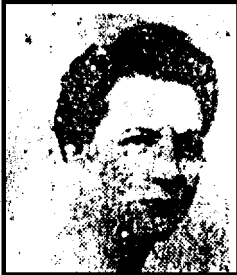


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The Birch Rod

DORIS FLEESON

Washington. The first member of Congress to admit his membership in the far right, semi-secret John Birch Society is Rep. Edgar W. Hiestand, an extremely conservative Republican from what has long been a safely Republican district in Los Angeles County.

The society's announced aim is to fight communism. In doing so, it uses Communist techniques such as "front groups," loaded questions and more or less secret cells with particular attention to college campuses.

Its founder, Robert Welch, has charged that former President Eisenhower, Chief Justice Earl Warren, former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles were secret Communist agents or sympathizers. Hiestand now says that an honest investigation would dispel charges that the society is "dictatorial or Fascist" and he wants the House Un-American Activities Committee to make it.

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Hiestand's colleagues from California marvel that he would admit his membership in the society, as one of its major critics has been the very conservative Republican Los Angeles Times. The Times ran both a long expose of the society and a strongly worded editorial on the front page signed by Otis Chandler, publisher.

United Press International, however, in a special report had said that the society listed Hiestand as a member of its "Committee of Endorsers." Hiestand apparently decided to beat his political enemies to the punch by admitting it.

UPI also states flatly that "there is no public accounting of either money or membership." Such secrecy is not against the law, as witness the Ku Klux Klan, but American public opinion has frowned on it in political societies. Hence

the view in the California delegation here that Hiestand has written his political epitaph.

The fact that California is gaining eight new House seats by reason of its population increase, and that Democrats at long last are getting a chance to do the reapportionment won't help him either.

What most interests Democrats, however, particularly the experts in the tangled maze of California politics, is what they think they perceive as a power play centering around the John Birch Society, directed by Richard M. Nixon. The former Vice President's connections with the Los Angeles Times are very close and his desire to run again for the Presidency is obvious.

The controversial society is particularly strong in California, a famous breeding ground of off-beat organizations. Presidents of the state's colleges find its campus cells just as troublesome as Communist cells were for a long time and occasionally still are.

The society is also said to be multiplying in the South, where Nixon and Republicans generally have great hopes.

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Democrats are certain that few Democrats, certainly few in such key states as California, are attracted to the John Birch Society. Putting it another way, they figure the society as a hair shirt for Republicans in the same way left-wing organizations have been for Democrats. Certainly Republicans in key states cannot afford the label.

Democrats, therefore, suspect that the current outcry represents a considered effort by Republicans, including Nixon, to rid themselves of the John Birch coloration before the elections of 1962 and 1964. If some Republicans, as Hiestand, have to be sacrificed in the national Republican interest, Democrats figure Nixon as just the cool operator to figure out the tactics and put them into operation.

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