

# A Reply

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THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES between historical investigation of controversial issues and the polemical use of history. Jeff D. Blake's essay is a textbook example of polemics impersonating as history.

First, he employs the classic "straw man" argument by inventing allegations I did not assert and then tries to impress readers by seeming to knock down assertions I did not make in the first place. His essay begins with the assertion that my article "claimed Benson master-minded this episode of covert surveillance" at BYU in 1966. Readers of my article know that it never made such a statement nor implied it. In fact, the article specified that Ernest L. Wilkinson asked his administrative assistant to arrange for students to do this monitoring of BYU professors in 1966. Blake's essay also concludes with a denial of "D. Michael Quinn's suggestion that Ezra Taft Benson organized, directed, or in any way was connected to the 1966 BYU spy ring . . ." The article made only the last assertion; the first two "suggestion[s]" are Blake's straw men.

Second, as an extension of his "straw man" fallacy, Blake commits the fallacy of irrelevant proof. Blake's two main arguments are that Elder Benson was not involved in the 1966 BYU spying and that "Birch Society involvement was coincidental." Blake's biography of Wilkinson and discussion of the BYU president's own involvement are irrelevant to the central claims of his essay.

Third, in the manner typical of polemics, Blake ignores significant evidence that is contrary to his two main assertions and combines that suppression of evidence with his straw man argument.

1. Blake claims: "Because Benson supported the [John Birch] society, and some society members were involved in the spying, Quinn reasons that Benson was behind the spying." To the contrary, those are not the reasons I presented. The article noted that nearly six years before the 1966 spy ring Ezra Taft Benson had encouraged Wilkinson to commit "espionage" on BYU professors and that years after the 1966 case Elder Benson was receiving student reports about BYU faculty members, for which church president Spencer W. Kimball delivered a stinging rebuke to

BYU's board of trustees. In regard to what the article did assert, Blake fails to acknowledge or comment on the following evidence:

a. Wilkinson's diary of 29 November 1960 showed that Ezra Taft Benson encouraged the BYU president to initiate spying on professors, which spying was to involve his son Reed Benson. My article emphasized this, but Blake ignored it. My article did not claim that Wilkinson sought Elder Benson's advance approval in 1966 for "espionage" on BYU's faculty. Wilkinson knew he already had a written record of that approval which he could use in self-defense if absolutely necessary.

b. Consistent with the above, the article referred to Byron Cannon Anderson's statement to me that Reed Benson commissioned him to monitor liberal students and professors at the University of Utah, and then Anderson stated: "I transferred to Brigham Young University, where I was involved in the same sorts of things," which phrase I wrote down exactly as he said it. Even in his letter-to-the-editor effort to backtrack, Anderson acknowledged that Reed Benson "had previously expressed a desire to be kept informed of same" (in *Dialogue*, Winter 1993, ix).

c. Also consistent with Anderson's statement to me and with Elder Benson's earlier proposal for Reed to be involved in BYU "espionage," my article referred to Wilkinson's diary for 7 April 1965. On that date Wilkinson concluded that Reed Benson had furnished his father with reports about BYU's professors of economics and political science. Byron Cannon Anderson had been a student at BYU since fall 1964 and was a student in April 1965, during which time he "was involved in the same sorts of [student and faculty monitoring]" he had done at the University of Utah by "desire" of Reed Benson. A year later BYU professors of economics and political science complained that Anderson had spied on them, which I cited in the notes of the article.

d. Blake questions the reliability of my article's unnamed source at LDS headquarters concerning Elder Benson receiving reports from BYU's student-spies in 1966, and Blake claims: "Aside from an anonymous informant, no contemporary, first-hand account supports Quinn's assertion." However, Blake does not acknowledge Wilkinson's written conclusion that the apostle was receiving such reports in 1965, nor does Blake refer to the statement by Dallin H. Oaks about "that Birch Mafia that surrounds ETB," when Oaks learned that Elder Benson was receiving written reports from student-spies on BYU faculty in 1977.

2. Blake claims that "Birch Society involvement was coincidental," and that only "some of the spies were members of the society" in the 1966 spying incident. This ignores the following evidence:

a. Ronald Ira Hankin's interview, 17 September 1966 (which Blake cites as a source without giving its date), states on page 5 that at the initial meeting of the BYU student-spies, non-student Ed Liechty, leader of

the Provo chapter of the John Birch Society, "was sitting right by the door." Hankin specified that he had seen every one of the student-spies of 1966 at meetings of the local Birch Society, "and I knew about five or six out of the dozen or more that were there were definitely as members, and three or four more as possible members."

b. Curt E. Conklin's letter to the editor (in *Dialogue*, Winter 1993, vii) described my article as an "uncannily accurate" narrative of the 1966 incident in which he was a student-spy member of the off-campus John Birch Society, and member of BYU's Young Americans for Freedom (the student-president of which was also a student-spy in 1966—my n211).

c. In fact, Conklin's letter to "Colleagues," on the computer-bulletin-board Mormon-L, 1 July 1993, shows that the student-spy affiliation with Young Americans for Freedom was no more coincidental than their association with the John Birch Society in 1966. All these student-spies were members of the BYU chapter of Young Americans for Freedom, and the organizing meeting for the BYU spy ring was defined as "a special YAF meeting, to be held in the regular place, 370 ELWC."

d. Blake acknowledges that H. Verlan Andersen became the attorney for Stephen Hays Russell in his dealings with BYU's administration after Russell was exposed as the spy ring's leader. However, Blake does not inform his audience that H. Verlan Andersen was the faculty sponsor of BYU's Young Americans for Freedom, of which all the student-spies were members as well as being Birchers (1966 [BYU] *Banyan*, 293).

Fourth, Blake emphasizes Russell's denials of Benson/Birch involvement even though Blake seems to regard him as unconvincing as I do from the first investigation of Russell twenty-eight years ago to the present:

1. Blake neither acknowledges nor challenges my article's n215 which shows Russell's initial denial in 1966 that there was an organized group of students monitoring BYU professors—clearly false; his initial denial that he was a member of the Birch Society—clearly false by his own later statements; and his fall-back claim that he had quit the Birch Society before the spy-ring incident—clearly false by statements of Hankin and David M. Sisson, and even by Russell's own later autobiography.

2. Blake refers in a note to Russell's letter to him on 1 July 1994 in which "Russell states that he was the only Birch Society member among the spies." That is also clearly false by the statement of Hankin in 1966 (which Blake examined and cited) and by Conklin's letter which *Dialogue* published six months before Russell's letter to Blake.

3. Blake obviously disbelieved the former spy-ring leader and instead affirmed in the text of his essay that "some of the spies were members of the society," a reversal of Russell's absolute denial that any of the other spies were Birchers.

4. And then Blake expects us to accept Russell's continued denials that he had informed Ezra Taft Benson of the spy ring's activities and findings before Hankin's public exposure.

Fifth, in keeping with his polemical approach, however, Blake asks readers to disbelieve Russell's initial statements to the student-spies (when Russell had no reason to fear the consequences of his statements) "that he [Ezra Taft Benson] was behind it [the spying]," according to Hankin's statement which Blake quoted. Blake did not acknowledge the corroborative statement by David M. Sisson on 17 September 1966 (in the same manuscript collection which Blake examined) concerning a Provo chapter meeting of the Birch Society where Russell "told of his close association with Elder Benson and how he rode back to Salt Lake City with Elder Benson after Elder Benson's devotional address [at BYU] which was given that same day or earlier." Hankin's statement added on page 7 that Russell said in this meeting which began in Provo and continued by car to Salt Lake City that Benson and Russell discussed BYU's "liberal professors." However, citing those statements by Sisson and Hankin would not have supported Blake's claim that Russell had only one "very informal" meeting with Benson, and thus they are absent from Blake's essay. Incidentally, that description in Russell's 1993 letter to Blake contradicts Russell's autobiographical account of his first meeting with Elder Benson: "the head of the John Birch Society in Utah County took me to the Church Office Building at Salt Lake City to meet Apostle Ezra Taft Benson," and "I was introduced to Brother Benson as a 'key conservative student at Brigham Young University.'"

Sixth, correspondingly, Blake asks us to believe all of Russell's retractions, denials, and contradictions from the collapse of the spy ring to the present (when Russell had every reason to fear the consequences of his statements and to shield Elder Benson from the embarrassment of the spy ring's bad reputation).

Seventh, Blake presents Louis Midgley's November 1993 reassessment of Ezra Taft Benson's role in the 1966 spy ring without noting that Midgley misstated the reasons for his original conclusion. According to Midgley in 1993, his 1966 letter was merely "speculating" that Elder Benson had "a possible connection" with the BYU spy ring, "based on Benson's political stance and its possible similarities with those involved in the spying." To the contrary, Louis Midgley's letter of 11 November 1966 was reporting what BYU's vice-president Earl C. Crockett had learned through conversations with Wilkinson, Apostle Harold B. Lee, and First Presidency counselor N. Eldon Tanner: "Then he [Crockett] added ELW [Ernest L. Wilkinson], Clyde Sandgren, and [Ezra Taft] Benson to the list of those 'involved,'" wrote Midgley in 1966, and added: "Finally he said he believed that the real home of the group was ETB . . ." Blake examined

and cited Midgley's original letter but did not provide this information to his readers.

It is not necessary for me to speculate about the motives for Jeff D. Blake's polemical essay, Stephen Hays Russell's twenty-eight years of after-the-fact denials, or Louis C. Midgley's belated reversal of his statements about Ezra Taft Benson's role in the 1966 spy ring, which reassessment came while Benson was church president and while Midgley was portraying himself to LDS headquarters as a crusader for orthodoxy. It is necessary to recognize that readily available documentary evidence contradicts Blake's essay, Russell's denials, and Midgley's second thoughts.