemiss met with McKay and showed him “hundreds of letters from all over the United States which have been received from members of the John Birch Society.”⁶¹ What she did not tell him was that the letters were not spontaneous but came in response to a notice in *The John Birch Society Bulletin* that urged Mormon members of the society to write to McKay, thanking him for his stand against Communism and praising “the great service Ezra Taft Benson and his son Reed (our Utah Coordinator) are rendering to this battle, with the hope that they will be encouraged to continue.”⁶² At McKay’s instruction, Middlemiss wrote a form letter to be sent out to any society members who voiced concerns over their Church standing. The letter, which

58. *Ibid.*, January 23, 1963.

59. Edwin B. Firmage (Brown’s grandson), Interview, Salt Lake City, October 10, 1996.

60. Wilkinson, Diary, January 31, 1963.

61. McKay, Diary, February 4, 1963.

62. *The John Birch Society Bulletin*, February 1963, 28–29. Eventually

went out over her signature instead of his (although beneath her signature she always typed "Secretary to President David O. McKay"), read in part: "I have been directed to say that members of the Church are free to join anti-communist organizations if they desire and their membership in the Church is not jeopardized by so doing. The Church is not opposing The John Birch Society or any other organization of like nature; however, it is definitely opposed to anyone's using the Church for the purpose of increasing membership for private organizations sponsoring these various ideologies."⁶³

The letter provided society members with an antidote to the First Presidency statement, and it was thereafter quoted frequently, although often in a truncated form that ended with the words "of like nature." Within a month of the statement, therefore, both sides had an authoritative source to quote in favor of their own position. Consequently, the sparring proceeded and intensified.

Early in March, Ernest Wilkinson met with W. Cleon Skousen, who, though not a member of the society, shared many of its views. Wilkinson recorded in his diary: "I found out that despite the manner in which he [Benson] is being criticized by President Hugh B. Brown, President David O. McKay is squarely behind him and has told him to keep up his good work."⁶⁴ It was typical of McKay to allow colleagues wide leeway in their public statements and not contradict them in public. In private, however, he was not as circumspect; and his private statements, which were not always consistent, sometimes led to major conflicts and misunderstandings.

The day after Wilkinson's meeting with Skousen, an article with the headline "Benson Not Speaking for Mormons on Birch" appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*.⁶⁵ It quoted Hugh Brown as saying that Benson was entitled to his own opinions but that, in expressing them, he spoke for himself only and not for the Church. In a subsequent First Presidency meeting, McKay agreed with Brown and then criticized Benson:

McKay received over 2,000 such letters. See McKay, *Diary*, February 26, 1963.

63. McKay, *Diary*, February 4, 1963.

64. Wilkinson, *Diary*, March 3, 1963.

65. "Benson Not Speaking for Mormons on Birch," *Los Angeles Times*, March, 4, 1963.

Following the publication of the [First Presidency] statement, I was asked to apologize for what was said against Brother Benson and his son Reed because if we had called them “we would have done anything that you suggested.” I said, “Yes, and nobody in the Church or in the world would have known that you were doing that, but everybody knew that you are a national character and everybody knew that you favor the Birch Society and that you approve your son representing it in Utah, and when the First Presidency gave that statement it received the same publicity which your statement received, and we offer no apology.”⁶⁶

The following week, on March 12, 1963, Lela Benson, wife of Ezra Taft Benson’s other son, Mark, sent a handwritten request to Clare Middlemiss. The letter gives the appearance of having been engineered by other Bensons; it also gives the clearest known indication of Middlemiss’s sympathy toward the John Birch Society: “Yesterday I talked to a Bishop who said he would like to see one of ‘those’ letters that President McKay has sent out regarding the John Birch Society. However he claims that it won’t hold much weight unless it is signed by the President and not you. (I disagreed of course—but he stands firm!) Therefore, could you possibly send me one and have it signed by President McKay himself? *I understand from Father Benson and his family that you are a dear, sweet, loyal, true blue soul.*”⁶⁷ There is no record of whether Middlemiss complied with the request.

The following day, in response to mounting pressure and after consulting with McKay, Ezra Taft Benson issued a statement to affirm that “only one man, President David O. McKay, speaks for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on matters of policy.”⁶⁸ While on the surface the statement seemed to be conciliatory, in fact it was carefully crafted to have just the opposite effect. First, while disclaiming that he spoke for the Church, Benson began the statement by reaffirming his own strong support for the John Birch Society: “I have stated, as my personal opinion only, that the John Birch Society is ‘the most effective non-Church organization in our fight against creeping socialism and godless communism.’” Second, by stating that only McKay could speak for the Church authoritatively,

66. McKay, Diary, March 6, 1963.

67. Lela (Mrs. Mark A.) Benson, Letter to Clare Middlemiss, March 12, 1963; photocopy of original in my possession. The underlining, which is in the original, was apparently added by Middlemiss.

68. “Elder Benson Makes Statement,” *Church News*, March 16, 1963.

Benson took a swipe at Brown's credibility as a spokesman for the First Presidency. And third, Benson quoted only from the Middlemiss letter, which was sympathetic to the society, and neglected to mention the January statement of the First Presidency, which was openly critical of the society.

Having issued his disclaimer, Benson continued to speak out publicly in support of the John Birch Society. The following week, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported an interview with him:

Although he is not a member of the society, he "strongly" believes in its principles. . . . "I have stated, as my personal opinion only, that the John Birch Society is the most effective non-church organization in our fight against creeping socialism and godless communism." . . . Elder Benson, whose son, Reed, is Utah coordinator for the John Birch Society, said he is completely impressed by the people who are pushing the work of the society and praised the "honesty and integrity" of Robert Welch, the founder.⁶⁹

Three weeks later, Ernest Wilkinson went to a social event that included two senior Church officials, Henry D. Moyle of the First Presidency and senior apostle (and eventual Church president) Harold B. Lee. Earlier in the day Wilkinson had received a phone call from Benson "who read me the riot act for having invited a Communist to speak to our students." (The speaker was advertised as a Communist but, in fact, was not; the pose was a publicity device.) As Wilkinson explained the unpleasant matter to Moyle and Lee, "Brother Lee commented that anyone who didn't agree with Brother Benson's mind was, indeed, a Communist. Brother Moyle said that he was happy that I was finding Brother Benson out, that when it came to this subject, he just didn't have any reason."⁷⁰ Lee was particularly distressed by Benson's actions and, according to an acquaintance, later said privately "that the brethren would never permit another member of the Twelve to serve in the Cabinet or in a high political position because, as he put it, 'Elder Benson had lost his spiritual tone and would no longer accept counsel.'"⁷¹

Moyle and Lee were not alone among the General Authorities in dis-

69. "Benson Clarifies Views on Birch Society Stand," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 21, 1963.

70. Wilkinson, *Diary*, May 13, 1963.

71. L. Ralph Mecham, Letter to Gregory A. Prince, March 21, 2001.

approving strongly of Benson's actions, yet Benson, as one General Authority later commented, continued to enjoy the support of "a majority of one":

Early in my career [as a General Authority] I found that there was not a whole lot of support or appreciation for Benson constantly harping on the communist issue. Although, every time President McKay was present or in a meeting, he would be the endorser, or thanking President Benson for doing what he was doing. That kept the other elements sort of quiet. Hugh B. Brown really thought President Benson had gone overboard. And yet President Benson—I talked with him several times, not on this subject but just in conversation—would remind me that he was doing what the prophet had asked him to do.⁷²

In August 1963, Robert Welch sent McKay a letter requesting that Ezra Taft Benson be permitted to join the National Council of the John Birch Society. While McKay was broadly supportive of Benson's outspokenness, he drew a firm line in responding to Welch's letter, one that he never allowed Benson to cross in spite of repeated pleas: "I said that the letter will be answered that Brother Benson may not join that Board; that he cannot be a member of that Board and be a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles."⁷³ Deeply disappointed by the decision, Benson met with McKay later that month and said that he would "never say another word on the subject if that was President McKay's wish. [President McKay] said he wanted me to continue to speak out with the assurance I had his support as I have had in the past."⁷⁴

Buoyed by the reaffirmed vote of confidence, Benson obtained McKay's consent to speak at a testimonial dinner for Robert Welch in Los Angeles the following month. On September 23, Benson delivered the speech; and although he called Welch "one of the greatest patriots in American history," the speech took a back seat to what Benson said to reporters afterwards. Welch had recently published a book, *The Politician*, in which he accused Eisenhower of being a tool of the Communists. When asked if he agreed with Welch's statement, Benson sidestepped the question, refused to defend Eisenhower, and stated merely that Ei-

72. Paul H. Dunn, Interview, Highland, Utah, May 21, 1996.

73. McKay, Diary, August 9, 1963.

74. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 371-72.

senhower “supported me in matters of agriculture. In other areas we had differences.”⁷⁵

The morning after the banquet, Reed Benson escorted Welch into McKay’s office, where Welch “reviewed the success of the meeting of his organization in Los Angeles in which Elder Ezra Taft Benson was the featured speaker.”⁷⁶ McKay’s diary made no mention of the Eisenhower comment, which had already ignited a firestorm in Washington, D.C.

At the center of the protest in the nation’s capitol was Democrat Representative Ralph Harding, like Benson, an Idahoan. When Harding received a call to serve as a missionary in the Central States Mission in 1949, he requested that Benson, his “favorite General Authority,” set him apart. Benson complied. After returning from his mission, Harding went into the army and was at Fort Riley, Kansas, when Dwight Eisenhower was elected U.S. president in 1952. He recalled: “I remember the papers were full of President Eisenhower and his cabinet selections, and for Secretary of Agriculture it had been narrowed to Ezra Taft Benson of Utah and Clifford Hope, a Congressman from Kansas, whom all the Kansas papers were supporting. I can remember just as clearly as if it had happened yesterday kneeling down by my bunk when I was saying my prayers, and praying that Elder Benson would be appointed to that position. And he was.”⁷⁷

In 1960 Harding won a Congressional seat representing Idaho and arrived in Washington, D.C., just as Benson was completing his eight-year tenure as Secretary of Agriculture and returning to Utah. Harding was midway through his second term when Benson gave his speech in Los Angeles:

I was on the House floor when that report came in over the wires, the Associated Press and UPI. I was upset, and I stayed up there all night, taking that report and the information I had, and I wrote a speech criticizing Brother Benson for using his Church position to promote the John Birch Society. Then I called Milan Smith, who was a staunch Republican and my Stake President then. [Smith had been Benson’s Chief of Staff during his eight years in the Department of Agriculture.] I told him I would appreci-

75. “Benson Speaker at Testimonial Dinner,” Associated Press Wire Service, September 24, 1963, *Congressional Record-House* 108, No. 13 (September 25, 1963): 18125–28; McKay, *Diary*.

76. McKay, *Diary*, September 24, 1963.

77. Ralph R. Harding, Interview, Arlington, Virginia, October 24, 2000.

ate it if he would come up to my office, that there was something that I needed to discuss with him. He did. I let him take the speech, and he went through it. He was crossing out things here and writing more there, and he toughened it up! He made it even tougher than I had. He, [Washington D.C. Stake] President J. Willard Marriott, and most of the leaders of the Church back here were very, very upset about Brother Benson's actions. Then I called President [Hugh B.] Brown. We didn't have faxes, so we sat right there in my office, with Milan Smith on an extension, and I read the speech to President Brown. After I finished he said, "Well, Brother Harding, can you stand the brickbats?" I said, "I think so, President Brown." But he said, "No, I mean can you *really* stand the brickbats?" I said, "I think so." He said, "You know this speech will probably defeat you." I said, "I realize there is a chance of that." He said, "Well, if you are willing to take that chance, and you are wide aware of the brickbats that are going to come your way, you can do the Church a real service by going ahead and delivering that speech." I said, "That's all I wanted to know, President Brown." So I gave it the next day. It broke loose, especially in Utah and Idaho!⁷⁸

In his speech to the House of Representatives, Harding recounted his personal relationship with Benson: "It was just 14 years ago this month . . . that I was ordained by Ezra Taft Benson prior to my 2 years' service as a Mormon missionary." He recited the pride he had felt while Benson served as Secretary of Agriculture but lamented that, when he "left his position as Secretary of Agriculture, if not before, he began to change. . . . It was only a short time later that he became a spokesman for the radical right of this Nation."⁷⁹

Reaction to Harding's speech was both pointed and mixed. The majority of mail received in Harding's office chastised him for criticizing Benson in public. As Brown had conjectured, he lost his campaign for reelection the following year. But other letters were highly complimentary of Harding's action. One was particularly noteworthy:

I am grateful for your letter and for the speech that you made in Congress concerning the support and encouragement that the former Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Benson, has allegedly been giving to a Mr. Welch, said to be the founder and leader of the John Birch Society. Your honest and unselfish effort to set the record straight is something that warms my heart.

Frankly, because I rarely read such trash as I understand 'The Politician' to be, I had never before read the specific accusations made against

78. Ibid.

79. "Ezra Taft Benson's Support of John Birch Society Is Criticized," *Congressional Record-House*, 109, No. 13 (September 25, 1963): 18125-28.

me by Robert Welch. But it is good to know that when they were brought to your attention you disregarded all partisan influences to express your honest convictions about the matter. It is indeed difficult to understand how a man, who professes himself to be an anti-Communist, can so brazenly accuse another—whose entire life's record has been one of refutation of Communist theory, practice and purposes—of Communist tendencies or leanings.

With my best wishes and personal regard,
Dwight D. Eisenhower⁸⁰

A year later, when L. Ralph Mecham, an aide to Senator Wallace F. Bennett (R-Utah), escorted Wilkinson, then a candidate for U.S. Senate, to meet with Eisenhower, the former U.S. president spoke of Benson's actions. Long afterward, Mecham recalled:

When I took Ernest Wilkinson up to Gettysburg to visit with Eisenhower, I believe in the spring of 1964, to get Eisenhower's blessing for Wilkinson in his Senate campaign, Ike was almost wistful. We had a great conversation about many things. In the course of it he asked us quizzically, "Whatever happened to Ezra?" or something like that. The implication was clear. He could not understand, I believe, why a man to whom he had been so loyal had not reciprocated that loyalty but instead had adopted the extremist views of the John Birch Society.⁸¹

Benson's actions put McKay in a dilemma. On the one hand, there was a rising tide of criticism directed at Benson, both from Church members and from national media. On the other hand, McKay thought highly of Benson, received his intense, loyal support, and shared his deep, visceral disdain for Communism. While Benson's tactics occasionally caused embarrassment and distress for McKay, neither man ever questioned the goal.

McKay resolved the dilemma temporarily by sending Benson out of the country for two years to preside over the European Mission. McKay gave Benson the news privately, less than a month after the Robert Welch dinner. Both men's accounts of the meeting show that it was upbeat, with no hint that Benson was being punished or exiled. McKay wrote that, after he told Benson of the assignment, "Brother Benson expressed himself as being willing to go. He had a lovely spirit, and said he would do what-

80. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Letter to Ralph R. Harding, October 7, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

81. L. Ralph Mecham, Letter to Gregory A. Prince, March 21, 2001.

ever I wanted him to do.”⁸² Benson’s biographer described the meeting in similar terms: “‘Brother Benson, I have a great surprise,’ the prophet began. ‘President McKay,’” Ezra responded, ‘this church is full of surprises.’ Both men laughed and then President McKay announced that Elder Benson had been selected to preside over the European Mission with headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany.”⁸³

Regardless of McKay’s intent, however, the move was widely seen as a rebuff to Benson’s political activism. The same day that McKay met with Benson, one of McKay’s sons expressed such a sentiment in a letter to Congressman Harding: “We shall all be relieved when Elder Benson ceases to resist counsel and returns to a concentration on those affairs befitting his office. It is my feeling that there will be an immediate and noticeable curtailment of his Birch Society activities.”⁸⁴ Two weeks later, Harding received a letter from Joseph Fielding Smith, President of the Quorum of the Twelve and immediate successor to McKay, that conveyed a similar message: “I think it is time that Brother Benson forgot all about politics and settled down to his duties as a member of the Council of the Twelve. . . . It would be better for him and for the church and all concerned, if he would settle down to his present duties and let all political matters take their course. He is going to take a mission to Europe in the near future and by the time he returns I hope he will get all of the political notions out of his system.”⁸⁵

Reaction in the press was mixed. For example, the Church-owned *Deseret News* reported the story with a benign headline, “Elder Benson to Direct European Mission,” while a story in the nearby *Ogden Standard-Examiner* bore the headline, “Apostle Benson Denies Being Sent into ‘Exile’ for Political Views.”⁸⁶ The *National Observer*, in a lengthy article entitled “Mormons Split over John Birch Society Campaign,” attempted a balanced perspective:

82. McKay, *Diary*, October 18, 1963.

83. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 371–72.

84. Robert R. McKay, Letter to Ralph R. Harding, October 18, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

85. Joseph Fielding Smith, Letter to Ralph R. Harding, October 30, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

86. “Elder Benson to Direct European Mission,” *Deseret News*, October 24, 1963; “Apostle Benson Denies Being Sent into ‘Exile’ for Political Views,” *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, October 29, 1963.

The Benson connection with the John Birch Society has created somewhat of a “schism” in the Mormon Church. To a few Mormons, Birch philosophies appear to coincide with church doctrine. . . . But to others, especially those in the liberal Republican and Democratic ranks, the John Birch Society still meant political extremism, and they began asking for Ezra Taft’s scalp. . . . When the elder Benson received his new assignment to Europe many of his critics said the Mormon Church was “shipping out Benson to get rid of him.” But to this charge, the former Secretary of Agriculture declared: “Ridiculous—members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are subject to call anywhere in the world anytime. That’s our job, and I welcome the call with all my heart.” President McKay, who called Mr. Benson on this mission, also termed the charge ridiculous. He, too, said the mission was a routine church assignment for a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁸⁷

On the eve of his departure for Europe, Benson stirred up yet more controversy. On December 13, he delivered a farewell speech in Logan, a third of which was either direct quotations or paraphrases from Robert Welch’s manifesto, the *Blue Book*. Particularly inflammatory was a direct quotation from the *Blue Book* that was given wide publicity in a subsequent article by nationally syndicated columnist Drew Pearson. Benson charged that the United States government was so infiltrated with Communists that the American people “can no longer resist the Communist conspiracy as free citizens, but can resist the Communist tyranny only by themselves becoming conspirators against established government.”⁸⁸ When U.S. Senator Frank E. Moss (D-Utah) read an account of the speech, he wrote a candid letter to Hugh B. Brown:

I read the account of Apostle Benson’s speech in the Logan LDS Tabernacle in the December 15th issue of the *Herald Journal*. I won’t comment on the contents of the speech except to say that it appears that he has not changed his position at all from that that he expressed in Los Angeles at the testimonial dinner for Robert Welch. On page 10 there is a picture of Reed Benson passing out copies of the speech of Ezra T. Benson, and on that same page the following paragraph in the article says: “Copies of Elder

87. “Mormons Split over John Birch Society Campaign,” *National Observer*, November 4, 1963.

88. “We Must Become Alerted and Informed,” typescript, MSS A 328-2, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City. Attached to the typescript is the analysis by B. Delworth Gardner, N. Keith Roberts, and E. Boyd Wennergren tying it to the *Blue Book*. Pearson’s column, “Benson’s Cure for Communism,” appeared in the *Washington Post*, January 4, 1964.

Benson's complete speech were available at the meeting or can be obtained by writing directly to him at the LDS Church Offices in Salt Lake City, the Apostle said." I don't know how we could be tied in more closely as a Church with the doctrines espoused by Ezra Taft Benson than by an announcement of this sort. I continue to be bombarded daily by questions and criticisms back here.⁸⁹

The same speech elicited a second letter from Joseph Fielding Smith to Congressman Harding: "I have the comments regarding Brother Benson's speech in Logan, December 13, 1963. I am glad to report to you that it will be some time before we hear anything from Brother Benson, who is now on his way to Great Britain where I suppose he will be, at least for the next two years. When he returns I hope his blood will be purified."⁹⁰

In the midst of the whirlwind of controversy and on the same day that Smith wrote his letter to Harding, McKay dictated a letter to Robert Welch in response to his earlier request that Benson serve on the national board of the John Birch Society: "I told Mr. Welch that Elder Benson's duties as European Mission President would preclude his accepting his invitation."⁹¹ The benignly worded letter left the door open for Welch and Benson to repeat their request after Benson returned from Europe.

In late January 1964, McKay accepted an invitation from U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson to meet with him at the White House, the first such invitation extended to any religious leader since Johnson assumed the Presidency after the death of John F. Kennedy. Following lunch, Johnson invited the Mormon delegation in Congress, including Congressman Harding, to join them. As Johnson led the group on a tour of the White House, Harding took McKay aside for a moment: "I told President McKay, when we were walking out to the swimming pool, 'President McKay, I want you to know that just because I've had my problems with Elder Benson over the John Birch Society, that I still have a strong testi-

89. Frank E. Moss, Letter to Hugh B. Brown, December 20, 1963, Frank E. Moss Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

90. Joseph Fielding Smith, Letter to Ralph R. Harding, December 23, 1963; photocopy in my possession.

91. McKay, Diary, December 23, 1963.

mony of the gospel.' He said, 'I know that, Brother Harding. Several of us have had problems with Brother Benson over the Birch Society.'"92

The flap over Benson's departure to Europe had barely subsided when the controversy boiled over again. In late February the *Idaho State Journal* published extracts from several of the letters Congressman Harding had received, including Eisenhower's, Robert McKay's, and both letters from Joseph Fielding Smith. The Associated Press picked up the *Journal* article and published it nationwide. The *Salt Lake Tribune*, in publishing extracts from the letters, rekindled the debate over Benson's assignment. "There was speculation last December when Mr. Benson was sent to Europe by the church that he was being exiled for his political views. The LDS Church officially denied the rumors."93

McKay was deeply upset by the publication of the letters, which included his son's, and told his secretary, "I shall have to take steps to have these accusations stopped." He authorized her to send an explanatory letter to inquirers, stating, "Elder Ezra Taft Benson was not sent to Europe for any of the reasons given in your letter. Elder Benson was called by inspiration to preside over the European Mission."94

Then, in an unusually candid meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, McKay broached the subjects of Benson, the John Birch Society, Harding, and the published letters. He subsequently recorded a lengthy account of this "Very Important Meeting," summarized below.⁹⁵ He began the meeting by saying, "Before partaking of the Sacrament this morning, I should like to refer to an unfortunate incident which has occurred since the Council last met in this capacity." McKay was particularly upset at letters he had received stating that "a lack of harmony among the leaders of the Church" was "creating confusion among members and friends of the Church." He then put Joseph Fielding Smith on the spot:

I said that I should like to know today that there is no dissension among the members of this Council, and that we partake of the Sacrament in full fellowship and full support of one another. I mentioned that since

92. Harding, Interview, September 19, 2000.

93. "Ike Praises Idaho Solon for Benson Criticism," *Salt Lake Tribune*, February 21, 1964.

94. McKay, Diary, February 20, 1964.

95. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1964.

President Smith's name is associated with Brother Benson, particularly in the matter of the John Birch Society, that I think it would be well for President Smith on this occasion to explain his association with the controversy.

Smith replied that "he was glad to do so." He acknowledged "that he did say that when Brother Benson comes home, he hoped he would not get into politics and would keep his blood pure." However, he did not intend his comments to be a personal attack on Benson, but rather as an acknowledgement "that in politics a lot of things are done that are somewhat shady. He said he was speaking of conditions that exist in the political world, and intended no reflection upon Brother Benson." Smith said that he had discussed the matter of his letters with Benson and that the two men "are on the best of terms and fellowship with each other." He said he would not do anything to hurt Benson, but added that "he hoped Brother Benson would keep himself out of politics."

McKay accepted Smith's explanation, then defended Benson:

I then said that Elder Benson had permission from the President of the Church to give the lecture that he gave in the auditorium in Hollywood. I mentioned that some people had said that that was one activity wherein Brother Benson went contrary to the counsel of the Presidency and General Authorities. I said that Elder Benson had full permission to give that lecture and he gave a good talk. . . . I further said that Brother Benson had said publicly that he was in favor of the John Birch Society, and that I had told Brother Benson that he could not, as one of the Twelve, join that Society. This was before Brother Benson was called to be President of the European Mission, and his call as President of that mission had nothing whatever to do with the John Birch Society. I said that I had told him back in November last that he could not join the Society as one of the Twelve. . . . Brother Benson's call to preside over the European Mission had no relationship whatever to his desire to join that Society. I stated that so far as this Council is concerned, we have no connection whatever with the John Birch Society, no matter how good it may be and how noble its purposes; that Brother Benson received his call to go to Europe without any thought of associating his call to the European Mission Presidency with his views regarding the John Birch Society, and that so far as we are concerned this morning as the Council of the First Presidency and the Twelve, we have nothing whatever to do with it, and Brother Benson's call over there had nothing to do with it. I then said: "We shall partake of the sacrament this morning in the spirit of the opening prayer; that we be one in all things pertaining to this Church."

Although McKay's defense of Benson was categorical and impassioned, it sidestepped the issue that had catapulted Benson's talk into the

national spotlight, which was Benson's implicit sanction of Robert Welch's charges that Dwight Eisenhower, a close friend of McKay, was a tool of the Communists. In fact, there is no record that McKay ever took Benson to task on that issue, either publicly or privately.

With Benson in Europe, McKay tried, with little success, to put the whole matter of the John Birch Society to rest. In May 1964, Louis Midgley, a youthful Brigham Young University political science professor, published an article in the university newspaper that again fanned the flames of controversy:

I have been asked by the Editor at the *Daily Universe* to make some comments on the John Birch Society. It is difficult to believe that anyone at a university—anyone who reads books and thinks—would take such a movement seriously. . . . The man who wrote *The Politician* did so to inform his followers that former President Eisenhower was a communist. Of course he provides no evidence but the usual collection of garbage. For absurdity, the charge against Ike would have to be placed next to the belief, as far as I know, held by no one, that President McKay is secretly a Catholic. What Welch-Birch really wants is to return to a world without taxes, the U.N., labor unions, racial minorities demanding some kind of legal equality; Birchers want a world without fluoridation, the Soviet Union, large cities and emerging nations and all the rest that goes with our world.⁹⁶

McKay reacted strongly to the article, telephoning Earl C. Crockett, who was acting BYU president while Wilkinson was running for the U.S. Senate and directing him to meet with Midgley "and ask him why he should have written the editorial 'Birch Society Reviewed' for ten thousand students to read. . . . This matter of the John Birch Society should be dropped."⁹⁷ In a follow-up letter after the requested meeting, McKay wrote, "It would be well for faculty members to hold no discussions whatsoever on the John Birch Society, and to drop the matter entirely."⁹⁸

Though continuing to distance himself from the society, McKay kept the heat turned up on Communism, in June authorizing the publica-

96. Louis Midgley, "Birch Society Reviewed by Prof. Louis Midgley," (BYU) *Daily Universe*, May 22, 1964.

97. McKay, *Diary*, May 26, 1964.

98. David O. McKay, Letter to Earl C. Crockett, June 4, 1964, in McKay, *Diary*, May 26, 1964. Crockett was Acting BYU President while Ernest Wilkinson ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate. Wilkinson returned to BYU in 1965 and, after McKay's death, lamented to Benson that McKay's instructions

tion by Church-owned Deseret Book of a pamphlet consisting of his "Statements on Communism and the Constitution of the United States." And for his part, Benson refused to stay out of politics, even from across the Atlantic. In August, Mark E. Petersen, Benson's colleague in the Quorum of the Twelve and president of the West European Mission (Benson was president of the European Mission), wrote to Hugh B. Brown, "stating," as Brown reported in a First Presidency meeting, "that he wished there was some way to keep Brother Benson out of politics." Europe, Petersen said, "hates" Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate, yet Benson had recently given an interview to Danish journalists that resulted in a story with the headline, "Mormon Apostle Says America Needs Goldwater." Petersen said that this kind of publicity hurt the Church in Europe and asked if there was any way to stop it. Brown put the request to McKay, who "said that this ought not to be done, but asked that a communication be sent to Brother Benson calling attention to the report, and asking as to the accuracy of it."⁹⁹

The following day, Benson wrote a note to Clare Middlemiss that confirmed his continuing political activities: "Hardly a week passes without someone writing, urging that I come home to help in the great fight to preserve our freedom."¹⁰⁰ A month later Arch Madsen, president of the Church-owned radio and TV station KSL, relayed to the First Presidency an inquiry from a committee of broadcasters working to select a new president of the National Association of Broadcasters. The committee wished to know if Benson, who was on their short list, would be available to serve full-time in that position. An affirmative answer would involve, of course, terminating his assignment in Europe as well as giving him another leave of absence from his duties in the Quorum of the Twelve. "After hearing all the facts pertaining to the matter," McKay wrote, "I indicated that so far as the Church is concerned, Brother

had blocked any attempts to establish a chapter of the John Birch Society at BYU: "I would personally like to have one at BYU, and I am seeing what I can do, but my lieutenants insist I would be violating the letter that President McKay sent us sometime ago if I did." Ernest L. Wilkinson, Letter to Ezra Taft Benson, May 4, 1971; photocopy in my possession.

99. McKay, Diary, August 18, 1964.

100. Ezra Taft Benson, Letter to Clare Middlemiss, August 19, 1964; photocopy in my possession.

Benson would be available for such an appointment.” Hugh B. Brown concurred with McKay’s decision but added a strong qualifier: “If Brother Benson severed his relationship with [the John Birch Society] and accepted this position as a non-partisan assignment for the benefit of the Church primarily, he could do a lot of good; otherwise, he could do us a lot of harm.”¹⁰¹ Benson was not offered the position, but McKay’s strong support of his nonecclesiastical activities was a clear message to other General Authorities.

From Europe, Benson authorized the John Birch Society to use his photograph on the cover of its monthly magazine, *American Opinion*, in October. Reed Benson, acting as a surrogate for his father, published full-page advertisements in Idaho quoting his father’s endorsement of the society.¹⁰² Benson returned regularly to Salt Lake City for the Church’s semi-annual general conferences. In April 1965, Ernest Wilkinson recorded that Benson’s conference remarks were “a typical address against loss of our freedoms. He has great courage and I have great admiration for him. I’m sure some of his Brethren may have thought it was untactful, but yet [it] is apparent that Ezra is not going to give up in a cause in which he knows he is right. I know also that he has encouragement from President McKay.”¹⁰³

While Benson’s general conference address pleased Wilkinson, it had the opposite effect on many other Church members. The *Washington Post* stated, “The Mormon Church revealed sharp and bitter differences among its leadership on civil rights during its recent conference here.” Noting that Benson “spoke darkly but without specifics of ‘traitors in the church,’” the *Post* quoted the most inflammatory portion of Benson’s speech: “Before I left for Europe I warned how the Communists were using the civil rights movement to promote revolution and eventual take-

101. McKay, *Diary*, September 17, 1964.

102. Jack Anderson, “Reed Benson Spreads Birch Gospel,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 1965. In response to Anderson’s column, the *John Birch Society Bulletin*, March 1965, referred to Anderson as Drew Pearson’s “right-hand stooge, . . . viciously attacking what Anderson referred to as ‘the Benson father-and-son team.’”

103. Wilkinson, *Diary*, April 6, 1965.

over of this country. When are we going to wake up? What do you know about the dangerous civil rights agitation in Mississippi?"¹⁰⁴

According to the *Post* article, Hugh B. Brown "said tartly that Benson 'speaks strictly for himself.'"¹⁰⁵ Meeting later with his counselors, McKay raised the issue of Brown's outspokenness against the John Birch Society, which had been the subject of many letters of protest received by McKay: "I asked President Brown why he is so bitter against the organization. President Brown said that he did not consider it a good society, and he thought that they were doing more harm than good. He further stated that since I had told him about a year ago to be quiet on that subject, he had said and done nothing further regarding it. I said that it is wise not to mention the society."¹⁰⁶

Brown countered by bringing up the subject of Benson's general conference address and the resulting *Washington Post* article. He reported hearing many unfavorable reactions to Benson's remarks. "Brother Benson," he concluded, "should be told to take care of his missionary work and leave such matters alone." McKay responded, "I had not noticed anything objectionable in what Brother Benson had said" and asked Brown to bring him a transcript of the talk. Later, Brown did so and McKay agreed with his suggestion that the offensive paragraphs be deleted from the official published report of the conference.¹⁰⁷

In the immediate post-conference meeting, N. Eldon Tanner, who had been appointed McKay's second counselor in October 1963, also reported receiving negative feedback that he had heard about Benson's talk and summarized: It had "split the people down the center" in their Church meetings. McKay, obviously hoping to make the whole problem disappear, ended the meeting by saying, "I had told everyone not to mention the Birch Society but let the matter die out."¹⁰⁸

In October 1965, just returned from his European assignment, Benson met with McKay to discuss new political ambitions with him. "A

104. "Benson Ties Rights Issue to Reds in Mormon Rift," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1965.

105. *Ibid.*

106. McKay, *Diary*, April 23, 1965.

107. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1965. The conference addresses were also published in the *Improvement Era*.

108. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1965.

very prominent man, representing a large group of Americans who are strongly in favor of freedom,” said Benson, had approached him about forming a third political party, because “even the Republicans are becoming soft toward socialism and Communism.” McKay “told Elder Benson that he must not have anything to do with a ‘third party,’” but nonetheless “he should look into what these men have in mind.”¹⁰⁹

Thorpe B. Isaacson, whom McKay had added as an extra counselor in the First Presidency in October 1965, was present at the meeting and wrote a memo describing it in greater detail, which he sent to McKay. As he described it, the “very important prominent man” asked Benson to contact Senator Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina) and request that Thurmond join Benson in taking “throughout the states of the nation” a movement “to preserve freedom and to develop a conservative attitude and conservative government in the hopes that we could stem the tide of socialism and the softness towards communism.” The hope was that they could initiate a groundswell that would carry this plank into the Republican platform in 1968. “Brother Benson explained that the Republicans were becoming soft toward communism and drifting toward socialism and away from conservatism about as badly as the Democrats”; and while he hoped they could reform the Republican Party, they were prepared “to start a third party” if their message was ignored. When McKay cautioned him not to affiliate with a third party, Benson “stated that he did not care to get into politics, but he thought the Church should take a stand; that if somebody did not do something it would be too late. President McKay agreed with this” and told Benson “to go ahead and make further inquiry and to do what he thought was right.”¹¹⁰

In November, McKay met privately with Benson, who “gave a report on the serious inroads the Communists have made in this country. . . . I am convinced that our country is already on the road to Socialism, and that the Communists are making gains here.” Benson then suggested that Isaacson be sent to a two-day John Birch Society seminar the following

109. *Ibid.*, October 21, 1965.

110. Thorpe B. Isaacson, Memorandum to David O. McKay, October 21, 1965, in McKay, *Diary*. In light of Benson’s prior and subsequent political activities, his declaration “that he did not care to get into politics” seems ingenuous.

month to learn about “Communism and conditions in our country.” McKay agreed.¹¹¹

It is easy to see how McKay’s pattern of holding a firm line against the John Birch Society in council meetings, yet acquiescing and supporting Benson when he met with him privately, generated internal confusion and frustration. Hugh B. Brown particularly felt dissatisfied with the constantly changing signals. Although there is no record that Brown ever flared up at McKay, he sometimes took his frustrations out on Clare Middlemiss. Middlemiss recorded in her own notes one particularly heated exchange:

President Brown said, “Why cannot we have harmony?” Clare answered, “Yes, why?” [Brown] “You got off the wrong track with me over the John Birch Society and Brother Benson.” [Middlemiss] “I have only wanted to fight Communism, and have answered letters on the John Birch Society the way President McKay has told me to.” President Brown said, “I have wanted to fight Communism also, but not the way Benson or the John Birch Society are doing it—everybody is against them.”¹¹²

On January 11, 1966, McKay noted that he had received complaints from Church members who, understandably, were confused about the Church’s stand on Communism on the one hand and the John Birch Society on the other: “I said that I think the time has come for the First Presidency to make a statement as to the Church’s attitude regarding Communism; that this, however, should have nothing whatever to do with the Birch Society, and should be a message from the First Presidency of the Church. The Brethren agreed that there is a great need for such a message, and I was persuaded that I am the one who should prepare such a statement.”¹¹³

However, before he could take action, Benson preempted him only five days later by making another public endorsement of the John Birch Society. Speaking in Boise, Idaho, Benson called the society “probably the most effective non-church group in the United States in the fight against galloping socialism and Godless communism.” Still forbidden by McKay

111. McKay, *Diary*, November 19, 1965. Later, Isaacson elected not to go to the seminar. In January 1966, Isaacson suffered a massive stroke from which he never recovered.

112. Clare Middlemiss, “Notes,” November 24, 1965; photocopy in my possession.

113. McKay, *Diary*, January 11, 1966.

to join the society, Benson nonetheless suggested that he was everything but a formal member. "This is a fine group," he said. "I know their leaders, I have attended two of their all-day council meetings. I have read their literature. I feel I know their programs." He ended his remarks by emphasizing that McKay "has said he doesn't understand why the people do not become alerted and informed regarding the greatest evil in the world—the Communist conspiracy."¹¹⁴ In the context of Benson's preceding remarks, it sounded as if McKay was endorsing the John Birch Society. Indeed, U.S. Senator Wallace F. Bennett (R-Utah) noted as much to McKay's oldest son in a letter that referred to the speech: "I have just been reading the report in the *Tribune* of the 16th of the speech Brother Benson made in Boise in which he praised the John Birch Society and ended with a very clever statement about your father which would seem to give your father's endorsement."¹¹⁵

Benson's attempts to imply McKay's endorsement of the society did not end with speeches. Early the following month he met privately with McKay and presented his most audacious proposal yet. McKay described the meeting in his diary:

Met by appointment Elder Ezra Taft Benson who said that the editors of the *American Opinion* magazine would like to have my portrait on the cover of their April issue. He said this magazine is published in Belmont, Massachusetts, and is a high-class publication. He showed me several past issues with pictures of Senator Barry Goldwater, the Honorable J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, and other prominent Americans. Brother Benson said that they needed a colored photograph and some biographical material, and I asked him to get these from my secretary, Clare. After discussing the matter, I could see no reason why I should not grant permission for the editors to use my picture.¹¹⁶

In presenting the matter to McKay, however, Benson had elected not to divulge one crucial detail: *American Opinion* was the monthly magazine of the John Birch Society. At a subsequent First Presidency meeting, Apostle Mark E. Petersen dropped a bombshell by stating that the Church Informa-

114. "LDS Apostle Backs up Birch Group," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 16, 1966.

115. Wallace F. Bennett, Letter to David Lawrence McKay, January 21, 1966, Wallace F. Bennett Papers, Accession 290, Box 24, fd. 3, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

116. McKay, Diary, February 9, 1966.

tion Service had received a bill for \$25 for a color photograph of McKay for the cover of *American Opinion*, “which is the John Birch Society organ. . . . Elder Petersen said that if my picture is so published it will certainly look as though the Church is endorsing the John Birch Society.” McKay reacted strongly, making it clear in the process that Benson had deceived him by failing to inform him that *American Opinion* was a Birch Society magazine:

I said that my picture should not appear on this magazine; that the Church has nothing to do with the John Birch Society. I authorized Brother Petersen to tell Brother Benson that he had brought this matter to my attention, and had been told by me to stop the printing of my picture on this magazine; that I do not want it used in that way. I said to Brother Petersen, “You are ordered in the presence of these men to stop it.” I further said that I do not want to have anything to do with the John Birch Society; that the Church has had nothing to do with it in the past, and that so far as Brother Benson is concerned, I do not think we would hear anything more about it.¹¹⁷

The day after McKay’s decision to withdraw his permission to print the picture, Benson met with him. According to McKay’s diary entry, Benson avoided the issue of *American Opinion*’s sponsorship, instead repeating that it “is considered a high-type magazine” on whose cover the photographs of Senator Barry Goldwater, J. Edgar Hoover, and other prominent men had appeared. Furthermore, he reminded McKay that he had given his word on the matter, to which he replied, “I told Brother Benson that they had better go ahead with it since I had given my permission for this to be done.”¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, McKay did not tell any of his other associates that he had reversed field on the issue.

Even with the benefit of over four decades of hindsight, it is not possible to conclude with certainty why McKay acted as he did on this issue, but the reason likely involved an interplay of factors. McKay was ninety-two, older than any previous Church president. Although he was not intellectually impaired, his declining physical condition severely limited his direct contact with the outside world. On an organizational chart, Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner, his first and second counselors, would clearly have been considered his closest confidants. However, a sharp exchange with Tanner a year earlier over the Church’s

117. *Ibid.*, February 18, 1966.

118. *Ibid.*, February 19, 1966.

finances had led to a rift between McKay on the one side and Tanner and Brown on the other. Following that incident, McKay became increasingly dependent upon other voices within his inner circle. The most persuasive of those voices, when it came to the issue of Communism, were Ezra Taft Benson, Thorpe B. Isaacson, and Clare Middlemiss, all of whom were strong Birch Society sympathizers. The *American Opinion* incident occurred less than a month after a massive stroke permanently incapacitated Isaacson, with the result that Benson's and Middlemiss's voices became even more prominent. Furthermore, Middlemiss functioned as McKay's chief-of-staff and controlled access to McKay. Benson had ready entree, but Middlemiss often blocked others from seeing the president.¹¹⁹

But perhaps most importantly, McKay, from the 1930s onward, was consistently and vehemently opposed to Communism. He was not speaking hyperbolically when he called it the greatest threat in the world to freedom and to the Church, and he felt that way long before Benson embraced the same philosophy. If one can understand the depth of McKay's feelings against Communism, perhaps his continual waffling over Benson's involvement with the John Birch Society can better be appreciated.

Early in the morning of March 8, 1966, N. Eldon Tanner placed a phone call to McKay, who was resting in Huntsville. He said "it was very urgent" that he, Joseph Fielding Smith, Mark E. Petersen, and David Lawrence McKay (McKay's oldest son and an attorney) see him that morning. McKay agreed, and by 10:30 A.M. the four men, along with First Presidency secretary Joseph Anderson, who took minutes, arrived in Huntsville. A summary of Anderson's account with various quotations follows here:¹²⁰

Tanner began the meeting. "Last night I received a letter, and when I

119. Some correspondents were concerned that Middlemiss would intercept mail addressed to McKay. For example, Robert H. Hinckley, who worked for the American Broadcasting Company in New York, wrote a letter to McKay on March 17, 1966 (photocopy in my possession), to which he added the following postscript: "Forgive me for sending this letter via your son, but I am concerned that some letters may not be getting beyond the desk of Miss Middlemiss."

120. The account that follows is drawn from these minutes in McKay, *Diary*, March 8, 1966.

read it I got in touch with Mark E. Petersen. This letter is signed by Philip K. Langan, Circulation Manager of the *American Opinion*.” The letter confirmed what McKay’s colleagues had feared in the prior month’s meeting on the subject: that the John Birch Society intended to use McKay’s photograph on the cover of the magazine to promote the society. The letter read in part:

The cover of the April 1966 issue of *American Opinion* will feature the President of the Mormon Church, David O. McKay. We feel that our Standing Order Agents will want to increase their monthly shipment, as newsstand sales should improve with the well-respected President McKay on the cover. Our Subscription Agents now have a good selling point for any Mormon prospects they might be trying to “sign up.” And for our regular Subscribers and John Birch Society Chapter leaders, you now have an opportunity to favorably impress your Mormon friends, who are not yet actively involved in the battle against Communism.

Upon reading the letter, Tanner had immediately called Petersen. The two men were baffled because, in their prior meeting with McKay, his instructions to withhold his photograph and cancel permission to use it had been explicit. They had contacted Lawrence McKay to see if he knew of any change in his father’s wishes, but he knew of none. At that point, Tanner moved quickly to arrange the meeting.

They then read to McKay the minutes of the First Presidency meeting of February 18 in which he had unambiguously ordered Petersen to stop the printing of his photograph on the magazine. Without mentioning Benson by name, McKay replied, “They have resorted to everything they could to get me associated with that.” Tanner said, “One reason we thought we should come this morning is if you thought it should be stopped we ought to get word to them immediately.” McKay replied, “You get them by telephone. Tell them I do not want anything to do with it, that I do not want my name associated with John Birch.” Tanner then showed McKay the issue of *American Opinion* with Benson’s picture on the front cover and said, “That is the way they would want to put your picture, and even if they have it printed they could put a new cover on without any trouble.” McKay replied, “I do not want my picture on it. Stop it!”

While Lawrence McKay telephoned the society in Massachusetts, Petersen raised the issue of Benson’s involvement. As the discussion progressed it was clear that, from McKay’s point of view, Benson had not been forthcoming with him in their private discussions. It was also clear

how deeply Benson had offended his closest associates by consistently overreaching the limits McKay placed on him:

Petersen: "It would seem to me something ought to be said to Brother Benson also to stop it. He will carry on his campaign. He is the man we have to deal with. You are the only man that can stop him."

McKay: "What campaign is Brother Benson carrying on?"

Petersen: "He is out speaking on this all the time. It was only about ten days ago that he attended a John Birch Society meeting in Seattle and spoke vigorously in favor of their program, and he mentioned another meeting last Thursday. He gives press interviews and is promoting this all the time."

McKay: "Why is he doing it?"

Petersen: "I am sure he will not stop for anybody but you. I do not think he will pay any attention to any of us, like he paid no attention to me when I told him about the picture. He paid no attention to it. It hasn't been stopped."

McKay: "What has he in mind? He is one of the Twelve."

Tanner: "After you gave such firm and positive instruction and said 'I want to say it before you men,' we knew how you felt about it, and to see this come out shocked us. I cannot understand his position. We all feel opposed to communism as much as can be, but when you and all the Twelve say not to use the Birch Society, it is quite serious."

At this point in the conversation, McKay asked Lawrence to get Benson on the phone. Joseph Anderson was not on an extension, so he recorded only McKay's part of the dialogue. Nonetheless, it is clear that, as he began to talk to Benson, his tone changed immediately, for on this as well as other occasions when he spoke privately with Benson, he simply could not come down hard on him. Unfortunately, the result was that he left the door open for Benson to continue his activities:

McKay: "Good morning, Brother Benson. My associates in the Presidency are here and they inform me that the publishers want my picture on the outside cover of *American Opinion*."

Benson:

McKay: "Now would be a very poor time to put my picture on it. I wish they would not do it."

Benson:

McKay: "At the present time I think it would be unwise because the members of the Church conclude that my giving permission to have my photograph on it was an implication that I belonged to this and was in favor of their ideals. I do as far as opposing communism. I would like a telegram sent to the publishers of the *American Opinion* telling them not to print my picture."

At McKay's direction, Lawrence then phoned the editorial office of *American Opinion*. Anderson recorded Lawrence's half of the conversation:

"Hello, this is David Lawrence McKay speaking from the office of President David O. McKay of the Mormon Church. Word has just reached him that the *American Opinion* plans to publish his picture on the front cover of the April issue. He is very much upset over that and asks that it be stopped no matter what the cost. In fact, he has directed us to take whatever steps that are necessary in order to stop it. This implies the approval of the John Birch Society by him as President of the Mormon Church and if that happened it would be necessary to deny that throughout the Church, besides taking any necessary legal action if there is any."

At the conclusion of the phone call, Lawrence said to the other men in the room, "He says there is plenty of time to stop it." His father concluded the meeting by saying, "I am glad you came."

Having resolved one crisis, McKay was quickly brought into another. On the same day that he pulled the plug on *American Opinion*, J. Reese Hunter, who identified himself only as "Dinner Chairman," sent a letter to bishops throughout the Church inviting them to a John Birch Society banquet honoring Robert Welch.¹²¹ The timing of the event, April 7, was crucial, for the annual general conference, which would be attended by thousands of bishops throughout the Church, was to be held on April 6, 9, and 10. The banquet would thus fill a gap in their schedule. The letter made strong reference to a Benson talk in the Assembly Hall the previous month, implying that McKay had sanctioned it, which he had not done: "This talk was delivered to a turn-away crowd of over 2,000 persons. President David O. McKay had requested that he be allowed to view the proceedings over closed-circuit television." In order "to continue this education process respecting the things which threaten us today," Robert Welch would speak at the banquet. "Elder Ezra Taft Benson will be present and will introduce Mr. Welch." The letter concluded, "As you know, Conference will be held April 6th, 9th, and 10th this year. Thursday evening will

121. Although Hunter's letter did not indicate it directly, the banquet was an official John Birch function, as indicated in a subsequent article, "Birchers Applaud LDS Policy," *Deseret News*, March 23, 1966.

be free for most people and we invite your attendance, along with your counselors and wives, at this dinner."¹²²

The following day, the First Presidency published a "Notice to Church Members," denying any Church involvement in the banquet. It concluded: "In order to avoid any misunderstanding we wish to notify bishops, other church officers, and members of the Church in general, that the Church is not involved in this dinner in any way, and furthermore, that the Church has no connection with the John Birch Society whatever."¹²³

The day thereafter, a friend and former neighbor of McKay wrote an impassioned letter from New York City, pleading with McKay to rein in Benson's extremist activities:

The head of the Birch Society, Robert Welch, is due in Salt Lake City on April 6th or 7th, the time of general conference. Efforts will be made to have him recognized in some way during Conference (Elder Benson may even propose to have him come to the stand to make some brief remarks). But this is the Robert Welch who slandered President Eisenhower by writing that "there is only one possible word to describe his purposes and actions. That word is 'treason.'" Welch bore the same kind of false witness against Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, calling him "a Communist agent." He also accused the late President John F. Kennedy, during his brief term in office, of being sympathetic to the Communist goals of world conquest. . . . President McKay, I beseech you to give heed on [sic] these matters to all of your dedicated Counselors in the First Presidency. . . . I fervently hope that Mr. Welch, the Birch head, will receive no recognition of any sort from you or the Church while he is in Salt Lake City. And I beseech you to require a decision from Elder Benson forthwith as to whether his life will be dedicated to Church or Birch. He is doing the Church a great, great disservice by mixing the two.¹²⁴

A week later, McKay met privately with Benson to discuss the Birch Society banquet. McKay gave him a gentle message not to speak at the banquet or other society functions, but in such a way as to leave him plenty of maneuvering room if he chose to take it: "I told Brother Benson that I think it would be best for him not to speak at strictly John Birch So-

122. J. Reese Hunter, Dinner Chairman, to "Dear Brethren," March 8, 1966, McKay, Diary, March 15, 1966.

123. "Notice to Church Members," *Deseret News*, March 16, 1966.

124. Robert H. Hinckley, Letter to David O. McKay, March 17, 1966; photocopy in my possession.

ciety meetings, but approved of his filling speaking appointments already accepted which were not associated with this group.”¹²⁵

On the following day, McKay and Benson attended the regular weekly meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve in the Salt Lake Temple. McKay’s diary entry for the day gives no indication as to what was discussed in the meeting, merely stating, “Many problems and important Church decisions!”¹²⁶ However, a diary entry from the following week described a portion of the meeting:

President Tanner reported that following the meeting on Thursday last, Elder Benson had told him that he thought he, President Tanner, was a little hard on him in his presentation of the case pertaining to his relationship to the Birch Society. President Tanner told Brother Benson he thought that he was as reasonable as he possibly could be under the circumstances. Elder Benson raised the question as to what he should do about the dinner to be given by the Birch people the evening of April 7. President Tanner told him that he did not see how the question could have been stated more clearly to him by the President and by the Twelve, that everyone wanted to let him know that he should discontinue speaking about the Birch Society and for it, and that President McKay in the discussion had said two or three times that he should not participate further with them. Brother Benson inquired about the dinner, that in the letter that had been sent out it was announced that he would be in attendance and introduce the speaker. President Tanner said that he told Brother Benson that he could not give him any further answer than was given in the meeting on Thursday. Elder Benson asked President Tanner if he would clear this matter for him with President McKay, and President Tanner had said no, that he felt that it was just as clear as anything could be.¹²⁷

The day after the meeting in the temple, Benson met privately with McKay to discuss further the matter of the banquet and wrote a memo to McKay, written the same day and “read and approved” by McKay, summarizing their discussion.¹²⁸ Benson noted, “I desire to follow your counsel at all times,” and then reaffirmed his continuing and unqualified support of the John Birch Society, once again implying McKay’s endorsement: “I am still convinced that the John Birch Society is a great patriotic, non-po-

125. McKay, *Diary*, March 23, 1966.

126. McKay, *Diary*, March 24, 1966.

127. McKay, *Diary*, March 29, 1966.

128. Ezra Taft Benson, Letter to David O. McKay, March 25, 1966, McKay, *Diary*.

litical, voluntary, educational organization which is doing great good in the fight against the Godless socialist-communist conspiracy which you have warned is the greatest evil in this world.” He ended the memo by stating, “If you feel at any time I am getting off the right track please do as you promised and ‘tap me on the shoulder.’”

The combination of McKay’s unwillingness to give Benson an ultimatum, and Benson’s willingness to assume *carte blanche* support from McKay, no matter what caveats McKay had intended, ensured that Benson would continue to push his political agenda as long as McKay lived. It also ensured that Benson’s fellow General Authorities who disagreed with his extremism would be continually frustrated in their attempts to rein him in, for he would always appeal directly to McKay.

Meanwhile, having been thwarted in his attempt to involve Benson in the banquet, Robert Welch shifted tactics and initiated a letter-writing campaign to lobby his cause directly with key Church leaders. In the March issue of *The John Birch Society Bulletin*, he praised McKay’s long-standing efforts to combat Communism, quoted part of McKay’s general conference talk on the same subject, and then urged society members to write “to express their appreciation to this great religious leader, who is also—whether or not he would even recognize the word—a great Americanist.”¹²⁹ Welch urged correspondents to keep their letters brief, “make it clear that you do not expect any answer,” and mark both the letter and the envelope “Personal and Confidential,” a move that would ensure that the letters would go directly to Clare Middlemiss (who pasted this issue of the *Bulletin* in her personal scrapbook).¹³⁰

The day after general conference began, Welch was honored at the announced banquet at the Hotel Utah. Benson attended but did not speak. In his speech, Welch described the Church as “a very good recruiting ground.”¹³¹ Two days later, in the priesthood session of general conference, McKay, in marginal physical health, asked his son Robert to read

129. *The John Birch Society Bulletin*, March 1966, 22–24.

130. Clare Middlemiss, Scrapbook, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. These multivolume scrapbooks are unlabeled and unpaginated.

131. Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America’s Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: G. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), 78.

his statement regarding the Church's stand on Communism. The statement said, in part:

Church members are at perfect liberty to act according to their own consciences in the matter of safeguarding our way of life. . . . They are free to participate in non-Church meetings which are held to warn people of the threat of Communism or any other theory or principle which will deprive us of our free agency or individual liberties vouchsafed by the Constitution of the United States. The Church, out of respect for the rights of all its members to have their political views and loyalties, must maintain the strictest possible neutrality. We have no intention of trying to interfere with the fullest and freest exercise of the political franchise of our members under and within our Constitution . . . The position of this Church on the subject of Communism has never changed. We consider it the greatest Satanical threat to peace, prosperity, and the spread of God's work among men that exists on the face of the earth. In this connection, we are continually being asked to give our opinion concerning various patriotic groups or individuals who are fighting Communism and speaking up for Freedom. Our immediate concern, however, is not with parties, groups, or persons, but with principles. *We, therefore, commend and encourage every person and every group who are sincerely seeking to study Constitutional principles and awaken a sleeping and apathetic people to the alarming conditions that are rapidly advancing about us. We wish all of our citizens throughout the land were participating in some type of organized self-education in order that they could better appreciate what is happening and know what they can do about it. Supporting the FBI, the Police, the Congressional Committees investigating Communism, and various organizations that are attempting to awaken the people through educational means, is a policy we warmly endorse for all our people.*¹³²

These italicized sentences were seen by McKay's counselors as an implicit endorsement of the John Birch Society, and they became the subject of an internal tug-of-war. Three days later, McKay summoned Henry A. Smith, editor of the *Church News*, to his office and told him that he had learned that Smith did not plan to publish the statement on Communism in the forthcoming *Church News*, which carried a report of the general conference. Smith, without describing the rationale behind the decision, acknowledged that to be the case. McKay replied, "Well it should go in. I made that statement to 85,000 Priesthood members; the press has it, and many recordings have been made of it. I think it had

132. *Conference Report*, April 9, 1966, 109; italics mine.

better go in.”¹³³ Accordingly, the statement was published in the *Church Section*, but the controversial (italicized) passages were deleted at McKay’s request.¹³⁴

When Clare Middlemiss found out about the deletion, she brought up the matter with McKay, saying that “many recordings had been made of the statement and that many people are calling the office to find out why these paragraphs had been deleted.” McKay replied that his son Lawrence, at the instigation of Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner, had urged that he omit them, “pointing out that they would tie the Church in with the John Birch Society.”¹³⁵ Three days later, Middlemiss again pressed the issue with McKay, saying that she had received many letters protesting the deletion of the paragraphs. Furthermore, Mark E. Petersen had recently published an editorial in the *Church News* that was critical of the John Birch Society. The offending passage proclaimed: “The Church has nothing to do with Communists, nothing to do with racists, nothing to do with Birchers, nothing to do with any slanted group.”¹³⁶ At that, McKay reversed his previous position: “I told Clare that I did not wish these paragraphs deleted; that I gave them and the statement should stand as given; that many people have recordings of the full statement. . . . These things are very upsetting to me, and the deletion of what I said at Priesthood Meeting is causing a lot of people to question and to wonder what is going on.”¹³⁷

As a result, the deleted paragraphs were restored when McKay’s statement was published in the official *Conference Report* and in the Church’s monthly *Improvement Era*. Middlemiss was not satisfied, however, and pushed for the statement’s publication in full the following week in the *Church News*—a presumptuous move by a secretary that strongly suggests she was acting as a surrogate for Benson, who in fact had brought up the same subject with McKay two days earlier but had

133. McKay, Diary, April 12, 1966.

134. “Conference Talk Texts,” *Church News*, April 16, 1966, 7.

135. McKay, Diary, April 15, 1966.

136. “Politics and Religion,” *Church News*, March 26, 1966. *Church News* editorials, both then and now, are unsigned.

137. McKay, Diary, April 18, 1966.

not been as insistent as Middlemiss.¹³⁸ This attempt, however, brought Middlemiss into direct conflict with Lawrence McKay, who strongly opposed the society and who was acting to block publication of the disputed passages. On April 21, the two met face-to-face and confronted the issue. According to Middlemiss's account, Lawrence argued that the passages should not be published, "that it will do a lot of harm to the Church; that the John Birch Society will use it as meaning members of the Church should join their society." Middlemiss countered that she "did not see how they would take it that way; that they had already been called and said that the statement was not for them, and they are not to distribute it from their office."¹³⁹

The following day Middlemiss visited President McKay in his apartment in Hotel Utah and again brought up the subject of publishing the entire statement. She also reported her confrontation with Lawrence McKay, referring to his earlier discussion with Lawrence when he had agreed not to publish the statement in full, noted, "I have never seen my son Lawrence so upset—he hates the John Birch Society."¹⁴⁰

McKay's attention was deflected momentarily from the John Birch Society by another of Benson's political initiatives: a run for the U.S. presidency. Months earlier, Benson had presented to McKay a rather nebulous plan whereby he and Senator Strom Thurmond would press the Republican Party for reforms, with the intention of forming a third party if the Republican Convention balked. That plan, however, had not included presidential aspirations. In mid-April 1966, Benson met with McKay and described "The 1976 Committee," which would be composed of 100 prominent men from throughout the country. This committee, a third party despite its name, would nominate him as president and Thurmond as vice president. McKay again expressed doubts about the wisdom of forming a third party, to which Benson replied that he also was "opposed to this, but this Committee and movement might result in a realignment between the two political parties." McKay responded, "This nation is rapidly moving down the road of soul-destroying socialism, and that I hoped and prayed that the efforts of the 1976 Committee would be successful in stemming the tide." He told Benson "to let them go ahead

138. McKay, *Diary*, April 16, 1966.

139. Clare Middlemiss, "Notes," April 21, 1966.

140. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1966.

and wait and see what develops.” Benson presented him with proposed statements that he and McKay might make if the committee proposed his nomination. McKay approved the statements. The statement drafted under his name concluded with: “His doing so has my full approval.”¹⁴¹

Three weeks later when Benson was on a Church assignment in Germany, the 1976 Committee announced its intention to draft him as a candidate for president in 1968. Benson, speaking disingenuously in view of his prior conversation with McKay, told a reporter that he was in “shock” over the committee’s proposal. “It’s the first I’ve heard of it,” he said. The same newspaper report indicated “about half of the committee’s 30 organizers are members of the Birch Society.”¹⁴²

Benson’s bid for the presidency ran out of momentum and was discontinued a year before the 1968 political conventions. However, it placed McKay in the awkward position of maintaining political neutrality toward one Mormon presidential candidate who was a serious contender, Michigan Governor George Romney, while at the same time endorsing the candidacy of Benson, who was never regarded as a serious candidate. A lengthy article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted the dilemma, pointing out that Benson “obtained from David McKay, the 92-year old prophet and president of the Mormon Church, an unpublished letter giving full approval to any campaign that Mr. Benson might make.” The article noted that political activity among American churches was on the rise; but while larger denominations such as Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans had generally espoused liberal positions, the Mormons remained “deeply conservative.” Wrote the unidentified reporter: “In great part this is due to certain doctrinal teachings unique to Mormonism. But it also is due to the energetic efforts of Mr. Benson, whose flirtation with the John Birch Society has produced deep divisions within the church. ‘What Benson is doing could rend the church,’ says a Western governor, ‘and that would be bad for the church and bad for the West.’”¹⁴³

In a nationally syndicated column, Drew Pearson also noted the shift in Mormon political philosophy, characterizing it as atypical of McKay: “David O. McKay, president of the Church and now 93 years old, once

141. McKay, Diary, April 16, 1966.

142. “Presidential Draft for Elder Benson,” *Deseret News*, May 3, 1966.

143. “Mormons & Politics: Benson’s Influence Helps Keep Growing Church on Conservative Track,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 1966.

championed the principle of free discussion, of letting Mormons have and listen to sharply divergent views. He still stands by that principle in theory. But the *Deseret News*, the Church-owned newspaper which circulates throughout Utah, shies away from publishing views not approved by the Church elders. Chief reason for the new Mormon trend toward political and philosophical isolation is probably the influx of outsiders into Utah, plus the steady drumbeat of John Birch Propaganda from Ezra Taft Benson.¹⁴⁴

For his part, McKay disregarded the criticism and stood solidly behind Benson. Meeting with him in late October 1966, McKay reread his letter of support, reaffirmed its content, and assured Benson “that I would support him in any effort which he might make in his efforts to help preserve the Constitution.”¹⁴⁵

In November, McKay’s counselors met with him about Benson’s request to duplicate and distribute widely his own talk in the most recent general conference. Tanner, normally nonconfrontational, protested: “From this talk one would conclude that Brother Benson and President McKay stand alone among the General Authorities on the question of freedom.” Although Tanner did not quote from Benson’s speech, it contained a thinly veiled shot at Brown and other General Authorities who urged moderation in the struggle against Communism: “Of course, the war in heaven over free agency is now being waged here on earth, and there are those today who are saying, ‘Look, don’t get involved in the fight for freedom. Just live the gospel.’ That council [sic] is dangerous, self-contradictory, unsound.”¹⁴⁶

McKay agreed that it went too far, and “decided that the talk should not be mimeographed and distributed in pamphlet form.”¹⁴⁷ Two weeks later, however, Benson met privately with McKay and asked him to reconsider his decision. After rereading Benson’s talk, McKay decided “there is

144. “Mormons Reverse Clock,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 1966.

145. McKay, *Diary*, October 31, 1966.

146. Ezra Taft Benson, *Conference Report*, October 2, 1966, 122.

147. McKay, *Diary*, November 16, 1966.

nothing wrong with the talk, so I told my secretary to tell Elder Benson he could have it mimeographed if he wished."¹⁴⁸

During this period while Benson's bid for the presidency was still alive, he renewed his efforts to obtain McKay's sanction for his formal affiliation with the John Birch Society. On February 24, 1967, McKay received a 12-page letter from Robert Welch, "a cursory glance [at] of which indicates or pleads for permission for Ezra Taft Benson to serve on the National Council of the Society."¹⁴⁹ In closing the letter, Welch indicated that Benson had already agreed to serve on the council, subject only to McKay's consent.¹⁵⁰ McKay deferred acting on the request for a month. Benson scheduled a private meeting at the month's end to push for a decision. McKay told Benson, "I enjoyed reading Mr. Welch's letter and felt that he is sincerely dedicated, and that he displayed a very good spirit in his letter." Nonetheless, he declined, for the second time, Welch's request. However, he worded his response in such a way as to leave the door open: "It was agreed that Elder Benson would answer Mr. Welch and tell him that it would be impossible for him to serve on the Council at this time."¹⁵¹

It did not take long for Benson to raise the issue a third—and final—time. One month later in mid-April 1967, he brought Robert Welch to meet McKay. Welch made an impassioned plea and presented McKay with a letter, beginning, "This is probably the most important letter I have ever written."¹⁵² Welch pulled out all the stops in the letter, alleging that Communist infiltration of the United States government "has now reached so far that rampant treason is gradually but surely establishing Communist control over the United States." Standing between the Communists and complete takeover was but "one formidable, unshattered bulwark, . . . the one enemy which the Communists fear most anywhere in the world": the John Birch Society. Unhampered by modesty, Welch alleged that "but for the opposition of the John Birch Society our country

148. McKay, *Diary*, December 2, 1966.

149. McKay, *Diary*, February 24, 1967.

150. Robert Welch, Letter to David O. McKay, February 21, 1967, McKay, *Diary*, March 22, 1967.

151. McKay, *Diary*, March 22, 1967.

152. Robert Welch, Letter to David O. McKay, April 18, 1967, in McKay, *Diary*.

would already have been carried by Communist internal subversion beyond the point of ‘no return.’” In concluding his letter, Welch called Benson “one of the world’s truly great men” and proclaimed that allowing Benson to join the society council would enable him “to perform for his country an act of greatness equal to that of many another hero in our history.”

Although McKay had for years hardened and then softened his stance on the John Birch Society and, more particularly, Benson’s interaction with it, he never softened to the point of allowing Benson a formal affiliation. In spite of the dual pressures exerted by Benson and Welch, McKay held the line. “I explained to him, as I have on two other occasions by letter, that it would not be wise for Elder Benson to serve in this capacity.”¹⁵³ This time the message got through, and Benson never asked the question a fourth time. Three days later, McKay showed Welch’s letter to Mark E. Petersen who, upon reading, it said: “President McKay, Elder Harold B. Lee has some hair-raising stories to tell about the Birch Society which I am sure he will tell you, which I think would scare you to death. We have the Church, and if we live up to its teachings, we do not need to worry about what will happen to this country!”¹⁵⁴

Benson continued to pursue a conservative political agenda, though with a lower profile once it became clear to him that McKay would never allow his formal affiliation with the John Birch Society. And Hugh B. Brown, for his part, continued to be a sounding board for moderate and liberal Mormons who were upset at Benson’s activities. Typical of the letters Brown received was one from a Church member in Maryland: “I personally feel that Brother Benson is misusing his Priesthood Authority. . . . I am finding it increasingly difficult to raise my right hand in Quarterly Conference and sustain Brother Benson as an Apostle. Isn’t there something that can be done to curb this type of political involvement of the Church in general?”¹⁵⁵

While Brown’s responses in the past had always been critical of the activities of Benson and the society, they now became even stronger, suggesting that McKay had finally realized that Benson’s activities, if left un-

153. McKay, *Diary*, April 18, 1967.

154. McKay, *Diary*, April 21, 1967.

155. Dorothy L. Skinner, Letter to Hugh B. Brown, March 24, 1967; photocopy in my possession.

checked, would do lasting damage to Church members individually and to the Church as an institution. Three weeks after McKay's meeting with Benson and Welch, Brown wrote to a correspondent: "We did discuss your letter and numerous others like it on the same subject with the First Presidency and are taking it to the Twelve as soon as Brother Benson returns from Europe, and we prefer to have him present when the matter is discussed. I think you can be assured that something definite will be decided upon and activities in this connection will be curtailed."¹⁵⁶ While McKay's diaries contain no contemporaneous account of the follow-up to Brown's assurance, a later statement by Tanner indicated that the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve jointly advised Benson to "discontinue this kind of thing."¹⁵⁷

While Benson reduced his visibility with the society, he did not cut back on his political activities. Early in 1968 his ambitions took him in a different direction, and he approached McKay for permission to join Alabama Governor George C. Wallace, running for U.S. president on a third-party ticket, as his vice presidential candidate. Unlike Benson's earlier presidential ambitions, this proposal met McKay's immediate and unambiguous rejection. It is not clear how much of McKay's decision had to do with his aversion to a third political party (which he had expressed at the time of the Benson-Thurmond initiative), his personal feelings toward Wallace, his unwillingness to have an apostle square off against announced Mormon candidate George Romney, or growing weariness with Benson's political activities. In writing to Wallace, McKay couched his decision in ecclesiastical language: "Please be assured that my decision is not political in essence, but one that involves Mr. Benson's calling as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church."¹⁵⁸ McKay's decision was not, however, an indication that he had softened his stance on Communism. Indeed, several months later when he learned of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia he said, "The Communists will never surrender

156. Hugh B. Brown, Letter to Burns S. Hanson, May 11, 1967, Firmage Papers, Box 48, fd. 21.

157. McKay, Diary, May 29, 1969.

158. McKay, Diary, February 13, 1968.

their main aim—that of world conquest—no matter what they say or do.”¹⁵⁹

Two months before the 1968 presidential election after Romney had dropped out of the race, Benson approached McKay with a second request for permission to join Wallace as a third-party candidate. McKay responded: “My decision is still the same; . . . I feel that Elder Benson should not launch out on this political campaign; that it could lead to confusion and misunderstanding in the Church.”¹⁶⁰

Shortly after the election, Hugh B. Brown summarized his feelings about Benson and the John Birch Society in an interview recorded by his grandson, expressing sentiments that proved to be accurate: “There are some [General Authorities]—I won’t put it in the plural even—who sustain the John Birch Society. Others of us do not. I don’t think that that should be an issue, should not be a question involving one’s standing in the Church whether they approve of that or not. I do think that in this case all members of the General Authorities should keep out of that discussion. I think the John Birch Society will run its course and finally be rejected. That’s my own opinion.”¹⁶¹

In 1968, Benson made one last attempt to recruit McKay’s support of the John Birch Society. Telephoning Clare Middlemiss from New York City, he pleaded:

Clare, President McKay has told me on various occasions that there are two things he regretted in his presidency: (1) the untimely decision, which was later changed, to move the college at Rexburg to Idaho Falls; and (2) the issuing of the statement in the public press against the John Birch Society. Now, in order to alleviate that feeling about the John Birch Society, I wonder, since they are celebrating their 10th Anniversary tonight at a meeting and banquet in Indianapolis, Indiana, if President McKay would send a telegram similar to the following: “John Birch Society, c/o Mr. Robert Welch, Stauffer Inn, Indianapolis, Indiana—Congratulations upon reaching ten years of courageous and effective service in defense of our freedom and acquainting the American people with the insidious dan-

159. McKay, *Diary*, August 26, 1968.

160. McKay, *Diary*, September 9, 1968.

161. Brown, interviewed by Firmage, November 30, 1968, Firmage Collection, Ms 674, Box 51, fd. 29.

gers of the atheistic communistic conspiracy. Best wishes for future success in the fight to preserve our God-given liberties.”¹⁶²

Middlemiss attempted to reach McKay with the request, but he was in a meeting and could not be interrupted. She then presented the matter to Alvin R. Dyer, whom McKay had appointed as his fifth counselor in the First Presidency. Although Dyer, a conservative and Middlemiss’s cousin, was sympathetic to the concerns of the society, he vetoed the request before it could reach McKay.

In the final year of McKay’s life, his relationship to Communism and to Benson changed slightly but significantly. While continuing to condemn Communism as forcefully as ever, he gradually acknowledged that there was a difference between Communism as a system, and a Communist (and even more so, a socialist) as a person. N. Eldon Tanner inquired in a First Presidency meeting: “If a man were an avowed communist, would our position be to excommunicate him or disqualify him for any position in the Church?” McKay responded that he should not hold any Church position but allowed that he might remain a member of the Church, a softening of his earlier stance.¹⁶³ It is likely that this change came with the realization that European Church members were not of the same political stripe as American members and that socialist and even Communist parties in their countries carried far different baggage than in the United States. Indeed, even Benson was occasionally reminded by European Church members of the difference. One British member spoke of a dinner conversation with Benson: “Elder Benson was talking away to me and he said this and that. I said, ‘Well, Elder Benson, I’ve got to be honest with you. I was very upset when I sat in the Tabernacle and heard you attack my politics.’ ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘Well, I’m a socialist. I’ve been a socialist all my life. My father was a great radical socialist. I don’t think you know what socialists are when you come up and criticize them so harshly.’ He explained to me the difference between the socialist he was attacking and the socialists I believed in at that time.”¹⁶⁴

McKay’s friendship with Benson never waned, but tolerance for his extremism gradually wore down. In a First Presidency meeting eleven

162. McKay, *Diary*, December 7, 1968.

163. McKay, *Diary*, May 29, 1969.

164. Arthur Forbes Herbertson, interviewed by Gordon Irving, April 2, 1986, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, LDS Church Archives.

months before McKay's death, the subject of Benson's political remarks from the pulpit again came up. After McKay's counselors weighed in with assorted anecdotes highlighting the problem, McKay "asked what conclusion the brethren had reached regarding the matter. President Tanner said the same conclusion that was arrived at about two years ago, that Elder Benson should discontinue this kind of thing, and particularly in stake conferences, and should limit himself to talking about the gospel and its applications. President Tanner said that he thought I made as clear a statement on the subject as he had heard made in the meeting of the Council of the First Presidency and the Twelve at that time. I said that there is no reason why we should not continue that understanding."¹⁶⁵

When Benson gave an inflammatory speech at BYU three months later, in which he was particularly critical of U.S. government officials and the United Nations, McKay authorized Hugh B. Brown to go to BYU and give a strong rebuttal, stating, "I did not think that any government officials should be accused of these things."¹⁶⁶

Although McKay and Benson had both been willing to go to war to fight Communism, the war never came. Instead of going out with a bang, the Soviet Union went out with a whimper, collapsing under its own weight in the late 1990s. With its collapse, Communism as a successful form of government quickly became discredited throughout the world. With the gradual opening of archives in the former Soviet Union and other Communist states, it has become apparent that some Communist infiltration of organizations and government institutions within the United States had occurred, yet the threat that the "Communist conspiracy" posed to the West never approached the magnitude of which Benson and Welch had warned.

In spite of the claims of Robert Welch, there is no convincing evidence that the John Birch Society was effective in combatting Communism. It was very effective, however, in polarizing Americans against each other and in fostering an atmosphere of hate and intolerance. Welch's attacks on Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Martin Luther King, and other individuals and institutions gradually brought discredit and disdain upon himself and his organization; and although the society still ex-

165. McKay, *Diary*, February 12, 1969.

166. McKay, *Diary*, May 12, 1969.

ists, it long ago ceased to have significant visibility within American society.

Benson's political activism diminished abruptly upon McKay's death, for he lost his patron and protector. McKay was succeeded by Joseph Fielding Smith and, subsequently, Harold B. Lee, both of whom had strongly objected to Benson's political activities during McKay's presidency. A comparison of Benson's general conference talks before and after McKay's death attests to their effectiveness in curtailing his political extremism.

Fifteen years after McKay died, Benson became Church president; and to the surprise of many Church members, whose memories of his earlier political activities were still vivid, he was a gentle, pastoral Church president whose consistent message was a plea for Mormons to become reacquainted with the book that gave them their nickname: the Book of Mormon. The controversy that highlighted so many of his years as an apostle never returned.

Sadly, Mormonism's involvement in the 1960s with right-wing political extremism left a legacy that affects the Church adversely to this day. As early as 1961, one Mormon Congressman, David S. King (D-Utah), warned McKay that the Church seemed to be abandoning its position of neutrality in politics, to the extent that "Sunday School teachers are making broad hints and innuendoes in classes that those who follow the Democratic program are handmaidens of Communists, and cannot expect to consider themselves in full fellowship in the Church."¹⁶⁷ Mormonism's identification with right-wing politics did not go unnoticed in Communist countries, as indicated in a 1985 internal report by Stasi, the East German secret police: "In the May 18, 1985, political-operational report of Department XX . . . regarding the political-ideological orientation of the US-American Mormons, it was determined that they are to be classified as representatives of the right wing of American conservatism. There are close connections between their leadership and ruling circles within the government [at that time the Reagan administration]. Relationships also exist between persons and institutions of the church and the American secret service."¹⁶⁸

Utah is now one of the most Republican states in the country, and Mormons have become so identified with the Republican Party that, de-

167. McKay, *Diary*, November 16, 1961.

168. Karlheinz Leonhardt, *Die ersten hundert Jahre: Eine Geschichte der*

spite their national prevalence, they have become almost invisible in Democratic presidential administrations. In recent years, this matter became of sufficient concern that one of the few Democratic General Authorities, Marlin K. Jensen, a Seventy, was assigned by the First Presidency to give an interview to the *Salt Lake Tribune* in 1998, in which he noted: "One of the things that prompted this discussion in the first place was the regret that's felt about the decline of the Democratic Party [in Utah] and the notion that may prevail in some areas that you can't be a good Mormon and a good Democrat at the same time. . . . I think it would be a very healthy thing for the church—particularly the Utah church—if that notion could be obliterated."¹⁶⁹

Although McKay's fears of worldwide Communist conquest were overblown, his concerns that Communism was atheistic and that it robbed people of free agency remain well founded. One need only look at the countries formerly under Soviet domination to see the extent of damage to churches and individuals of seven decades of Communist oppression. And his prediction that Communist rulers would fall if they continued to rob people of their free choice between good and evil proved to be prophetic. His words spoken in 1954 are a potent reminder for all ages: "No power on earth can take this freedom away."¹⁷⁰

Gemeinde Freiberg (Freiberg, Germany: Privately printed by Karlheinz Leonhardt, 2000), English translation by Raymond Kuehne; photocopy courtesy of Leonhardt and Kuehne in my possession.

169. Dan Harris, "LDS Official Calls for More Political Diversity," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 3, 1998.

170. "President McKay Predicts Fall of Red Leaders," *Deseret News*, April 26, 1954.