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Constructing the American Right-Wing: Religion, Domestic Intelligence Gathering, and the Making of Conservatism in the United States

Final report on research at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library

In August 2014 I conducted research at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library for a book project tentatively titled "Constructing the American Right-Wing." The project seeks to understand the complex interaction between religion, domestic intelligence gathering, and the development of political conservatism in twentieth century U.S. culture. Although the U.S. government's Cold War-era surveillance of the American public has been well-documented (e.g., Cunningham 2005), historians have paid much less attention to the parallel development of intelligence gathering operations of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the course of the twentieth century. By concentrating on the development of NGO intelligence gathering specifically motivated by religious convictions, this project hopes to contribute to several interconnected areas in the humanities, including American religious history, religious studies, and cultural studies.

During my research, I spent the majority of my time with two large collections—Group Research, Inc. records, 1955-1996 (MS#0525), and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State Subject Files, 1953-2010 (MS#1555). The collections of Group Research, Inc.(GRI) and Americans United (AU) represent two major NGO pressure groups that sought to collect information on right-wing groups during the latter half of the twentieth century. GRI largely focused on monitoring the political activities of right-wing pressure groups and fundamentalist Protestant organizations engaged in anti-communist activism. AU invested most of its resources tracking the activities of conservative religious organizations involved in political action. GRI and AU distributed reports based on their intelligence files to a wide range of political, legal, and religious advocacy groups and helped shape the

reporting of a generation of journalists covering right-wing groups. Scholars have used both manuscript collections as resources for documenting the rise of the American conservative movement and its complex relationship to religion in the twentieth century. Most notably, the Group Research collection has been used in important book-length studies by Phillips-Fein (2009) and Hendershot (2011) to document the development of American conservatism as an intellectual and political movement. My research seeks to build on previous scholarship by exploring the archives themselves as objects worthy of careful study.

Although mostly comprised of newspaper clippings, ephemera, and other publicly available material, the GRI files offer glimpses into the processes Group Research founder Wesley McCune and his staff used to build their archive. The papers offer substantial coverage of right-wing activity during the 1960s and 70s, with a clear focus on anti-communist groups, anti-union activism, and fundamentalist religious broadcasters. Most significantly for my research, several components of the collection record the ways in which GRI's research circulated through institutions on the political left and right. The files reveal that GRI's publications were used by a number of political operatives in the Democratic Party and by labor activists. Whether at the local, state, or national levels, activists used GRI files and research reports to expose the alleged "extreme" positions of a number of conservative politicians and link them to organizations such as the John Birch Society. The files include correspondence between McCune and various politicians and their operatives—including notable national figures such as George McGovern.

Further, the GRI files indicate that McCune and staff maintained close ties with labor unions, most notably working with groups associated with Walter Reuther and union leaders in Detroit, Michigan. The files contain clippings and a limited amount of correspondence related to GRI's labor union support, a fact that led to considerable tension with Republican and conservative Democratic lawmakers. Finally, the GRI files indicate that McCune's organization not only collected an extensive amount of "extreme" or "fundamentalist"

religious groups; it was also the target of extensive surveillance by many of the groups that it monitored. The GRI papers indicate the scope of some of this counter-surveillance, but research I have recently completed in other collections—including the Billy James Hargis Papers (MC 1412) at the University of Arkansas and the J. Howard Pew Papers (Acc#1634) at the Hagley Museum and Library—makes clear that the GRI was feared and loathed by the groups it watched. For example, Hargis, a Oklahoma-based fundamentalist preacher with a nationally broadcast radio program, invested resources in monitoring GRI's activities and made efforts to influence how McCune presented his ministry in GRI's written reports.

Like the GRI collection, the Americans United papers are mostly comprised of newspaper clippings, ephemera, and other publicly available material, and does not offer clear glimpses into the inner workings of the AU. While the GRI's papers offer extensive coverage of conservative organizations from the 1960s through the 70s, AU's collection documents the rise of the so-called Religious Right of the 1980s. The AU collection documents the shift from international concerns related to communist infiltration of America's labor unions and religious groups toward domestic tensions related to civil rights, public education, and social issues such as abortion. Notably, AU's papers make clear that by the 1970s power had shifted away from the unions and political operatives that supported McCune's organization toward liberal pressure groups and political action committees such as People for the American Way and Planned Parenthood. AU's papers document the rise of the mega television ministries of such figures as Pat Robertson (among many others) and the emergence of the political machinery of the Religious Right. In the future, I hope to compliment my research in Columbia's AU holdings with work in Princeton University's Americans United for Separation of Church and State Records, 1947-2007 (MC185) to better understand the inner workings of AU and their archival collection strategies.

Taken as a pair, these two organizations amassed two of the most significant private archives that shaped journalistic and scholarly accounts of conservatism and right-wing

religious activism during the twentieth century. The collections highlight the structural and organizational differences between the “New Right” of the 1960s—represented in all its diverse messiness by the John Birch Society, the Goldwater campaign of 1964, various fundamentalist ministries, and the “fusionist” conservatism of William F. Buckley Jr.—and the Religious Right of the 1980s. The collections point to the complex and reciprocal relationship between archival collections, political activity, and public perception of religious activism in the United States.

References:

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