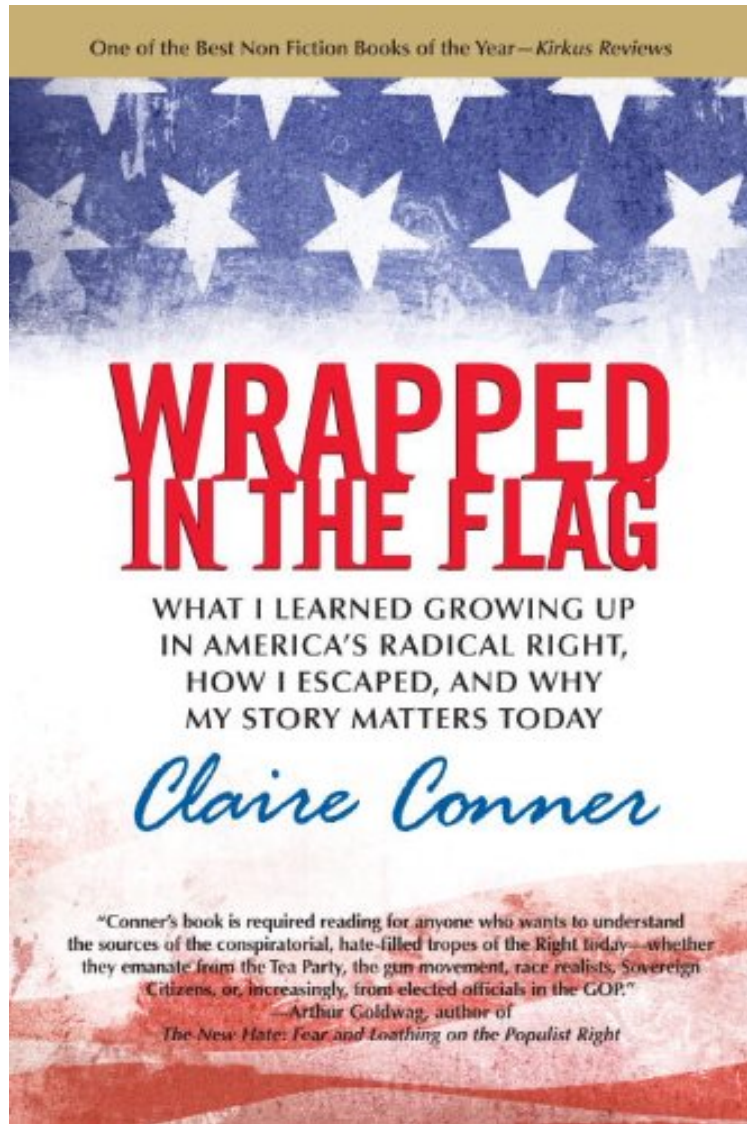


[FREE] *Wrapped in the Flag: What I Learned Growing Up in America's Radical Right, How I Escaped, and Why My Story Matters Today*

## **Wrapped in the Flag: What I Learned Growing Up in America's Radical Right, How I Escaped, and Why My Story Matters Today**

*Claire Conner*

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**Claire Conner : *Wrapped in the Flag: What I Learned Growing Up in America's Radical Right, How I Escaped, and Why My Story Matters Today*** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Wrapped in the Flag: What I Learned Growing Up in America's Radical Right, How I Escaped, and Why My Story Matters Today*:

289 of 295 people found the following review helpful. I was there! By Janet Conner Claire Conner is my big sister by three years. We shared twin beds in our Chicago home and I can attest to all her stories. I was there. At just 13, Claire was roped into the world of the John Birch Society. If she wasn't at school, she was stuffing envelopes and attending meetings. I was assigned to help with dinner and then go upstairs and keep my younger brother and baby sister quiet during the meetings. That's why Claire is on the full page Life Magazine spread and I am not. I was probably changing a diaper. Dinner at our house was unlike dinner at any home I've been in then or since. The only topics worthy of discussion were politics and religion. I've never met anyone else whose dinner conversation included how the Communist Chinese tortured women. It was tough to swallow your meatloaf but you better be quiet. Those who tried to change the subject or introduce another way of thinking paid a high price. If Claire's book was only a memoir about "What it was like to grow up in a cult," it would be interesting and important. But it is so much more. For a couple of years now, we've called one another and said, "Sheesh, did you hear what so-n-so in the right said NOW?" We recognized all of it. It is all old JBS stuff. We know. We had the bumper stickers and pamphlets to prove it. I've heard so many people wonder aloud, "Where DID these people come from?" Well, Claire answers that question in *Wrapped in the Flag*. It would be nice to think that the old John Birch Society faded away, but it hasn't. It's larger and stronger than it ever was. And it is influencing our political thinking and language whether we know it or not. I am so grateful that Claire asked herself a lot of hard questions about what we were told, and generously shares her very open and often painful story of learning how to think and speak for herself. I hope this book makes you think and speak for yourself. It certainly has made me remember.

135 of 140 people found the following review helpful. Far More Than a Memoir By Mark L. Taylor This book is a book I've been waiting for for many years. I, too, grew up a "Birch kid" and Claire Conner's story resonates deeply with my experience of having grown up in the intellectual cult known as the John Birch Society (JBS). Conner's family moved from the Chicago area to Mauston, Wisconsin. My father was president of the local JBS chapter in Madison, Wisconsin, at the same time, in the late 1960's. At that time Madison was churning with anti-Vietnam War protests and civil rights activities. To say I grew up in a world of head-turning political extremes is an understatement. Given the very closed - even secretive -- circle of JBS extremists, my guess is that my father and mother knew Claire's parents. Conner's book was the first time I felt anyone else had any idea what it was like to grow up in the cauldron of far right wing paranoia, hate and rigid thought control that is the JBS. Certainly, over the years I have spoken about my experience with close friends but there quickly comes a point where the person I am speaking with is clearly not getting what I am describing; it's too absurd. Truly, you have to have been there for years on in to really "get" what it was like to grow up in the JBS political cult. While personal stories, like Conner's or my own, of growing up in such an environment can make for a good read there is a larger story here that affects everyone in America. What we are talking about with the John Birch Society is the cult of right-wing authoritarianism; a rigid world view of absolutes. In the JBS there is no middle ground, no nuance, no possible exception, no opportunity for dialogue, no questions, no other possible interpretation of events, no possibility that the world doesn't conform completely to a rigid belief system imposed from authority at the top. Those who disagree, doubt, or even question the basic tenets and convoluted teachings of such a system are labeled traitors, idiots, immoral or dangerous; usually all four. They are to be dealt with severely, and at times were in my home when I dared to question or disagree. At our family dinner table, like the Conners', there was a high degree of political lecturing. It was very clear there was no room for doubt or any form of "yeah, but" thinking; the agenda was clear, and as unbalanced as it was unbending. Like Conner's mother's dining room table, my father's desk in the corner of the family room was always piled high with JBS brochures, fliers, bumper stickers, petitions, pamphlets and books. He was one of the foot soldiers in the Barry Goldwater campaign. As a kid I joined my father campaigning door-to-door for Goldwater. I remember up-and-coming young true believers coming to the house to meet with my father; he was a kind of political mentor to many young conservative activists at that time. Some of those people went on to become well known in Republican circles. The tea party extremists are the modern shoots of the JBS, and, in fact, some of the big private money that fueled the early JBS now underwrites the fiery extremism of the modern tea party. Fred Koch - father of David and Charles - was a founding member and funder of the JBS. Like the JBS, the tea party and many parts of the libertarian movement there is a nasty authoritarian streak running right up the spine of the modern right wing movement. It is a rigid authoritarian rule that can be scaled up from the family, to a business or school, projected further to a political party (as it has) and onward to an entire nation, as is happening. The JBS is a microcosm and understanding it can help explain so much of what is going on right now in America. Just as my family was stunted, shut down and eventually broken by my father's JBS extremism, so, too, the United States Congress under the authoritarian moves of the hard right extremists in congress. In many ways, Conner's parents and my father have won. While Claire Conner's book is a compelling memoir I urge readers to view it as a cautionary tale from the trenches of the far right and an introduction to the kind of nation we are well on the way to becoming.

94 of 101 people found the following review helpful. An Important, Perhaps Essential Book By Michael Austin WRAPPED IN THE FLAG is a well-written, compelling memoir of a political movement that most Americans know almost nothing about. During the Cold War, the John Birch Society defined the far-right wing of American politics. Born in the aftermath of the McCarthy Hearings, it was originally organized to continue McCarthy's work--to oppose communism in all of its

forms and to root out communists and communist sympathizers in American government and culture. As the group developed, it folded more and more conservative causes into the general umbrella of the "International Communist Conspiracy"--a highly organized and well-funded superorganism that included labor unions, civil rights organizations, universities, public schools, the news media, and, minimally, two American presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. The essential facts about the Birch Society are now part of the historical record. What Conner gives us are the feelings of a thoughtful, intelligent young woman who grew up in and around the Society and had to learn how to balance family loyalty with her growing discomfort with what the Birchers stood for. Claire Conner had a front-row seat at the birth and development of the John Birch Society. Her parents were personal friends of JBS founder Robert Welch, her father was a longtime member of the organization's leadership team, and much of her life was defined by the extremist politics of her parents and their friends. She writes poignantly of being a high school student and reading John Howard Griffen's *BLACK LIKE ME*, or of watching Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech on TV, and realizing how inadequately her received opinions had prepared her to understand the role of race in America. And she writes with great compassion about the conflicts that her emerging liberalism (or, at least, her non-ultra-conservatism) caused between her and the parents she continued to love. Conner does a good job of presenting the Birch Society's political rhetoric in a way that makes it easy to generalize to other extremist groups. The JBS had a single narrative through which it viewed all political events--that a global communist conspiracy had infiltrated America and was working to overthrow liberty and the Constitution. They seized on anything that could support this narrative and explained everything that contradicted it terms derived from the narrative itself. Rational reflection, critical thinking, and linear reasoning could occur only within the boundaries of the narrative, which was always capable of absorbing challenges into its structure and neutralizing them. This is how extremists of all stripes see the world--including (quite ironically) the Stalin-era Soviets against whom the Birch Society so firmly stood. Modern readers will, and should, draw comparisons between the Cold War John Birch Society and the modern Tea Party Movement. Conner draws plenty of lines that we can follow. In the first place, much of the original funding for the Birch Society came from Kansas industrialist Fred Koch, whose sons Charles and David now bankroll many Tea Party groups and causes. Furthermore, the JBS support of Barry Goldwater in 1964 created many of the activists who worked for Ronald Reagan in 1980--who, in turn, serves as a primary inspiration for much of the far right today. And, from Goldwater to Reagan to Ted Cruz, many of the core objectives of the far right have remained constant for the last sixty years: scaling back the federal government, supporting state's rights, returning American to its Christian roots, and fighting "the enemy," whoever that enemy might be. One of the most important things that *WRAPPED IN THE FLAG* shows us, then, is that modern Tea Party conservatism is inherently anachronistic. It is designed for a context that no longer exists. Its obsessive concern for states' rights, for example, traces back to the Civil Rights Movement, during which the federal government had to nationalize guard troops in Mississippi and Alabama to integrate schools. It is entirely out of proportion fifty years later. And the Tea Party's deep Cold War roots cause it to conceptualize "Terrorism" (which is actually a tactic) and "Islam" (which is actually a billion very different people) in the same way that the John Birch Society conceptualized communism: as deep, unified conspiracies that allows us to fit everything that happens in the world into a single, black-and-white narrative. "We" are on the side of freedom, while "they" (which includes most American politicians and especially President Obama) want to destroy what makes America great. And because the Tea Party, like the John Birch Society, can only reason effectively within the boundaries of its own narrative, it, like Claire Conner's parents, cannot seriously engage, or compromise, with views that contradict its core assumptions. Understanding the story of the John Birch Society is essential to understanding the rise and persistence of the Tea Party. Beyond that, the JBS gives us an excellent lens for understanding extremist movements of every era and ideology. Because she has such in-depth experience with her subject, Claire Conner is uniquely qualified to write a book like *WRAPPED IN THE FLAG*. And because she is both a deep thinker and an engaging writer, we should be grateful that she did. Michael Austin, Ph.D. Author of *That's Not What They Meant!: Reclaiming the Founding Fathers from America's Right Wing*

A narrative history of the John Birch Society by a daughter of one of the infamous ultraconservative organizations founding fathers. Named a best nonfiction book of 2013 by Kirkus Reviews and the Tampa Bay Times Long before the rise of the Tea Party movement and the prominence of today's religious Right, the John Birch Society, first established in 1958, championed many of the same radical causes touted by ultraconservatives today, including campaigns against abortion rights, gay rights, gun control, labor unions, environmental protections, immigrant rights, social and welfare programs, the United Nations, and even water fluoridation. Worshipping its anti-Communist hero Joe McCarthy, the Birch Society is perhaps most notorious for its red-baiting and for accusing top politicians, including President Dwight Eisenhower, of being Communist sympathizers. It also labeled John F. Kennedy a traitor and actively worked to unseat him. The Birch Society boasted a number of notable members, including Fred Koch, father of Charles and David Koch, who are using their fathers billions to bankroll fundamentalist and right-wing movements today. The daughter of one of the society's first members and a national spokesman about the society, Claire Conner grew up surrounded by dedicated Birchers and was expected to abide by and espouse Birch ideals.

When her parents forced her to join the society at age thirteen, she became its youngest member of the society. From an even younger age though, Conner was pressed into service for the cause her father and mother gave their lives to: the nurturing and growth of the JBS. She was expected to bring home her textbooks for close examination (her mother found traces of Communist influence even in the Catholic school curriculum), to write letters against socialized medicine after school, to attend her fathers fiery speeches against the United Nations, or babysit her siblings while her parents held meetings in the living room to recruit members to fight the war on Christmas or (potentially poisonous) water fluoridation. Conner was on deck to lend a hand when JBS notables visited, including founder Robert Welch, notorious Holocaust denier Revilo Oliver, and white supremacist Thomas Stockheimer. Even when she was old enough to quit in disgust over the actions of those men, Conner found herself sucked into campaigns against abortion rights and for ultraconservative presidential candidates like John Schmitz. It took momentous changes in her own life for Conner to finally free herself of the legacy of the John Birch Society in which she was raised. In *Wrapped in the Flag*, Claire Conner offers an intimate account of the society based on JBS records and documents, on her parents files and personal writing, on historical archives and contemporary accounts, and on firsthand knowledge giving us an inside look at one of the most radical right-wing movements in US history and its lasting effects on our political discourse today. From the Hardcover edition.

Both of Claire Conners parents were deeply involved in the cult of far right politics: they knew that Eisenhower was a secret Communist and they idolized Francisco Franco. *Wrapped in the Flag* is at once the heartbreaking and intermittently hilarious story of her coming of age and a first-hand history of the far right since the 1950s. Conners book is required reading for anyone who wants to understand the sources of the conspiratorial, hate-filled tropes of the right today whether they emanate from the Tea Party, the gun movement, race realists, Sovereign Citizens, or, increasingly, from elected officials in the GOP." Arthur Goldwag, author of *The New Hate: Fear and Loathing on the Populist Right* An invaluable contribution to understanding the mentality of extremist conservatism and its supporters. Kirkus, starred review The John Birch Society had a huge impact on American politics. They were responsible for the lurch into insanity. The religious right, the Tea Party and the takeover of the Republican Party by extremists can't be understood unless you understand the paranoid xenophobia Birchers injected into America. This book is about a journey through and out of that Birchernetherworld. It's a vital piece of the puzzle to understanding the madness that overcame America and a moving story about one person's journey back to sanity. Frank Schaeffer, author of *Crazy For God* Experiencing this splendid volume is like reading a history book inside out: events you only knew about from afar are revealed anew, with the striking ground-level intimacy of a fine family memoir. I've been waiting for a book like this: one that demonstrates the shockingly effectual continuity of the John Birch Society as a force in American political life: from its early days discrediting the Cold War credentials of JFK, to its outsized role building up grassroots momentum in the Clinton impeachment, to its sudden eruption into mainstream Republican thinking with the rise of the Tea Party movement." Rick Perlstein, author of *Nixonland* This passionate, personal history of the John Birch Society is timely and important. At a moment when Tea Party activists have embraced many of the Birchers' most outrageous notions, Claire Conner has performed a great service by reminding us of the origins of some of most virulent ideas that continue to pollute our body politic. As the skeptical daughter of two passionate Birchers, Conner may be the only person who could have written such a clear-eyed, insiders account of the persistent dangers of right-wing extremism. Charles Kaiser, author of *1968 In America* and *The Gay Metropolis* An affecting portrait of late-20th-century America on the fringe." Publishers Weekly This insiders view of the most radical right-wing organization of the Cold War era describes the seeming paranoia and questionable logic of the most devoted JBS members. Conner provides colorful descriptions of many of the eccentric JBS leaders, including founder Robert Welch. . . . Readers interested in learning more about this example of the Cold War eras ultraconservative political trends will be fascinated by Conners description of the perpetual fear of JBS members regarding communist takeovers and communist infiltration of the highest levels of our government. Recommended. Library Journal About the Author Claire Conners father was a national spokesperson for the John Birch Society for more than thirty years; her mother was also a staunch follower. Conner holds a degree in English with honors from the University of Dallas and a graduate degree from the University of Wisconsin. She lives in Tampa, Florida. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Preface I Know What Exremism Looks Like Five years ago, I was sure Id heard the last of conspiracies, secret Communists, and Americas imminent collapse. After all, the Cold War had been over for twenty years, my parents and most of their fanatic friends were dead, and the Bush administration was killing Americas appetite for right-wing Republicans. There's no one left to hoist the extremist flag, I told myself. I was wrong. By 2008, political discourse sounded eerily similar to that of 1958, when a brand-new right-wing, populist movement the John Birch Society burst onto the American scene. All across the country, newly awakened Birchers rallied to take our county back. Two dedicated Birch leaders mobilized the Midwest: Stillwell and Laurene Conner my parents. Dad and Mother had been primed for their lurch to the right for many years. They loved Joseph McCarthy and hated the Communists. They'd decided that government assistance made people weak and lazy, and that the New Deal was really a bad deal. They loathed Franklin Roosevelt and blamed Democrats for destroying our free-enterprise system. So in 1955, when

Mother and Dad were introduced to Robert Welch, a candy-company executive turned conspiracy hunter, they immediately recognized a kindred soul. My father said Welch was a brilliant mind and the finest patriot I've ever had the privilege to know. Three years later, when Welch founded his John Birch Society, Mother and Dad didn't hesitate they signed up and immediately handed over \$2,000 for lifetime memberships, the equivalent of about \$15,000 today. The John Birch Society became my parents' lifelong obsession; nothing was allowed to interfere with the next meeting, the next project, the next mailing. At fourteen and thirteen, respectively, my older brother and I were deemed old enough to take up the cause as full-fledged adult members. During Birch activities, the other Conner children were banished upstairs, where my ten-year-old sister was put in charge of the baby (eighteen months) and my six-year-old brother fended for himself. In only a few months, the entire Conner family lived and breathed Birch. Night after night, Birch activists and new recruits filled our living room. They received hours of instruction about the secret conspiracy, the New World Order, hidden codes on the dollar bill, and Communist spies inside our government. Birchers were schooled in the evils of creeping socialism, Communism, and Marxism. Good Birchers understood the sins of welfare and Social Security. It was time to rise up against the unholy alliance of the Left Communists, socialists, liberals, union bosses, and the liberal press. Robert Welch identified Communists as one enemy in this epic struggle to save the country. Of course, in the 1950s the march of the Communists across Eastern Europe and Asia was scary to Americans, but Welch was more worried about the Communists lurking inside our country, often holding positions of influence. These home-grown American Communists were ready to spring into action to take down our Constitution and replace it with a socialist manifesto. Birchers believed that those American Communists were all over the place. They served on school boards, advocated putting fluoride in drinking water, and taught subversive university classes. Others organized labor unions, led the civil rights movement and served in the Congress. The Birch message resonated. Membership exploded and revenue spiked. My father was rewarded for his dedication with a promotion to the Birch National Council, where he served for thirty-two years. - From the outset, the GOP applauded the Birchers for their patriotic zeal and embraced them as good Republicans. But after a scandal rocked the society in 1961, the GOP worried that its closeness to the Birchers would taint the Republican brand. It could not afford to be painted by the Democrats as the political arm of the radical right. Republican leaders decided to label the Birchers as crackpots and push them out of the party. Problem solved. The effort worked. Before long, the Birchers had joined the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and other kooks as the most extreme reactionaries in American politics. The Republican Party took credit for saving the United States from fringe-of-the-fringe crusaders who imagined that even the president was a Commie. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, while the politicians and pundits declared the Birchers dead and buried, the moneyed Birch leadership went to plan B, redirecting their cash and their influence into think tanks and foundations. My parents joined in that diversifying effort. They founded a right-wing Catholic organization, the Wanderer Foundation, in St. Paul, Minnesota and donated to every right-wing organization and political-action committee they could. My parents never had big money, but other Birch families spent huge sums to bankroll Birch ideas. Fred Koch, one of the original Birch founding members and a National Council member with my father, invested a small fortune on his pet projects, including the so-called right-to-work laws, designed to hamper union organizing. His sons, David and Charles Koch, inherited their fathers' multimillions, turned them into multibillions, and invested liberally in their favorite political causes: the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, and others. Those organizations incorporated many John Birch Society ideas and effectively increased both their reach and their impact on American politics. Since Citizens United, the 2011 Supreme Court decision that opened the floodgates to unlimited and unregulated corporate political donations, the Kochs have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to individual candidates and political-action committees. The Kochs and their allies envision the same framework for American government that I heard from my father and his John Birch Society allies: the New Deal dismantled, the federal government reduced to a quarter of its current size, and most federal programs gutted. In this right-wing, libertarian utopia, businesses and individuals would be free to do anything, unrestrained by rules or taxes. In 2008, when the economy tanked and Barack Obama emerged as the Democratic nominee for president, the radical right went on the offense. The Democrat was labeled a Marxist, a Socialist, and a friend of terrorists. Folks unfurled the yellow Don't Tread on Me flag and shouted about trees of liberty being watered with the blood of tyrants. When I heard frenzied voters at a Republican rally shouting, Treason, and Kill him, in response to one of Sarah Palin's anti-Obama rants, I worried. My parents are back, I told anyone who'd listen. People looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I realized that the Birch Society had faded out of America's memory. It had been confined to a footnote on a footnote for political wonks. Six months after President Obama was inaugurated, a new right-wing, populist movement arose. The Tea Party bankrolled by the Koch brothers and Americans for Prosperity staged rallies and protests across the country. Self-appointed zealots suggested Second Amendment remedies if they didn't achieve their goals at the ballot box. I shuddered when I heard my father's favorite rally cry: We've come to take our country back. These newly minted right-wingers were rattling off old Birch slogans: Immigrants are the enemy. Protect our borders and deport all illegal aliens. Gays are ungodly. Pray the gay away from children and teens. Unemployed people don't want to work, and poor people keep themselves poor, on purpose. If we cut the minimum wage and eliminate unemployment compensation, everyone will have a job. Unions caused the economic collapse by shielding lazy, incompetent public employees. Rich

folks are job creators, and we need to protect their wealth. Social Security is unsustainable, and Medicare and Medicaid have to be restricted so that corporations and job creators have lower tax rates. Abortion is murder and must be outlawed even in cases of rape and incest. No exception means no exceptions; even in cases where the mothers life is in danger. The economic meltdown of 2008 came from high taxes on corporations, too many regulations, and poor people taking out mortgages they couldnt afford. The government cant create jobs, so stimulus programs dont work. Cutting taxes creates jobs. The government cant limit the right to own or carry guns. If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns. America is Gods chosen nation, but our president cant understand our exceptionalism. After all, hes not a real American; hes a Marxist, Socialist, Muslim racist who hates America. I know that this new radical Right is a rewrite of the old John Birch Society. This time, however, the movement has enormous political muscle, unlimited dollars, and right-wing media support. This reality hit me after studying my parents files and personal writing, combing historical archives, and reading contemporary accounts and documents produced by the Birch Society itself. My notes credit published works and archival documents, but much of this narrative comes from my experience. This book chronicles the history of the John Birch Society and its impact on America, past and present. But above all, *Wrapped in the Flag* is my story.