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***Going to Extremes: The National Parent Teacher Association
and Political Extremism in the 1960s****

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) reported efforts at “infiltration” by conservative extremist groups, including the John Birch Society (JBS). Extremists sought to take over PTA meetings to obtain a mainstream platform for minority opinions. The PTA parried extremists’ efforts with a deluge of activities and publications dedicated to democratic fair play and research-based approaches to education. In spite of a coherent plan for dealing with such techniques in the 1960s, the methods used by the Birch Society and other conservative extremist groups appear to have resumed in contemporary educational discussions. Once again, opinions that appeal to the fringes of the American political and social spectrum have dominated policy discussions, most notably relating to textbook selection.

KEY WORDS Parent Teacher Association; John Birch Society; Political Extremism; Public Education

In March 1965, the president of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Jennelle Moorhead, led a workshop called “Extremism and You.” In it, she described the “new and deadly force” of extremism. Moorhead mentioned that leftist perspectives were one part of the educational landscape, but she devoted more attention to conservative extremism. From across the country, she reported, the PTA and its members had been targeted by unpleasant scrutiny from conservative extremists. For example, one local PTA president mentioned trying to prevent her meeting from turning the PTA into a forum for ultraconservative political perspectives. Soon after, five people forced their way into her home while her husband was away. They refused to leave until she went to her telephone to call police, but she said “she was terrified, and wrote in a letter, ‘I was labeled a Communist.’” In another case, Moorhead said, a council president in the west

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“was harassed by phone calls as late as 3 a.m. and had garbage dumped on her lawn. Her children were told their mother was a communist and were not allowed to play with neighbor children. The situation became so unbearable that her husband quit his job and they moved to another community” (Moorhead 1965c).

The accusations went beyond harassment of PTA members. Moorhead claimed that conservative extremists were “adept at every form of fraud and falsification,” employing misleading statements or citing articles that did not exist, in order to support their opinions. To Moorhead, one of the most dangerous conservatives was Robert Welch, leader of the John Birch Society (JBS). Moorhead claimed that Welch was bent on forming “chapters in a majority of congressional districts to gain political support for ‘conservative’ candidates. By infiltrating PTAs the members of these chapters can use them to swing large blocks of votes their way.” To Moorhead, the stakes were clear: “These defenders of the extremist position are determined to win control over American institutions—among them, the PTA ... because extremists know that the PTA would rear each child so that he will grow up a free citizen, able to think independently and well about critical issues” Moorhead 1965c: 6, 7, 10).

The PTA also took the offensive in such disagreements. Moorhead and other PTA leaders cast the JBS and other extremist groups as “a clear, present, and persistent danger to schools and democracy.” They worried that if left unchecked, the JBS would be able to misrepresent PTA efforts, typically by misrepresenting the organization as sympathetic to Communism (Moorhead 1966a). Moorhead and others like her had pledged themselves to prepare children to participate in a diverse society dedicated to the free exchange of ideas. PTA members across the nation feared that conservative extremism would alter public perceptions of their work, and perhaps even the direction of their efforts in public education.

The 1960s preoccupation with groups like the John Birch Society reveals the ways in which some extremist conservatives targeted educational agencies and organizations to publicize and amplify their concerns to the general public. The PTA, which always classified itself as a nonpartisan organization, pledged itself to consider a range of opinions and to endorse resolutions that worked in the interests of children and were supported by expert research. Of all the extremist groups discussed, the most frequently mentioned (and soon the object of PTA countermeasures) was the JBS. Through the end of the decade, PTA members produced a flurry of materials about confronting extremism and protecting its members’ right to consider a variety of views rather than a single perspective.

As civic agents, the predominantly female members of the PTA expanded beyond the constraints of home and family life identified in early research about post-WWII women. They were far from the disorderly women who tested the limits of suburban domesticity and motherhood described in more recent historical scholarship, however. To date, just one monograph describes the work of the National PTA, and it focuses on issues surrounding race and education (Anderson 2010; May 1988; Meyerowitz 1994; Woyshner 2009). This case study therefore contributes to a number of scholarly conversations about American political culture, public education, gender, and the PTA, and to scholarly awareness of women’s civic organizing in the post-WWII period.

The PTA's interactions with the Birch Society and other extremist groups in the 1960s are important for a few reasons. First, they offer a concise case study of the methods used by conservative extremist groups in the 1960s. Second, they illustrate the ways in which educational policies and programs served as a lens that magnified broader social and political debates, especially those that related to the education of children. Finally, and most importantly, the conflict between the PTA and the JBS foreshadowed contemporary debates about educational policy and politics in the United States. The similarity of the methods warrants consideration, particularly in understanding the course of contemporary discussions about educational policy and textbook selection. The PTA pledged to uphold rules of fair democratic exchange of ideas, as long as a final vote could establish the preferred courses of action. Extremists, in contrast, worked from the assumption that their opinions were correct, and circumvented conventional rules in order to represent their perspectives more strongly.

THE PARENT TEACHER ASSOCIATION

Jennelle Moorhead offered her observations in a period of social and political tumult in U.S. history. By the mid-1960s, liberals and conservatives expressed their opinions boldly, but President Moorhead reminded her members of the PTA's founding principles. Organized in 1897 by Phoebe Apperson Hearst and Alice McLellan Birney, the National Congress of Mothers was established on principles of democratic participation. The name of the organization then changed over time, to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, and eventually to the Parent Teacher Association. Its board and members were required to be nonpartisan, noncommercial, and nonsectarian: "It is expected that any Board member who contemplates participation in a partisan political activity will consider the effect of his action in the light of the nonpartisan policy of the Congress" (NPTA Box 1, Folder 4:15; NPTA Box 113, Folder 734:19; NPTA Box 2, Folder 16). In practice, this meant that PTA members were required to avoid any public political advocacy and to base conclusions about the best approaches for children upon the consideration of diverse viewpoints. PTA members consistently sought out expert opinions from a variety of professional organizations to support their approaches to education. By the mid-20th century, the PTA was widely presumed to be well-versed on research about educational methods and policies. PTA leaders communicated regularly with legal, governmental, academic, and policy-making bodies to offer their opinions about the best educational approaches for children. The PTA's primary goal was "to promote the welfare of children and youth in home, school, church, and community." In short, it was possible to engage in discussion (or disagreement) at the local level—for example, about pressing topics such as desegregation, fluoridation, and sex education; however, PTA leaders encouraged members to consider expert research about children and education (including legal advice), and then to pursue policy decisions that followed those best practices (Anderson 2010; Moorhead 1965a).

PTA VALUES

After World War II, the National PTA adopted a four-point program, embracing school education, health, world understanding, and home, family life, and parent education as the primary targets of their efforts. Reflecting upon postwar principles, members reinforced “our honest belief in democratic ideals; and challenge others to pursue the same course” (“Our Four-Point Program,” p. 13).. Leaders reminded their audience that the PTA could “cooperate with other organizations and agencies active in child welfare” but that members “should refrain from trying to direct their administrative activities or control their policies.” At the heart of their efforts lay a consistent focus on children’s well-being. As the organization’s leaders put it, “for children’s good, [the PTA] wants school lunches, public health services, health education, good schools, child labor laws, and well-staffed juvenile courts.” To that end, members acknowledged that the PTA “works openly with federal agencies such as the US Agriculture Department, the US Public Health Service, the US Office of Education, the Children’s Bureau, and the US Department of Labor and with their state and local counterparts.” To the PTA, such activity was a requirement of its primary objective: the welfare and protection of children (*National PTA’s Guide* 1965:3, 11).

In the post-WWII period, PTA members commented frequently on the importance of considering a variety of opinions before reaching decisions on children’s best interests:

The PTA has to take stands on critical issues affecting the welfare of children and youth—for example, on federal aid to education, on equalizing educational opportunity, on services for disadvantaged children, on mental health programs, on fluoridation of water, on the United Nations. And this it does. But it does so only after study, after consultation with experts and specialists. It does so only after the democratic processes of discussion, debate, and majority decision. On critical issues there are bound to be differences of opinion. ... It is only through examining them, discussing and debating them, that we can arrive at the wisest decisions—decisions that are most likely to be beneficial to children and youth, decisions worthy of a great democracy. (Moorhead 1965a:7)

Leaders frequently proclaimed that democratic decision-making governed their efforts. While the direction of PTA efforts seemed partisan to some, members suggested that its course was logical, governed only by expert opinions and a genuine desire to help children.

The emphasis on reasoned discussion, logical problem solving, and democratic procedure became a staple of the PTA's efforts. In the post-WWII period, PTA members repeated often the standard of considering a diverse array of opinions. Publicity assured that the "PTA practices as well as preaches democracy. It welcomes dissent and debate as well as agreement. It does not impose conformity to any doctrine or dogma except the democratic process." The organization also professed the importance of majority rule: "No one expects or assumes that the stand taken by an organization has the endorsement of every single member. It simply represents a majority opinion. ... The minority has the right to try to change the opinion of the majority by the democratic processes of discussion, argument, and persuasion" (*National PTA's Guide* 1965:12, 15). To arrive at the majority opinion, the PTA encouraged a free-flowing exchange of opinions: "In every community we must continue to foster a free market in ideas. In order to make change possible we must create a climate that is hospitable to change, a climate in which free discussion, responsible debate, and honest dissent flourish" (Moorhead 1965a:8). Not only did this approach ensure carefully reasoned policies relating to the education and support of children, but also, by welcoming dissenting opinions, the PTA avoided the appearance of social or political partisanship.

Although some characterized PTA programming as generally liberal, the organization frequently touted itself as moderate. Members sometimes criticized the leftist radicalism of the 1960s, particularly the public protests about American involvement in Vietnam. President Moorhead characterized antiwar sentiments and protest as giving "aid and comfort to the enemy" (Moorhead 1965e). Still, aware that some criticized the PTA as a liberal group, the PTA issued its pronouncement that "PTA stands on issues ... are likely to be moderate and middle of the road, rather than extreme. On the whole they could be characterized, as the PTA itself can be, as being 'sanely progressive and soundly conservative.' As such, they are not likely to please either the extreme left or the extreme right" (*National PTA's Guide* 1965:10). Convinced that their methods incorporated the views of people across a range of social and political attitudes, members of the PTA strove to present the organization as a moderate one that enjoyed broad-based appeal.

As one of the nation's largest agencies dedicated to the education and welfare of children, the PTA staked a claim to legitimacy that reflected Cold War imperatives. For some Americans, the end of World War II presented an unprecedented opportunity to achieve the kind of democracy for which the war had been fought. Active participation in civic life, confidence in democratic processes, and a reliance upon expertise to justify their approach suggested that the PTA framed itself as a modern organization that relied more upon objective methods than political schemes.

By the 1960s, however, members noted that extremism was a growing challenge. On the one hand, PTA members believed that it was fair to consider such viewpoints among a spectrum of concerns about children. On the other hand, members frequently suggested that the methods and views of conservative extremists had become increasingly antagonistic and disruptive. Conference agendas listed extremism as one of many "adverse factors" under a planned "discussion of problems" in 1964 ("Agenda"); it was not just the opinions held by extremists, but also their conduct. One member

noted, “In California its efforts last year to replace moderate school board with ‘Birch boards’ were noted by the president of the State Board of Education. He also reported that Rightists had gained sufficient strength ... ‘to disrupt the school program’ in at least ten school districts” (Moorhead 1966a:1). Not only were PTA members concerned about JBS activities in their organization; it appeared that PTA activities worried members of the JBS.

THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY

Of the many conservative extremist groups that figured in 1960s political culture, the JBS assumed prominence in PTA records. Founded in Indianapolis in 1958, the JBS was named for a Baptist missionary and Army captain who had been executed by Chinese communists during World War II. The JBS was perhaps best known for its strident opposition to Communism. Its organizational document, *The Blue Book* (a transcript of founder Robert Welch’s two-day speech delivered when the group was formed), spelled out the threats that the Birch Society vowed to confront. Welch and others were convinced that American “Illuminati” (politically powerful insiders) participated in an effort to form a totalitarian “world government” and to unite all economies under a single Communist model. To that end, the JBS pledged itself (and still does) to “less government, more responsibility, and—with God’s help—a better world” (JBS, *Blue Book*; JBS, “History”; JBS, “John Birch”). From the society’s founding, the JBS has been characterized as an extremist conservative organization (Bell 1964; Hawley 2016; Miller 2016; Nickerson 2014). Largely born from a Cold War concern about perceived Communist threats to the world order, the JBS increasingly turned its focus on educational agencies, including the PTA, as one source of the trends it viewed unfavorably. To Birchers, education represented both the pitfalls of postwar liberalism and the potential to steer teachers, parents, and children toward a worldview that aligned more closely with their outlook. Recognizing the potential payoff, the JBS focused on the PTA as one avenue to popularizing its opinions.

BIRCH SOCIETY BELIEFS

It was one thing to disagree with PTA resolutions, but the JBS members and other conservatives intended to correct the problems they perceived. Because educational issues, curriculum selection, lessons in citizenship, and health-related concerns were all part of schoolchildren’s experiences, schools were now a battleground in which curricular approaches could be debated publicly in order to supplant “dangerous” views. Conservatives, including the JBS, hoped to discredit the PTA by describing the threats to children that came with PTA initiatives. Said one:

The Communist plot against American school children thickens. Their planned bloodless coup, to take over the US by destroying the American home is deeper than we thought. ... Definitely the PTA is the spearhead by which

Congress was fooled into voting \$15,000,000 to put on the payroll of the Red-infested US Office of Education 3,128 “youth counsellors,” and just as definitely these sex degenerates are trying to make perverts and degenerates out of school children—and weaken the moral fiber of the US. (“Let’s Abolish the PTAs” 1962:1)

These claims about the PTA showed one method of the JBS and other conservative extremists. Allegations of “perversion,” coupled with the presumed Communist “infestation” of American government, suggested that the PTA was complicit in the weakening of Americans’ moral fiber by waging a war against children. Not only counselors were deemed guilty of this lapse in values. The JBS claimed that sex education, often defined as “hard core” or indecent, had exposed children to subjects that were indecent and inappropriate for a school setting (Publius & Associates 1968). In the Cold War, allegations of degeneracy and Communism served to discredit the PTA and to present the JBS as a fixed moral compass around which Americans could center.

The JBS affixed negative political impacts to other school initiatives that the PTA praised. Health-related initiatives such as fluoridation inspired the organization’s concern; in 1963, the JBS noted, “The objectives of the Society are for ‘less government, and more responsibility.’ We are opposed to the fluoridation of public water supplies on grounds that the government has no right at any level to administer what in effect is, compulsory dental care” (“Bulletin for January” 1963:22; see also Woodbury 1968:93). Even worse than government intrusion into health matters, posited Birchers, were government policies enforcing desegregation. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling ordering the desegregation of public schools was met with particular vigor. JBS members condemned the ruling as “an effort to destroy the Constitution,” the product of a “federal dictatorship,” and “a perfect example of Communist strategy and Communist tactics at work.” Much to their frustration, JBS members concluded that “the Supreme Court has ruled that it is legal to advocate atheism, free love, sexual perversion, and the violent overthrow of the Republic, but that it is illegal to discriminate because of race, creed, or color” (Anderson 1966:6; JBS 1961:16; “What’s Wrong with Civil Rights?” N.d.). The JBS repeated these allegations frequently, claiming that government overreach limited members’ ability to express their opinions fully or to enjoy the freedoms to which they felt entitled.

For members of the JBS, the stakes were high. Like the PTA, the JBS appeared to see the post-WWII period as a significant moment in which to act. Often, its rhetoric was infused with Cold War concerns about the specter of radicalism in public education: “Education thus has become a central battlefield in the struggle between totalitarianism and liberty, between socialism and Constitutionalism. Every attempt is being made to further the socialism of the children in the State controlled schools and to bring under control the growing percentage in the independent schools” (Rushdoony 1966:91). The future seemed bleak to members of the JBS:

This, at least, is certain: Public education having become more and more politicalized, being subject to more and

more radical political pressures, is on its way out. As one superintendent of a Pennsylvania public system recently summarized his observations: “A decade from now, our public schools will be financed and directed by Washington and will be attended by Negroes and white paupers only.” (Sennholz 1969:20)

It was clear that the JBS disagreed with overall education trends, yet like the PTA, the JBS also proclaimed that it was nonpartisan:

The John Birch Society itself is in no sense a political organization. We try to give our members information, understanding, and, we hope, even inspiration which will make them better citizens. As good citizens, they may take an active part in politics. But each member does so entirely on his own ... for we regard education as the means, and political action as only the mechanics for bringing about improvements in government. (Welch 1966:1, 4)

In spite of the public proclamations of neutrality, members of the JBS intended to change the overall direction of educational policy discussions in the PTA. They characterized the PTA’s political, social, and legal perspectives not only as liberal but also as dangerous for their potentially harmful influences on children. By contrast, “political action” was merely a consequence of those problems, and a necessary means through which education could improve.

To that end, members of the JBS focused on the PTA and other educational institutions. Changing the minds of educators would foster greater support for JBS members’ perspectives and indirectly would encourage a new generation of students to accept an increasingly strident expression of Christian morality, patriotism, greater vigilance toward Communism, and a rejection of the PTA policies or viewpoints with which they disagreed.

TARGETING THE PTA

Over time, the JBS moved to Massachusetts and was chartered as a nonprofit educational organization, and the PTA soon provoked its intense focus. After all, the National PTA sustained relationships with school administrators, parents, teachers, and community leaders across the nation. It possessed a reputation of passionate advocacy for children. Perhaps most importantly, it also was widely known for objective approaches to policies concerning children’s development and education. Put simply, the JBS likely saw the dual appeal of this action. Members could not only combat educational trends with which they disagreed but also voice extremist opinions through an organization that enjoyed a reputation for moderate policymaking. Working through the PTA could camouflage a more extreme ideology.

The JBS began to plan its efforts to take over PTA meetings as early as 1961. Robert Welch speculated that it was time to present the JBS message in communities nationwide:

We would line up a large list of speakers ourselves, all over the country ... who would be willing to speak to these comparatively small audiences. ... This, like everything else we are talking about, is a matter of planning, supervision, and control. Then we would go to work putting together the huge lists of church clubs, PTA groups, and others who use such speakers, and start making known to them who was available on what subjects. Most of the speakers' bureaus and lecture agencies are not utilized by such groups to any great extent, because neither side can afford it. Which leaves the doors wide open for the Communists to send in their men or their friends. It's another game at which we ought to beat them hands down. (Welch 1961:107-8)

This was more than speculation. By 1965, the JBS insisted in a full-page newspaper advertisement that it had "established a nationwide educational army," and promised to provide four million dollars' worth of books and pamphlets mostly through its publication, *American Opinion* (JBS 1965:B11).

In fact, not only PTA president Moorhead described conservative and extremist attacks on the PTA. Some extremists also proclaimed that this was their goal. Birch Society founder and leader, Robert Welch, instructed his followers:

Take over your local PTA at the beginning of this school year, get your conservative friends to do likewise, and go to work to take it over. You will run into real battles, against determined leftists who have had everything their way. But it is time we went on the offensive, to make such groups the instrument of conservative purpose, with the same vigor and determination that the 'liberals' have used. ... When you and your friends get your local PTA group straightened out, move up the ladder as soon as you can to exert a wider influence. (French 1967:477)

At stake, therefore, was the course of educational policy and programming across the United States. By presenting conservative or extremist opinions more strongly than the opinions' actual representation in American political culture, members of the JBS hoped to transform the PTA, scaffolding its programs on a conservative approach to children's education.

By 1965, extremist groups had attempted some of the changes that they had outlined earlier. *Look* magazine reported, “A subtle but vicious war is being fought over how America’s schools should be run.” In it, reporter Ernest Dunbar proclaimed that extremist elements relied on “weapons [that] include innuendo, parliamentary maneuvers and sometimes ... violence.” According to Dunbar, extremist groups threatened any PTA member who questioned the validity of the evidence that Birchers presented in meetings. The JBS also resorted to unfair methods, printing fake membership cards to “pack” meetings with like-minded people (including those who were not parents of enrolled students) in order to sway the vote on resolutions. They also threatened school boards that events should be canceled “if you want to see daylight tomorrow.” The threats were not always empty. In one case, a restaurant belonging to the author of a PTA fundraising skit was bombed in an apparent attempt to cancel the event (Dunbar 1965).

Another thrust of JBS organizing was ideological. Birchers and others condemned “Liberals and super-Liberals [who] think it is all right for themselves to go into their local Parent-Teachers Associations, and to do everything they can to slant the activities and decisions of these Associations to the left. ... And with typical arrogant and illiberal Liberalism, they try to make the going as rough for the Conservatives as they can.” Following the guidance of Robert Welch, conservative extremists engaged in a series of efforts intended to slow the spread of PTA’s publicity and programs, and instead to steer the group towards a more “patriotic” and anti-Communist outlook. They urged members to “Join Your Local PTA, and Become Active in it,” and described efforts to transform PTA work as “plain good citizenship” (“Bulletin for September” 1962:10). In Cold War America, members of the JBS may have hoped that their strident anti-Communism, coupled with the funding of wealthy members like candy manufacturer Robert Welch and oil entrepreneur Fred C. Koch, would help the organization spread their distinctive message in educational circles. At stake, they believed, were their children’s futures and moral well-being.

THE PTA REACTS

PTA members, aware that they had become a target of conservative extremists, characterized JBS members as biased, undemocratic, and inaccurate. The PTA compiled numerous reports of extremist activity in its organization and soon set out to confront JBS activity. PTA members, dedicated to democratic procedure and to solutions grounded in expert research, were alarmed by the JBS attacks. As evidence documented this concerted campaign, the PTA snapped into action. Its efforts fell into three broad efforts. First, it set out to discredit the JBS, using critical commentary about the group to denigrate JBS methods. Second, the PTA engaged in a campaign to present itself as an effective organization, most often by reinforcing democratic principles, or casting extremists as undemocratic. Finally, the organization engaged in an educational campaign, publishing pamphlets to warn Americans about the dangers of extremist groups and to suggest measures to limit their impact.

CRITICIZING EXTREMISM

The PTA took the offensive with sharply worded commentaries about the JBS and other extremist groups. President Moorhead claimed that extremists “sought refuge in false charges and false testimony” and “lent their efforts toward negative and destructive ends.” Moorhead generalized about conservative extremism, claiming that it “is against free and democratic discussion of controversial ideas. It is against what is taught in our schools and against the ways we teach it. It is against a vast number of books that many intelligent people consider worth reading.” This posited that the PTA stood as a force against such trends, and Moorhead contrasted the PTA vision of education against that of PTA opponents:

Instead of education and discussion that liberate the mind and lead to independent thinking, extremism would employ indoctrination in its own sterile formulas. Instead of diversity, it would impose a deadening conformity. ... Extremism rides to power on the waves of fear and confusion that it has itself stirred up. (Moorhead 1965c:4)

Broadly, extremists were now labeled as destructive of liberation and independence, the hallmarks of democratic freedom.

PTA leaders also listed a series of claims about extremist interference in their own meetings. In a 1965 address to elementary school principals, PTA president Jennelle Moorhead offered a lengthy criticism of extremist groups. She claimed they were “deliberately disruptive and divisive” and that groups like the JBS “sought to create distrust and suspicion of schools, churches, courts, the national government, and individuals, including President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and President Johnson.” Even more offensive than distrust in government, she said, was that extremists “sought to silence opposition to their views by calling disagreement disloyalty and treason” and that they “labeled those who disagree with them subversive, traitorous, Fascist, and Communist.” Of course, Moorhead also pointed to “hate propaganda ... creating a climate of fear, distrust, and suspicion” and spreading “lies and distortions” about the PTA, schools, and school administrators. Moorhead cautioned principals that such groups engaged in “undemocratic pressures on school boards and library boards and democratic organizations in order ... to brainwash young Americans into their point of view by controlling what children and youth are free to learn and to read. ... They try to subvert our democratic tradition of free discussion, group decision, and majority rule” (Moorhead 1965d:3).

Through 1965, Moorhead repeatedly delivered speeches with this kind of content. Establishing and publicizing the extreme ideological focus of the JBS was one means by which she and others tried to discredit the Birchers. The PTA acknowledged that “extremists have always been a part of American life,” pointing to examples that ranged from the Salem witchcraft trials to the 19th-century Know-Nothings; however, they claimed that by the 1960s, extremism had taken on an unsavory character, attempting “to create Russian-style schools and [make] organized efforts to infiltrate and take control of

PTAs.” In other words, post-WWII extremism presented a new danger. As Moorhead said, “extremists manipulate patriotism and everyone’s natural love of country. They use patriotic symbols to mask a deep-seated fear and, in some cases, opposition to basic American concepts such as freedom of speech and the equality of all men and women.” What made extremists most dangerous was that “they brand[ed] their enemies ... as ‘anti-American.’ They oppose many efforts to reform, change, or improve what exists in America as un-American, calling such efforts untrue to ‘traditional American values.’ However, they never define ‘traditional’” (*National PTA’s Guide* 1965:1). It was little wonder that leaders like Moorhead framed their critique of extremism around familiar Cold War principles. Doing so cast extremists beyond the scope of the mainstream legitimacy that PTA members claimed.

Aside from the John Birch Society’s political bias, the JBS methods and manipulations distressed PTA members the most. PTA members often decried the tactics they found most objectionable. In one workshop on extremism, PTA members detailed the unfair methods that the JBS had used:

Here is how they capture a PTA meeting: Carloads of people (five or six cars, twenty-five to thirty people) march into a local unit meeting and each person “buys” a membership card at the door. They do not become real members because they have no intention of upholding our Objects, purposes, or bylaws. ... In the State of Washington a junior high unit was to be organized. But on the meeting night people that no one recognized as living in the community disrupted the meeting with derogatory statements about the PTA and blocked a motion to form a PTA unit in the school. ... In Pasadena, California, thirty-five people previously not active in the PTA moved in, nominated three people, and by voting for three instead of the five to be elected were able to put their candidates in office. (Moorhead 1965c:8–9)

Moorhead and other PTA members thus presented extremist groups as manipulative rule-breakers in order to sustain the PTA’s reputation as a democratic and fair-minded source of educational policy.

PTA members offered clear warnings about how extremist methods could shift the terrain of discussions about educational policy. They claimed that extremists “make false charges and use quotations out of context,” and suggested that the extremists created groups who used “high-sounding, patriotic names to promote their views.” PTA members also encouraged other members to be brave enough to oppose or counter the “highly emotional, inflammatory charges of subversive influences in schools, government, and community organizations.” Moorhead warned that extremists “send representatives to meetings with prepared, loaded, unanswerable questions to harass speakers whose views differ from theirs. They prolong meetings so they can make minority decisions after the

worn-out majority has gone home.” All of these divide-and-conquer strategies sowed discord in meetings. Moorhead worried that harassment could open the door to overrepresenting extremist views in educational circles, or making members less certain about the PTA’s policies (*Extremist Groups Both of the Right and of the Left*, N.d.; *The PTA: Where Democracy Prevails*, N.d.).

In addition to publicizing the subversion within PTA meetings, PTA members also detailed the distasteful behavior that took place outside those gatherings. Moorhead pointed out that the JBS *Blue Book* instructed followers to “organize fronts. Little fronts, big fronts, temporary fronts, permanent fronts, all kinds of fronts” (*What is Extremism?* 1964). Such allegations likely resonated when PTA members reported an effort to “smear by publication” some of their units. In one case, copies of a pamphlet called *Parents are Puppets of the PTA* were sent by a “patriot’s study group” to every member of the Sumter, South Carolina, PTA. At a subsequent meeting, the secretary, Mrs. A. J. Moses, urged all members to withdraw from the state and National PTA (Moorhead 1965c:10). That resolution was voted down, but PTA units continued to report that “groups use social ostracism, economic pressures, and even violence to impose their views on others. Although they usually stay within the limits of legality, their methods certainly exceed the boundaries of human decency” (Moorhead 1965a:3).

Unfortunately, the PTA reported, extremists were willing to take direct action to change the course of public education.

[In one Iowa community] more than one-half of its 33 teachers resigned when an ultra-conservative school board fired the school superintendent and ruled that teachers could teach about communism only by reading from an “approved” text, without class discussion of the subject. And the public-library system of one Missouri city was almost wrecked by extremists who insisted that the libraries purchase sensational and undocumented far-right books. ... [In] Illinois, ultra rightists turned PTA meetings into forums for attacks on Federal officials, the State Department, the US Supreme Court and the United Nations. ... Portland, Oregon; Memphis, Tennessee; Upper Saddle River, New Jersey; North Hollywood, California and many other cities have witnessed similar attacks. (*Countering Extremism* 1966:8)

Moorhead and others warned PTA members that “under the banner of breaking a conspiracy, the extremists of the right have licensed themselves to break the law. They intimidate by slander, terrorize by rumor, disturb the peace and incite to violence” (*Countering Extremism* 1966:4). Although such instances were rare, they seemed to be increasingly frequent. PTA leaders thus speculated that JBS members acted on leader Robert Welch’s dictum “to be civilized is unquestionably to be

defeated.” They highlighted terrifying reports implying that JBS followers opted for uncivilized conduct:

Birchers are nowhere specifically told ... to harass the president of the California Board of Education with midnight telephone threats because he insisted on fair hearings for teachers accused of misconduct, or to invade a public library and surreptitiously remove dozens of “objectionable” books. Yet such have been the outrages committed by individual Birchers and by organizations with Birchers in their ranks. (*What is Extremism?* 1964:5)

To the PTA, JBS behavior went beyond civilized disagreement and tread into the arena of frightening and inappropriate conduct.

The allegations went beyond a lack of civility, however. Workshops, media releases, and public speeches characterized the JBS and other extremists as anti-democratic:

Why worry about the extremists? Because they’re trying to bludgeon the American people into abandoning the twin ground-rules of democracy—that problems are solved by free and honest debate of legitimate political issues. ... If arguments pro or con [on any issue] are shouted down with cries of “treason” or submerged by outpourings of race hatred and religious bigotry—then the democratic process [is] subverted and our survival in freedom endangered. (*National PTA’s Guide* 1965:13; see also *Countering Extremism* 1966)

This was more than a simple disagreement. PTA members connected extreme opinions to the negative results they feared:

Extremist groups try to stifle free expression of views opposed to their own. Most of us believe the public schools should not indoctrinate students in the political, economic, religious, or social views of any group. Extremist groups put pressures on schools to adopt courses and textbooks that reflect their views. ... Most of us believe in rule by the majority, subject to criticism by a “loyal opposition.” Extremist groups believe in rule by their own minority and label any opposition as disloyal. (Moorhead 1965a:2–3)

References to suppression of dissent, racism and religious oppression, indoctrination, and allegations of treason were all troubling themes that contrasted with the PTA’s aspirations to the democratic exchange of opinions. Most importantly, the suggestion that extremists could influence textbook selection and course content was a clear warning.

The PTA feared that controlling textbooks and curricula was a means through which public schools were seen as a fertile ground that could foster the future growth of extremism in public education.

Discussions about education, textbooks, and curricula therefore assumed unique importance in the 1960s. President Jennelle Moorhead laid out the issue starkly in an address to the National Education Association in 1965. She insisted that “no one is denying the John Birch Society or any other society the democratic right to organize and to propound its beliefs”; however, Moorhead reinforced her claims that extremists had used “coercion, intimidation, violence, misrepresentation, and character assassination” to force their ideas on others. To Moorhead and others like her, the course of their work was clear. As she said, the “fanatical extremists of both ends of the political spectrum are the foes of freedom and democracy. ... What we do not grant them is the right to stifle freedom and choke democracy” (Moorhead 1965a:8). Moorhead also encouraged other organizations to unite with the PTA in standing up against these assaults on education:

[Extremism] is a foe against which the NEA [National Education Association] and the PTA must stand together, strong and united. It is a foe that parents and teachers must fight together—and defeat. ... Extremism attacks both what is taught and how it is taught. It would emasculate both the curriculum and teaching methods. It seeks to bar discussion of controversial ideas and to ban certain books. It makes critical and objective examination of ideas and institutions unpatriotic. (Moorhead 1964:2)

For Moorhead, extremism presented twin dangers of stifling democracy and corrupting educational practices in the long term.

In spite of her vigilance on the subject, Moorhead and others had not managed to obstruct extremist efforts in the PTA. By 1965, Moorhead claimed the “simple and frightening fact that extremists of the right have already captured about 100 of our 47,000 PTA’s.” Equally urgent, teachers and administrators had fallen [prey] to extremist attacks. “In the name of anti-Communism, superpatriotism ... or some other battle-cry of the moment,” Moorhead reported, “extremism attacks textbooks that do not serve its own political, economic, or social goals. It demands investigations and dismissals of courageous teachers and administrators.” The NEA seemed to concur, noting that one of every 30 school districts nationwide had been targeted by extremist attacks from 1963 to 1964. “Extremism smears with nasty labels all who challenge or oppose its views, be they teachers, principals, parents, writers, school boards, or PTAs” (Moorhead 1965c:5–6, 8). Even as late as 1966, the PTA called the far right “a well-heeled, well-oiled ... unwelcome movement” and anticipated “a proliferation of its activities.” In particular, claimed Moorhead,

The Radical Right continues to infiltrate the PTA. It continues to frighten parents with scary tales of a takeover

of schools by the Federal government. ... It continues to alarm parents with nightmares about the schools' use of pornographic literature and subversive social studies. In the Far Right's coloring book, the instructions are to color the schools and the PTA red. (Moorhead 1966a:2)

Though reports like these typically indicated that conservative extremism was a minority presence in educational circles, PTA leaders were worried. Extremist opinions were never fully accepted in those arenas, but they had caused significant disruption, questioning the legitimacy of the methods and the opinions of the PTA. Under Jennelle Moorhead's leadership, the PTA began its responses to extremist influences in PTAs and other educational circles.

It was clear that PTA members disapproved of JBS methods and ideas, but PTA members' activism went beyond criticizing their opponents. Armed with a sense of what was wrong with extremist ideas, the PTA set out to define what was right about its own image of democratic civic engagement. By the mid-1960s, PTA members began to discuss solutions to the problems they had identified. Some allies proposed a more aggressive approach. Norman Goldman, the editor of New Jersey Education Association's *Review*, wrote to Moorhead in 1965, stating his plan to "run a major article on the PTA." In it, he said he was "especially interested in your current stand on extremist groups and how some of them, such as the John Birch Society, are trying to infiltrate local units." Goldman also urged Moorhead "to author an article that would be 'hard-hitting in taking these extremists apart' and at the same time, point out how these groups can interfere with the many worthwhile projects local units can conduct" (Goldman 1965). The PTA could be "hard-hitting" in its disagreement with the JBS, but the PTA's rules required that it permit a forum in which extremist views could be voiced alongside other opinions.

THE PTA AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

While the PTA decried Birchers' methods, the organization frequently contrasted extremist values and actions against its own vision of democracy. Because both the JBS and the PTA proclaimed their love of country and their opposition to Communism, the PTA worked to describe the merits of its approach to democratic citizenship or the negative implications of extremist political ideals. Moorhead proclaimed, for example, that "extremism ... smears with nasty labels all who challenge or oppose its views, be they teachers, principals, parents, journalists, school boards, or PTAs. With its tarbrush techniques, extremism imperils the very basis of democracy—free discussion and competition of ideas" (Moorhead 1965b:17). She reminded her audiences that "as long as the Far Right seeks to impose its will and its views by the vicious, undemocratic tactics of infiltration, intimidation, and slander, it is the enemy of education and democracy. It is dangerous and damaging to the American school—that strongest stronghold of freedom and democracy" (Moorhead 1966a:4). Moorhead and the PTA thus devoted time and effort to presenting themselves as arbiters of democratic standards in education.

The PTA also echoed its founding principle, reinforcing that it relied upon the objective consideration of research rather than any political bias. Moorhead advertised a clear mission as the PTA moved forward. She said, “The democratic state cannot be perpetuated without publicly supported education by and for all the people.” At heart, education of youth was key, using “solid facts, documented by scientific evidence, to combat the distortions and fantasies of the extremists.” To the PTA, “every gain for the Extreme Right imperils democracy, for extremists would suffocate discussion and choke off dissent, the oxygen by which democracy lives” (Moorhead 1966a, 1965d:4). To protect public education, Moorhead therefore pledged the PTA to a new objective: “We cannot tolerate disruptive techniques within our PTAs, and we do not intend to. ... We oppose coercion, intimidation, slander, and violence as a means of preventing change or forcing change” (Moorhead 1965c:13–15).

Interestingly, both the PTA and groups like the JBS proclaimed that their efforts were motivated by patriotism. The PTA intertwined patriotism with its educational objectives. Moorhead proclaimed that “true patriotism is not blind, irrational love. It is not simply ‘my country, right or wrong.’ Rather it is, as Carl Schurz put it, ‘My country—to be honored when right, to be set right when wrong.’” To cultivate patriotism among children, Moorhead posited, “What can our schools do to develop this kind of patriotism? To this end, students must have opportunities to grapple with conflict, controversy, and alternative ideas. Only so can they learn to think reasonably about their country’s past, present, and future” (Moorhead 1967a:1–2). As before, PTA members suggested that the best situation was one in which solutions to the nation’s problems could be gleaned from a free market in ideas.

As much as they professed an open exchange of opinions, the PTA leadership clearly believed that their approach was the best. This likely derived from the idea that the PTA was already part of a national web of experts who communicated regularly about education and children’s issues. The PTA worked with the American Association of School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association (Moorhead 1967a). They attended national conventions, and they shared published opinions about children’s education and well-being. If nothing else, this may have lent to the sense that they had already engaged in a process of considering varied opinions and arriving at the best options for children. Small wonder, then, that the PTA issued confident declarations that “the PTA practices democracy. It welcomes dissent as well as assent. ... The rule is to abide by majority decisions and to respect the right of the minority to disagree and work for change. ... Our common concern for children ... is greater than anything that can divide us. ... PTA members can tolerate diversity and act with unity and enthusiasm on majority decisions” (*The PTA: Where Democracy Prevails*, N.d.). The PTA thus had a new objective. Democratic exchanges and dissenting opinions were desirable, but the PTA also had to ensure that its ideals were not subsumed by the JBS and other extremist groups. To that end, PTA members set out to educate other PTA members and the general public about extremism.

PTA PUBLICATIONS

The PTA's national and state leadership referred often to the problems they had encountered with extremism. Meeting minutes were rife with references to "a free-for-all discussion concerning membership and extremists" and to "extremists—what you have faced, what you fear, and how you handle the problem" ("Minutes" 1965; Mallory 1965:2). Moorhead oversaw the publication of a leaflet on extremism to "inform PTAs and others about the nature of extremism, and ... to define the democratic processes that will be used to combat the undemocratic pressures of extremist groups." She pointedly noted "the differences between the beliefs and attitudes of democratic groups and those of extremist groups, both of the left and right" (Moorhead 1965a:2). To achieve that objective, she suggested, the PTA should be aware of the characteristics of conservative extremism and should find ways to combat such disruptive strategies. Moorhead defined these steps as "constructive," and PTA leaders suggested that these could limit the power of extremism in their organization. The deluge of public speeches, press releases, editorials, and communication among PTA offices demonstrated that extremism was a significant concern in the mid-1960s. The PTA defined itself as "the first line of defense against extremists' efforts to dictate the curriculum, control the textbooks, and use the public schools to promote their own social and economic philosophy" (Moorhead 1965a:8).

PTA members believed that the JBS and others engaged in "false charges and accusations" about their work. In response, the PTA published a pamphlet called *The Truth About the PTA* and asked that members "speak up for the PTA because in some communities extremists of the Far Right are speaking up against the PTA." At stake, predictably, was the future of education: "The loss of a single PTA member or a single parent-teacher association through the subversive tactics of the extremists 'is a disaster.' ... It is a disaster for schools. The school whose PTA defects to the extremists is severely disadvantaged. Its teachers' freedom to teach and its students' freedom to learn are endangered. Its administration is threatened and harassed" (Moorhead 1966b:4-5). PTA publications at times criticized such attacks by pointing out the PTA's accomplishments on behalf of children. By contrast, any criticisms against the PTA should be seen as an attack on children's well-being. According to one pamphlet:

Our critics charge: In collusion with the federal government, the PTA promotes socialistic and Marxist schemes under the guise of child welfare. The facts are: There is nothing secret, conspiratorial, fraudulent, or underhanded about the PTA's cooperation (not collusion) with government agencies—state, local, and federal—to abolish hunger, disease, ignorance, under-education, exploitation, neglect, and delinquency among America's children and youth. The PTA is concerned with children's well-being and opportunities, not with labels. (*National PTA's Guide* 1965:3)

Implicitly, the PTA proclaimed that it was better equipped to address the challenges facing American students. Accordingly, criticisms of the PTA and its educational approaches were tantamount to harming children.

The PTA did not only educate the public and PTA colleagues about its democratic values and procedures. The last significant effort of the PTA was to encourage a series of changes for the organization's meetings to limit the strength of extremist efforts. First, the PTA provided readings on a variety of topics relating to children's education. These snippets suggested the kinds of questions that PTA members should ask whenever extremists offered motions. For example, in a discussion about students' reading material, the PTA suggested, members should ask questions like "Is the curriculum continuously evaluated? By whom? What use is made of the evaluations? What curriculum studies are in progress or planned?" Similarly, publications asked pointedly, "How are teachers protected from groups seeking to restrict their freedom to teach?" ("Reading," N.d.:6, 8). Questions that referred to accepted professional opinions about curriculum and assessment may have ensured that PTA meetings steered away from extremists' emphasis on ideology alone.

The PTA also offered practical suggestions about how to avoid extremist takeovers of meetings. For example, one pamphlet advised its members, "Your agenda should include some time for questions and/or discussion from the floor. A word of warning is in order here. Birchers and other extremists are trained in the techniques of packing, disrupting and trying to take over a meeting. Such efforts can be thwarted only if the chairman is thoroughly grounded in parliamentary rules." Among other strategies, suggested the PTA, members could avoid efforts to monopolize a meeting "by calling for opposing opinions whenever a single viewpoint seems to dominate the discussion. In some instances, it may be wiser to distribute paper and pencil and ask for questions in writing, so that the chairman can screen out ... those clearly intended to provoke rather than to clarify" (*Countering Extremism* 1966:16). The PTA also suggested ground rules for its meetings:

The nasty trick of name-calling and mud-slinging must stop, whether it is done by extremists or by middle-of-the-road Americans. The identification of disagreement with disloyalty must stop. ... On all topics of concern ... discussion and debate are desirable. ... What is dangerous in this phenomenon called extremism is that it chokes off diversity and dissent, and these are the very breath and being of a democracy. (Moorhead 1965a:1-2)

Going forward, the PTA proclaimed that civility and consideration for all opinions ensured that extremists could have a voice in their meetings, but not the only voice.

The reference to provocative actions by the JBS and the PTA's own calls for civility in meetings indicated that the PTA was aware of the strategies deployed by extremists. Now, the PTA offered a variety of responses that would combat the disruptions it had encountered. PTA pamphlets suggested that individual chapters

should establish a policy that motions would not be voted upon until the meeting following their introductions. Chapters could set definite, reasonable times for adjourning meetings to prevent a small minority from “outstaying a moderate majority.” Outside meetings, PTAs also encouraged schools to set policies on curriculum and textbook selection, and urged them to request input from teachers and school officials. Members began to organize information programs to ensure community understanding of policies. Finally, the PTA suggested that schools define procedures for dealing with complaints about curriculum, books, and teachers (Moorhead 1965a:4). Each of these methods encouraged deliberate consideration of educational policies by a committed majority.

The PTA also offered members a number of ways to handle harassment and “undemocratic pressures” on their membership. When PTA members in Pueblo, Colorado, faced harassment regarding the organization’s support for UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), “the PTA leaflet recommend[ed] that the attack be brought out in the open.” PTA members claimed that discussion of subjects such as these resulted in “a clearer understanding of how and why the National PTA supports Unesco” (Moorhead 1965a:5). The PTA leadership also suggested that members “devote a meeting to a factual report by the committee on extremist groups; their efforts to infiltrate PTAs and influence them to withdraw from the state and national organizations; and their undemocratic pressures on schools and libraries.” They urged that “if someone comes up with a loaded, unanswerable question, ask him to rephrase it. Usually he can’t, because it’s a ‘canned’ question” (*Extremist Groups: A Clear and Present Danger*, N.d.). Awareness of the methods of extremists, hoped the PTA, would improve individual chapters’ ability to limit the extremists’ effectiveness.

PTAs not only adopted strategies to stymie extremists in meetings but also urged members to advertise the positive features of PTA work, defining the organization as a defender of democratic liberty and of aid to children. Among other things, members were told to “encourage reading and discussion of the National PTA publications *The American Way—Safeguarding Our Individual Rights and Liberties*, *How to Love a Country*, and *Extremist Groups—a Clear and Present Danger to Freedom and Democracy*.” They were also encouraged to “wage a campaign against the undemocratic tactic of putting derogatory labels on people for their opinions.” The PTA also promised that it would “advise and assist any PTA that faces a special problem—for example, interference from an undemocratic pressure group” (*Critical Issues in our Democracy*, N.d.:27–28, 46). Finally, Jennelle Moorhead supplied copies of her presidential address in which she lauded the national organization: “We shall be back this year and the next and the next. For the war against poverty, ignorance, and segregation is just war. It is our war. The war for health, human dignity, justice, jobs, opportunity is a good war. It is our war. The war for better lives for all children is our war. And we intend to win it” (Moorhead 1967b:6). The intensity of PTA responses to conservative extremism over the previous years demonstrated the depth of that commitment.

RESULTS

As the PTA assessed its efforts, Moorhead continued to describe extremism as evil: “The word ... itself implies lack of balance and moderation. It implies going beyond normal, acceptable boundaries. It implies irrationality, loss of control, or rejection of restraint. Extremism in pursuit of a virtue, as Aristotle pointed out, become a fault or vice.” Yet Moorhead insisted that from such flaws could come “positive and constructive” reactions, such as focusing “national attention on the importance of democratic practices and procedures.” She praised efforts to “scrutinize activities for lapses from democratic processes” and “alerted [PTA chapters] to watch out for infiltration and takeover by totalitarian groups.” Above all, Moorhead claimed that the recent PTA stance against extremism “has aroused Americans’ sense of fair play and their righteous indignation against such reprehensible tactics as slander, innuendo, character assassination, threats, intimidation, and coercion” (Moorhead 1965d:1, 2).

PTA members had some reason to celebrate. As early as 1965, the PTA action program noted that the organization was “learning to work under stress and to cope with the subversive tactics of the Far Right” (*Critical Issues in our Democracy*, N.d.:27–28, 46). Additionally, the PTA reported it was in the third printing of a pamphlet on how to handle extremism, and the PTA recounted praises from at least 10 members of Congress. Among others, Brock Adams of Pennsylvania praised the PTA as a “stalwart defender of democracy.” Carl Albert of Oklahoma said that PTA efforts were appropriate and that “any other means of accomplishing changes in public institutions is undesirable and dangerous.” New York’s James E. Scheuer “read the essential portions of our leaflet on extremism into the Congressional Record” (Moorhead 1965c:12–13). All of this political support came from members of the Democratic Party, but PTA members still insisted that they considered a spectrum of opinions in their meetings: “There are in our country sincere, honest conservatives who fear too much government interference in business, industry, and education. We may not share their fear, but we would never wish to silence it” (Moorhead 1965a:1). PTA members thus felt that their approach had thwarted extremist efforts.

While they reported some successes, the PTA leadership was concerned about other trends. They collected articles that suggested “the John Birch Society—and more than a score of other extremist groups—are now spending more than \$20 million a year to re-write American history” (Capell 1965:3). In addition, Moorhead acknowledged a decline in membership that derived partly from extremist efforts: “Last year the PTA lost some 80,000 members. I am not attributing the loss wholly or solely to Rightist subversion. But I have no doubt about the impact of the Far Right’s lies, distortion, hate and fear campaigns.” While Moorhead consoled her allies by dismissing the JBS as trying “futilely to march backwards into the nineteenth century and drag our schools with them,” she still claimed that Birchers “resist efforts to adapt schools to the needs of a changing society and to our nation’s social revolution” (Moorhead 1966a:2). Acceptance of extremist ideas still threatened the primary thrust of PTA efforts. “With insidious and subtle tactics,” Moorhead proclaimed, extremism “continues to infiltrate democratic organizations and seeks to capture strategic positions from which it can dominate and

control our schools” (Moorhead 1966a:1). If nothing else, PTA commentary indicated that conservative extremism still found its way into public conversations about education, perhaps in a way that awarded undue representation to a minority viewpoint.

RECENT SIMILARITIES

The intense divisions between the PTA and the JBS reached their peak in 1965, and conservative extremism continued. In the 1960s, extremist groups like the JBS referred to national media sources as the Kept Press, suggesting that few sources could be trusted and that laypeople were as capable of determining educational excellence as were experts in the field. Additionally, extremists continued to disrupt PTA meetings. In 1968, a discussion of potential convention topics chosen by the state presidents included a request for more information about “how to deal with dissenters and interrupters” (“Let’s Abolish the PTAs” 1962; “State Presidents’ Conference Agenda” 1968:1–2). At best, PTA members felt that they had established new rules for their meetings, but it was impossible to prevent extremist opinions from entering the fray. In fact, the PTA never sought to eliminate such opinions, only to ensure that their expression was limited to their representation in contemporary political culture. This may have been the core of the PTA’s problem. While the PTA guaranteed the introduction of diverse views, extremists like the JBS apparently engaged in unscrupulous methods to present their views and choices much more strongly than their actual proportion of American viewpoints.

To many in the United States, the actions of the 1960s PTA resonate strongly with more recent events. For example, Charles and David Koch, the sons of JBS founder Fred Koch, have recently utilized some of the same methods that plagued the PTA. In 2009, the Koch brothers provided funding through Americans for Prosperity to the budding Tea Party movement. The Kochs proclaimed that these were libertarian efforts centered largely on limiting government power and diminishing taxation; however, others have decried them as “radical,” “anarcho-totalitarian,” and guilty of “political manipulation and obfuscation” (Rich 2010; Mayer 2010). In addition, though the Kochs’ energy (and financial reserves) have been dedicated to many different concerns, education is one stream of that activism. Members of the JBS (which is still in existence) claim that “libertarians needed to mobilize youthful cadres by influencing academia in new ways.” To the Koch brothers, a recent mission has been to steer Americans closer to their values. Said one researcher: “In order to alter the direction of America, they had to ‘influence the areas where policy ideas percolate from: academia and think tanks’” (Mayer 2010, 2016). To those who share these values, the implication is clear: Changing approaches to education could shift the perspectives of Americans, making them more receptive to extremist outlooks.

The selection of textbooks for public schools has resumed Americans’ focus on the methods of conservative extremists. In 2009, the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) engaged in its efforts to select textbooks that supported its educational objectives. Texas offers one of the leading markets for textbooks, so SBOE choices influence textbook selection across the United States. None of the board members had relevant experience in the disciplines for which they selected texts, however; nor did they

possess academic degrees from those fields. Although Texas law provided for expert input regarding textbooks and educational standards, the standard for expertise was lenient: If just two board members affirmed that an individual was qualified, the selected person could testify in front of the board as to the merits of certain textbooks. Moderate members of the SBOE had selected experts from universities in the state to testify, but the extremists on the board opted instead for the testimony of individuals who supported a fundamentalist Christian perspective. Though only 5 of the 12 members of the SBOE were extreme conservatives, their efforts succeeded. Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education expressed concern that standards “were compromised in a Creationist direction” (Scott 2012). In effect, the standards required science teachers to include consideration of Creationism alongside other scientific theories, and public school teachers could now be pressured into standards that did not follow conventional scientific methods.

By 2010, these efforts seeped into recommendations on Social Studies texts. Some board members condemned the secular humanism that had “flooded our schools,” and they insisted that their efforts would elevate topics preferred by conservatives. SBOE members, emboldened by their recent successes, proceeded to strike consideration of such topics as women and minorities, Thomas Jefferson, and hip-hop music from the Social Studies standards. They voted down a recommendation that students should be able to “describe instances of racism” as one of the learning outcomes. At the same time, SBOE members added such topics as Phyllis Schlafly, the Heritage Foundation, country music, and the National Rifle Association to the standards. Board members concluded that Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin should be included in discussions of Enlightenment thinkers, and they directed teachers to “discuss the merits of the free enterprise system” (Scott 2012).

The recent Texas debates about textbook selection show that conservative extremism in the SBOE reinvigorated the methods used by the JBS against the PTA decades before. The debates that churned through the SBOE were similar to the PTA’s struggles of the 1960s. In each case, extremists sought to eliminate the educational approaches supported by expert research and sought to overrepresent perspectives that occupied the political and social fringes. This reflects the crux of the PTA’s original challenge. The PTA and state legislatures pledged themselves to democratic consideration of differing opinions, anticipating that the final vote would ensure majority support for the best approach. Conversely, extremists resorted to methods that circumvented the rules of fair play in order to support their views at the expense of others. It may be that the PTA learned from its experiences. The organization’s governance manual currently requires that members “prioritize association goals over personal goals at all times” (*National PTA Governance Policy Manual* 2017:2). In the grand scheme, PTA vigilance may have given the organization a means to limit the impact of extremism in its organization. In other educational circles, however, the historical example of the PTA serves as a bellwether, illuminating present-day concerns that will influence education for some time to come.

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