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“Guerrilla theater...in the guise of red, white, and blue bunting”: The People’s Bicentennial Commission and the Politics of (Un)Americanism

Abstract: This article explores the battles over ‘Americanism’ and ‘un-Americanism’ that swirled around the People’s Bicentennial Commission – a radical, populist organization that sought to promote fundamental economic change during the mid-1970s. Although it was founded by Sixties veterans, the PBC was sharply critical of what it saw as the New Left’s abandonment of Americanism. As the nation prepared to celebrate its 200th birthday, the PBC sought to present itself, and its radical programme, as representing the ‘true’ spirit of the American Revolution. For its conservative critics, though, the PBC’s patriotism was little more than a ruse, designed to trick ordinary Americans into supporting what was, essentially, a dangerous (and un-American) force.

(i)

On 4 July 1976, millions of Americans celebrated their nation’s 200th birthday with parades, picnics, and fireworks.¹ In Boston, 500,000 gathered by the Charles River to listen to a concert by the Boston Pops Orchestra. In Washington, there was a public reading of the Declaration of Independence and a huge fireworks display. But, by common assent, the day’s most memorable event was the parade of the tall ships, which saw an armada of some 200 vessels, including sixteen of the world’s tallest sailing ships, enter New York harbor, as 30,000 yachts, kayaks and other small boats crowded round.² President Ford and senior members of his administration joined with local dignitaries, world leaders, and 3,000 guests aboard the *USS Forrestal*, an 80,000-ton aircraft carrier, for the nautical review. At 2pm, as the Liberty Bell was being struck gently in Philadelphia, Ford rang the ship’s bell thirteen times, once for each of the rebellious Colonies, and a sign for the pealing of bells to begin across the land. Summing up the day’s events, the editors of *Time* magazine argued that “it was an altogether fitting celebration” of the nation’s independence “and perhaps the best

¹ *The Bicentennial of the United States: A Final Report to the People*, volume IV, 77, 409, 339; ‘BICENTENNIAL: Oh, What a Lovely Party!’, *Time*, 19 July 1976.

² *Ibid.*

part of it was that its supreme characteristics were good will, good humor and, after a long night of paralyzing self-doubt, good feelings about the U.S.”³

Historians have typically cast the Bicentennial as a welcome distraction from the malaise that supposedly characterized America during the 1970s. After all, divisions over affirmative action and busing, feminism and gay rights, together with the OPEC oil embargo of 1973-74 and attendant economic crisis (which included soaring inflation, high unemployment, and low or non-existent growth), rising crime, the Watergate scandal, and the humiliating dénouement to the Vietnam War, hardly provided the most propitious backdrop for a major national commemoration. As Dominic Sandbrook put it in his 2010 book, *Mad As Hell*, the celebrations served as moment of national reconciliation and highlighted “a zest for life and a sense of fun too often overlooked in all the gloom about inflation and energy crises.”⁴ For Natasha Zaretsky, however, the Bicentennial was no mere ‘distraction’, but an important, if overlooked, staging post in the advance of modern American conservatism.⁵ Other historians, meanwhile, have drawn attention to the ways in which political activists, of various persuasions, sought to exploit the national celebration. In a 2004 essay, for example, Christopher Capozzola argued that the nation’s 200th birthday was simultaneously a moment of escapism, celebration and crass commercialism, and a time of political protest and debate about the wider meaning of the nation.⁶ More recently, Tammy S. Gordon has illuminated the myriad ways in which activists on the

³ Ibid.; John L. Hess, ‘A Day of Picnics, Pomp, Pageantry and Protest’, *NYT*, 5 July 1976, 1, 18; Fred Ferretti, ‘Ethnic Diversity Adds Spice to the Holiday’, *NYT*, 5 July 1976, 1, 22; Frank J. Prial, ‘The Forrester’s Bell Tolls 13 Times for 13 Colonies’, *NYT*, 5 July 1976, 16.

⁴ Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 181-182. See also Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 160.

⁵ Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 22, 143-81

⁶ Christopher Capozzola, ‘“It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country”: Celebrating the Bicentennial in the Age of Limits’ in Beth Bailey & David Farber, eds., *America in the 70s*, 29-45, see esp. 31, 32-33, 34-35, 37, 42.

Left – including African Americans, women, and native Americans – engaged with, contested, and appropriated, the national commemoration, while Jill Lepore has traced the Tea Party’s embrace of the Founding Fathers to Bicentennial-era disagreements between political activists over the nature of the Revolution.⁷

Building on the notion of the Bicentennial as a site of debate about the meaning of America, this essay focuses on the activities of the People’s Bicentennial Commission (PBC), an offshoot of the 1960s New Left that combined street theatre and appeals to Americanism in a creative, and sometimes raucous campaign to bring about radical social, economic, and political change.⁸ Americanism, a “protean” and “famously contested term”, according to Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, signifies, “both what is distinctive about the United States ... *and* loyalty to that nation”, “rooted in a defense” of its canonic ideals of liberty, equality, self-government, and freedom of speech and association. An ideology, a tradition, a set of assumptions and symbols, a political language and a style, Americanism has proved an exceptionally malleable concept; one that, over the past two hundred years, has been claimed by forces from across the political spectrum (including abolitionists, pro-slavery defenders, labour organizers, corporate titans, imperialists and anti-imperialists, and civil rights activists).⁹ As well as embracing Americanism, the PBC had no qualms at all about portraying the business and political elites that they sought

⁷ Jill Lepore, *The Whites Of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle Over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 65-67, 82-84, 117. See also Lepore, ‘Tea and Sympathy: Who Owns the American Revolution?’, *The New Yorker*, 3 May 2010; Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), esp. 69-89.

⁸ ‘Introduction’ in Ted Howard, Charlie Jones, et al., *America’s Birthday: A Planning and Activity Guide for Citizens’ Participation During the Bicentennial Years by Peoples Bicentennial Commission* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 9.

⁹ Michael Kazin & Joseph McCartin, ‘Introduction’ in Kazin & McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1. See also Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5-7.

to unseat as profoundly un-American: the modern-day equivalents, no less, of the Loyalists who had sided with the British Crown during the revolutionary war.

The PBC enjoyed some modest success – most famously in exposing the cronyism at the heart of the official government agency tasked with planning the Bicentennial celebrations (revelations that would lead to the agency’s dissolution). But it soon found itself under assault by conservatives who claimed that its patriotism was nothing more than a tactical ruse designed to hoodwink Americans into supporting revolutionary Marxist goals. In the eyes of these critics, rather than embodying the ‘spirit of ‘76’, it was the PBC itself that was fundamentally un-American. It was a quarrel about the meaning of Americanism – and who had the right to invoke it – that was as old as the nation itself. Although the PBC ultimately faded from history, the story of its effort to forge a patriotic, populist radicalism during an era of economic crisis and widespread anti-business and anti-elitist sentiment is one that resonates powerfully today.

(ii)

The PBC was founded by veterans of the civil rights, student, and antiwar movements in the fall of 1971, with the goal of democratizing the U.S. economy.¹⁰ Five years later, the organization boasted some 75 local affiliates and a paid membership of 20,000, and had organized protests in towns and cities across the nation – including

¹⁰ Ted Howard et al., *The P.B.C.: A History* (Washington, D.C.: The People’s Bicentennial Commission, c.1976), 5, 9. Both Ted Howard, the PBC’s co-director and David Helvarg, its west coast co-ordinator, had been heavily involved in anti-war protests. See Tammy Gordon, interview with Ted Howard, December 21, 2011, 1-2, and Gordon, interview with David Helvarg, December 28, 2011, 1, ‘An Oral History of the 1976 Celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution’, UNCW Public History Teaching Collections: Bicentennial Oral Histories, University of North Carolina-Wilmington. I am grateful to Tammy Gordon for providing me with copies of these interview transcripts.

major demonstrations in Boston in December 1973 and at Concord in April 1975.¹¹

According to an informal internal survey, the “typical PBC supporter was young, between the ages of 24 and 34, generally with some college background, and either currently working, or not surprisingly, considering the times, unemployed.”¹²

Eschewing what it called the “community work that had been popular among organizers in the 1960s”, the group instead emphasised the “critical importance of rallies [and] demonstrations” and advocated a “dramatic and theatrical approach to local problems.”¹³ As Ted Howard, the group’s co-director, explained, “rather than political organizing [the PBC] was much more communication and provocative ... it was much more theatrical” – a “gadfly”, if you will, rather than a traditional Leftist cadre.¹⁴

The PBC’s charismatic co-founder, and most prominent spokesman, was Jeremy Rifkin. The son of a plastic bag manufacturer, Rifkin had grown up in a working-class neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side before studying at the Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania. At Penn, Rifkin was a cheerleader for the football team and an enthusiastic member of the Interfraternity council, and quickly developed a reputation as a party animal. He also excelled academically, becoming Senior Class President and winning the prestigious Cane Award in 1967. In 1968 he went on to gain a master’s in International Affairs from Tufts. Toward the end of his time at Penn, however, Rifkin had become involved in political activism. He recalled that, during a 1966 antiwar demonstration on Locust Walk (on the heart of campus), he “saw some football players beating up kids. These were my friends, the same jocks I drank beer with ... and I thought, ‘Wait a minute.

¹¹ *The PBC: A History*, 28-29. For a brief overview of the organization’s history, and some of its major activities, see Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 72-82 (esp. 75-76).

¹² *The PBC: A History*, 28.

¹³ *The PBC: A History*, 28.

¹⁴ Tammy S. Gordon, ‘Interview with Ted Howard’, 3.

Something's wrong here'. I guess my radicalization began there." Before long, Rifkin was organizing a demonstration to defend the protesters' freedom of speech. Like other New Leftists, he found himself taking on the restrictive campus regulations that were justified by the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, organizing a 600-strong demonstration that helped convince the University administration to relax the rules on visiting-hours for female students in all-male dormitories. In 1967 he organized a sit-in to protest the University's secret research into chemical and biological warfare. Later that year he addressed a 300-strong anti-Vietnam War rally at Houston Hall, telling the students that, "it is the responsibility of concerned individuals to speak out and be counted." Rifkin's activism continued after graduation: in 1969 he worked as an anti-poverty activist in Bedford Stuyvesant and East Harlem for VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America); he sought to build an interracial alliance with the Black Panthers in New York; and during 1970-1971 he was heavily involved with the Citizens Commission of Inquiry, an antiwar organization that sought to investigate alleged U.S. war crimes in Southeast Asia.¹⁵ The New Left and antiwar movement also featured prominently in the biographies of other leading PBC activists: Ted Howard had helped to organize antiwar protests at the Republican Party's national convention in Miami Beach in 1972, along with his friend David Helvarg, the group's west coast organizer, who had got his "first taste of mace, gas, and blunt-force trauma" during the protests at the 1968 Democratic Party Convention in Chicago.¹⁶

¹⁵ See David Lieber, 'Jeremy Rifkin's Big Beefs', *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 1992, 27, 28, 29; Dick Thompson, 'The Most Hated Man In Science: JEREMY RIFKIN', *Time*, 4 December 1989; *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial – The People's Bicentennial Commission: Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, March 17 and 18, 1976* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1976), 92, 104-106; Tom Mathews with Jane Whitmore, 'Up-to-the-Minutemen', *Newsweek*, 19 May 1975, 29.

¹⁶ Tammy S. Gordon, 'Interview with Ted Howard', 1; Tammy S. Gordon, 'Interview with David Helvarg', 1, 4-5; David Helvarg, *Saved By the Sea: Hope, Heartbreak, and Wonder in the Blue World* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2010), 37-39, 51, 56-57.

Although the PBC emerged from the activist milieu of the Sixties, it was sharply critical of the student and antiwar movements. The New Left, for example, was accused of adopting a “grab-bag” approach, favouring the “trappings” of radicalism over the substance, and being “defeat-oriented”, satisfied simply to “stand up and be counted even if no one else stands up with you.”¹⁷ Jeremy Rifkin argued that white guilt had caused the New Left to focus too much of its energy on “aiding and defending the revolutionary struggles of the Black and Third World communities”, thereby restricting its own role to that of a “cheerleader”, while neglecting the concerns of blue-collar whites.¹⁸ But the most serious criticism that the PBC levelled against the New Left was that – frustrated at the slow pace of change, inspired by Black Power activists, and despairing at the seemingly never-ending war in Vietnam – it had given up on America itself and looked overseas, to so-called ‘Third World’ revolutionaries, for inspiration.¹⁹

While the New Left’s radicalisation might have been explicable, the consequences – at least according to the PBC – had proved disastrous. Ted Howard explained that he had seen first-hand “the limitation of the Left in appealing to people, like my relatives. We had come to the point of glorifying Ho Chi Minh, and Mao, and like that it was very difficult to talk to people who weren’t on the Left.”²⁰ As Rifkin put it, the majority of ordinary Americans had come to view the New Left as “strange and at times even frightening”. Having “abandoned or rejected much of the heritage and most of the symbols to which the great majority of American people can

¹⁷ *The P.B.C.: A History*, 10; J. Anthony Lukas, ‘Who Owns 1776?’, *NYT*, 18 May 1975.

¹⁸ Jeremy Rifkin, ‘The Red, White, and Blue Left’ in Rifkin & John Rossen, *How To Commit Revolution American Style* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1973), 132, 134-135.

¹⁹ PBC grant proposal to the NEH, June 1972, PBC staff (probably Rifkin) in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial – The People’s Bicentennial Commission: Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, March 17 and 18, 1976* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1976), 102-103.

²⁰ Gordon, interview with Ted Howard, December 21, 2011, 1.

respond” the movement had found itself cut off and isolated.²¹ To remedy this situation, then, it was necessary to create a “Red, White and Blue Left” that would, it was hoped, appeal to Middle America by drawing on the nation’s indigenous revolutionary tradition, rather than looking to the likes of Che Guevara and Chairman Mao for inspiration.²² The PBC’s aim was to “reclaim the flag for dissent, to reclaim the American Revolution for revolutionaries.”²³ There was, Rifkin explained, “no sense” in vacating the patriotic terrain, and thereby allowing “the defenders of the system the advantage of presenting themselves as the true heirs and defenders of the American revolutionary tradition.”²⁴ Instead, Leftists should attempt to link their own demands to the “most noble and revolutionary principles of our common heritage” and invoke Sam Adams, Tom Paine, and the Boston artisans in order to “challenge existing institutions and those in power.” The upcoming Bicentennial, the PBC believed, represented a golden opportunity to “create a mass revolutionary consciousness in tune with the revolutionary legacy of 1776” and focus attention on the “un-American character of our economic and political leaders and the institutions they represent.”²⁵

The PBC’s claim that the New Left had given up on Americanism has long been accepted by many historians: activists’ flag-burning, their support for the Vietcong, and denunciation of ‘Amerika’ forms an important component of the so-called ‘rise and fall’ narrative that has been used to frame the 1960s.²⁶ In a 2006

²¹ Jeremy Rifkin, ‘Bicentennial’, *New American Movement* Nov-Dec 1971, reprinted in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 75.

²² *The P.B.C.: A History*, 10; J. Anthony Lukas, ‘Who Owns 1776?’, *NYT*, 18 May 1975. See also Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 72.

²³ Gordon, interview with David Helvarg, December 28, 2011, 1.

²⁴ Rifkin, ‘Bicentennial’, 76.

²⁵ Rifkin, ‘Bicentennial’, 76. 78. See also 77. Rifkin, ‘The Red, White, and Blue Left’, 136, 139.

²⁶ For a discussion of the ‘rise and fall’, or ‘declension’ narrative and its place in the historiography of the 1960s see Simon Hall, ‘Framing the American 1960s: A Historiographical Review’, *European Journal of American Culture* 31 (1) April 2012.

essay, Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin argued that, during the Vietnam era, many young opponents of the war came to attack America's national creed, dismiss "appeals to patriotism as a smokescreen for imperialist war and the squelching of dissent", and embrace a "passionate anti-Americanism". The result, they claimed, was that "by the late 1960s, Americanism had become virtually the exclusive property of the cultural and political right."²⁷ Certainly, when activists waved the flag of the NLF or denounced the United States as a 'monster' they made it much easier for their opponents to condemn the entire movement as dangerously subversive. Rifkin claimed that the New Left's "non-American style and rhetoric" had made it a "perfect target for the forces of reaction."²⁸

It would, though, be misleading to assume that the entire Left had given up on patriotism. While you would not necessarily know it from the newspaper coverage, American flags always heavily outnumbered those of the NLF at antiwar demonstrations, and activists often sought to ground their opposition to the war within the framework of Americanism. Vietnam Veterans Against the War, for instance, consistently framed their dissent as patriotic – in December 1971 some of the group's activists occupied the Statue of Liberty, arguing that the war in Vietnam represented a betrayal of everything that the monument was supposed to represent.²⁹ Appeals to patriotism featured heavily in the gay rights movement, too, and the Gay Activists Alliance, one of the most important gay rights organizations of the 1970s, regularly invoked the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (particularly the right

²⁷ Michael Kazin & Joseph A. McCartin, 'Introduction' in Kazin & McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6-7. See also Michael Kazin, 'A Patriotic Left', *Dissent*, Fall 2002.

²⁸ Rifkin, 'The Red, White, and Blue Left', 132.

²⁹ Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*, 16-17. The group also staged a protest at Lexington and Concord, arguing that "this present hour in history is again a time when people are trying to secure the liberty and peace upon which the country was founded." Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 40-41.

to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”) in support of gay rights.³⁰ The PBC’s attempt to forge a “Red, White and Blue Left” was, then, both a deliberate effort to counter popular perceptions that the radical Left was un-American, and indicative of the continuity of progressive traditions of patriotic protest.

(iii)

The primary focus of the PBC’s rhetoric and organizing was on the need for economic change, and it sought to harness Americanism in its efforts to bring about a fundamental transformation of the entire economy. When framing its critique of the nation’s economic system, for instance, the PBC drew frequent parallels with the Revolutionary era, arguing that a “Second American Revolution” was needed because a new breed of “corporate monarchs” had corrupted the work begun by the founders.³¹ An article published in the group’s newsletter, *Common Sense*, in early 1976 typified its rhetorical approach. It claimed that the “Redcoats” were “no longer coming. They are among us”; declared that a “new breed of Tory rules our nation”; and asserted that major American corporations, such as GM and Exxon, were the modern-day equivalent of King George III.³² Faced with this new ‘tyranny’, the PBC rallied under slogans that included “Democracy for the Economy!”, “Own Your Own Job!” and “Send a Message to Wall St!”, and it promised to “rais[e] aloft the banner of freedom led into battle two centuries ago by the Sons and Daughters of Liberty.”³³

The PBC set out its criticisms of the nation’s economic system in a detailed study, *Common Sense II*, published in 1975. It pointed out that a huge amount of power and wealth had become concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations,

³⁰ Simon Hall, ‘The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (3), September 2010, 544, 551.

³¹ *The P.B.C.: A History* (Washington, D.C.: The People’s Bicentennial Commission, c.1976), 5.

³² ‘1976: The Year for Revolution’, *Common Sense*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*; *The P.B.C.: A History*, 7.

and claimed that the 8 largest oil companies controlled 64% of oil reserves and 60% of all natural gas, and that the 200 biggest corporations controlled two-thirds of America's manufacturing assets. Sitting atop these "corporate pyramids" were "a handful of wealthy families who", they declared, owned more than 40% of the nation's private wealth. Not only was the hard work of ordinary Americans being exploited for the benefit of shareholders and management, the American workplace itself had become "a bastion of autocratic dictatorial rule that defies every principle of democracy that we profess to adhere to as a people."³⁴ In contrast to the "centralized and authoritative control" of the "corporate money men", the PBC championed an economic version of participatory democracy in which "economic power" would be "exercised by the people." The choice, they claimed, was simple:

We can continue to live under the control of these giant institutions and the select few who run them, forever renouncing any claim of democratic control over our lives and the life of our nation. Or we can exercise our God-given right to abolish these (manmade) institutions of tyranny, and replace them with new forms that provide for our equal and democratic participation in the economic decisions that affect our lives and our country.³⁵

Insisting that their vision of economic democracy was rooted in the nation's founding ideals, the PBC argued that only by translating the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" into the economic arena would Americans be able to "fulfill our hopes and aspirations as a free people in a democratic society."³⁶ The PBC even issued their own 'Declaration of Economic Independence', which called for the transformation of corporations into "decentralized economic enterprises", with "ownership and control being shared jointly by the workers in the plants and by the local communities in which they operate." "Similar patterns of shared representative

³⁴ PBC, *Common Sense II* (1975) reprinted in *The P.B.C.: A History*, 20-21 ; 'July 4, 1976: The Revolution Continues', *Common Sense*, July 4, 1976, special issue, 5.

³⁵ PBC, *Common Sense II* (1975) reprinted in *The P.B.C.: A History*, 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

control” should, they argued, be “exercised on a regional and National level.”³⁷ The organization also argued that tax loopholes for corporations should be closed and the burden on ordinary people reduced, and called for the formation of local TEA (Tax Equity for Americans) parties to push for a “radical redistribution of wealth and power.” The PBC reassured the public that there was nothing “un-American” about this – in fact, they argued that it would be “un-American” to give up on the “preservation and reconstruction of real democracy.”³⁸

In its efforts to generate support for its radical vision of “economic democracy” and win over ‘middle’ America, the PBC adopted a strikingly populist approach. By doing so they hoped to capitalize on growing dissatisfaction with both the parlous state of the economy and American business itself. Polls during this period, for instance, regularly indicated widespread support for the idea that too much power was now in the hands of a few, large, corporations; the ‘businessman as villain’ became a common trope in popular entertainment (one conservative journalist complained how in “almost every episode of *Columbo* a rich businessman has killed someone and seeks to bully Columbo into leaving him alone because of his high status ... Not even the smallest of businessmen is exempt from the mark of Cain”); and even mainstream politicians, like Senators Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson and Frank Church, lashed out at the oil companies and the giant multinationals.³⁹ Little wonder, then, that the PBC felt no need to pull its punches. In the ‘Declaration of Economic Independence’, for instance, it claimed that “America’s Giant Corporations” had “seized control over the great land and resources of our country”; “systematically destroyed thousands of small businesses and forced millions of Americans to become wage serfs for the wealthy owners”; and “forced millions of Americans into

³⁷ PBC, ‘The Declaration of Economic Independence’ in *The PBC: A History*, 76.

³⁸ Lepore, *The Whites Of Their Eyes*, 84; *America’s Birthday...*, 51.

³⁹ Sandbrook, *Mad As Hell*, 333.

unemployment lines by systematically closing down their American plants and moving their business operations abroad so they can hire cheaper labor and reap still greater profits for their owners.”⁴⁰ Some local PBC chapters campaigned against hikes in rates by local utility companies and the exploitation of local resources, including coal, by giant corporations.⁴¹ Nationally, the organization criticized American wheat sales to the Soviet Union, arguing that they had forced a sharp rise in the price of bread and other wheat products (the landmark 1972 trade agreement, which saw 440 million bushels of wheat sold to the USSR for \$700 million, had also been criticised by the U.S. General Accounting Office for helping to push up domestic food prices).⁴² In Murfreesboro, Tennessee, PBC activists at Middle Tennessee State University burned an effigy of Ned Cook, a “grain merchant who made a killing off of the sale of American wheat to the Russians.” Selected as the group’s “Tory of the Month”, the chairman of Cook Industries was denounced as a “corporate Baron and notorious weasel” who, it was alleged, had secured special tax breaks after pressurizing the state legislature and made \$55 million in un-taxed profits from the wheat deal. After local PBC chair Rick Edmondsun “blasted” the untaxed profits as a “slap in the face of the working middle class people of Tennessee” and an example of “corporate tyranny”, the effigy of Cook – complete with cigar and a sign that read “In Wheat We Trust” – was set alight, and marshmallows toasted over the remains.⁴³

⁴⁰ *The PBC: A History*, 76-77.

⁴¹ ‘PBC News and Reviews’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), 4; ‘PBC News and Reviews’, *Common Sense*, vol. 4, no. 1., 6.

⁴² See Declaration of Economic Independence, reprinted in *The PBC: A History*, 76; Arvin Donley, ‘The inside story of a groundbreaking trade agreement’, 2 July 2013, world-grain.com at <http://www.world-grain.com/News/News%20Home/Features/2013/7/The%20inside%20story%20of%20a%20groundbreaking%20trade%20agreement.aspx?cck=1>.

⁴³ *Common Sense*, vol. 4, no. 1, 6.

The PBC's populism was, in fact, frequently combined with provocative street theatre and creative, countercultural protest. According to David Helvarg, the group's west coast co-ordinator, the PBC was "both very serious and very good spirited", it was "a little Tom Paine and a little Abbie Hoffman."⁴⁴ Viewing the Bicentennial as a "context, a psychology, a dramatic moment in time that could be used to speak to tens of millions of Americans about the society's collective hopes and frustrations and aspirations", the organization placed street theatre at the heart of its efforts to "rekindle the true revolutionary Spirit of '76".⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, the iconography of the American Revolution infused the PBC's style: American flags (including the 13-star and the Bennington version, which contains a large '76' in the canton), tricorner hats, and placards and banners quoting the founding fathers or bearing 'Don't Tread On Me' and 'Spirit of '76' slogans were ever-present at PBC rallies.

The group's supporters also made use of liberty poles and liberty trees, and staged various entertaining attacks on effigies.⁴⁶ In Philadelphia on 2 July 1975, for instance, activists gathered beneath a Liberty Pole in the grounds of City Hall as a "Bill of Grievances", listing a series of alleged abuses of civil rights and civil liberties that the city's residents had endured, was read aloud.⁴⁷ Two days later, in San Diego, over 1,000 people attended a demonstration at which David Helvarg attacked the "economic royalists of our own day" and led a chant of "Live free or die" as "individuals dragged corporate effigies" on to the beach to be burned.⁴⁸ In Ann Arbor, around forty PBC supporters – some dressed in colonial attire, others carrying American flags and a 'Don't tread on me' banner – marched to the construction site of a new McDonalds restaurant to the strains of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy.' Local activist

⁴⁴ Gordon, 'Interview with David Helvarg', 9, 8.

⁴⁵ *The P.B.C.: A History*, 9-10.

⁴⁶ See, for example, 'P.B.C. News and Review: Chicago', *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), 5.

⁴⁷ 'P.B.C. News and Review: Philadelphia', *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), 4.

⁴⁸ 'P.B.C. News and Review: San Diego', *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), 4.

Sue Wyborski explained that the demonstration was designed to focus attention on “corporate control of the American food industry, of which Ronald McDonald is a symbol.” Protesters chanted ‘Ketchup, mustard, pickles, relish; we are getting more rebellious’, and a ‘Declaration of Food Rights and Grievances’ was read aloud. After “pledging support of the Declaration with ‘our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor’ [as the signers of the Declaration of Independence had done 200 years before], the PBC patriots hung the effigy of Ronald McDonald from the limbs of a [nearby] tree...to the cheers of the assembled crowd.”⁴⁹ The following year Treasury Secretary William Simon was hung in effigy in Newark, in a protest at his support for tax breaks for big business, and an effigy of Earl Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture, was “greased and grained” in Milwaukee amid anger at his links to agribusiness.⁵⁰

The anniversaries of major events in the nation’s struggle for independence were particularly attractive targets for the PBC, which staged imaginative and boisterous alternatives to the official celebrations. On the morning of 16 December 1973, the 200th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, 1,000 activists gathered at the city’s historic Faneuil Hall (1,000 more waited outside) to discuss the oil crisis (the OPEC oil embargo, launched that October, had precipitated a major energy and economic crisis), and denounce President Nixon (who was by now deeply embroiled in the Watergate scandal). Then, amid “war hoops and Indian cries”, they marched through downtown chanting, “Nixon, Exxon, ITT, Drive the tyrants in the sea!” The protest was soon dubbed an ‘Oil Party’. PBC co-director Ted Howard described how protesters carried revolutionary-era flags (including the ‘Gadsden flag’, which features a coiled rattlesnake and the words ‘don’t tread on me’), effigies of major oil corporations, and banners proclaiming “Long Live the American Revolution”, “John

⁴⁹ ‘Ronald McDonald Hung In Effigy’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 4.

⁵⁰ *Common Sense*, vol. 4, no. 1, 7. See also Tom Mathews with Jane Whitmore, ‘Up-to-the-Minutemen’, *Newsweek*, 19 May 1975, 29.

Hancock Didn't Sell Life Insurance", and "The Spirit of '76 Lives".⁵¹ Despite the freezing weather and falling snow, perhaps as many as 25,000 joined the rally at Boston Harbor – where protesters "roared" for Nixon to be impeached. Some carried signs in support of women's liberation and gay rights, while others attacked the war in Vietnam and recent coup in Chile. The PBC also provided a "people's navy", featuring rowing boats and canoes, which moved toward a replica of the *Beaver*, the 18th century sailing ship whose cargo of tea had caused so much trouble 200 years before. Shortly after the official re-enactment of the Boston Tea Party had ended, a small number of protesters boarded the boat where they unveiled "Impeach Nixon" and "Heed the People, Tax the Rich" banners. They also threw oil drums overboard. One PBC activist, wearing a giant 5-foot papier-mâché Nixon head "adorned with a golden crown whose points were labeled with names of U.S. oil companies", rowed around the *Beaver*, waving his hands in the familiar 'V'-style; the head was ultimately hanged from a scaffold.⁵² It was, Howard declared, "a hoot."⁵³

Two years later the PBC targeted the 200th anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord. On the evening of April 18 thousands of vehicles, leaving from points across New England, converged on Concord in a recreation of Paul Revere's famous midnight ride. This time the message was "Big Business is coming! Big Business is coming!"⁵⁴ As many as 40,000 – described by Andrew Kopkind in the *New York Review of Books* as "the infantry of Woodstock Nation" – attended a

⁵¹ Ted Howard, 'Two, Three Many Boston Tea Parties', reprinted in *The P.B.C.: A History*, 37-39.

⁵² 'The Tea & Oil Party, 1973', in *The P.B.C.: A History*, 35-36; Ted Howard, 'Two, Three Many Boston Tea Parties', reprinted in *The P.B.C.: A History*, 37-39; Dorothy McGhee, '20,000 Rebels Rise Up At Boston Oil Party – Dump King, Exxon!', *Common Sense*, vol. 2, no. 1 (January 1974), 1; John Kifner, 'Impeachment of Nixon Urged at Re-Enactment of Boston Tea Party', *NYT*, 17 December 1973, 26; Jill Lepore, 'Tea and Sympathy: Who owns the American Revolution?', *The New Yorker*, 3 May 2010.

⁵³ An Oral History of the 1976 Celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, Tammy Gordon, 'Interview with Ted Howard', 21 December 2011, 4. Copy in possession of author.

⁵⁴ *The P.B.C.: A History*, 51; '45,000 Patriots Gather at PBC Rally for Economic Democracy', *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 9; John Kifner, '160,000 Mark Two 1775 Battles; Concord Protesters Jeer Ford', *NYT*, 20 April 1975, 1, 49.

rally, where they heard Florence Luscomb, a 92-year-old suffragist, claim that the “principles for which the American Revolution was fought have been betrayed.” Actors read extracts from the works of Sam Adams, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Abigail Adams, while Phil Ochs, Arlo Guthrie, Holly Near, and The Persuasions were among the headline musical acts.⁵⁵ In the early morning, with ‘Don’t Tread on Me’ flags fluttering in the breeze and effigies of U.S. corporations hanging from the trees, the PBC’s Declaration of Economic Independence was read aloud and endorsed by the crowd.⁵⁶ Around 9:30, President Ford delivered a speech at North Bridge as part of the official commemorations (in an irony not lost on the protesters, he delivered his remarks from the “British” side of the river). As the president called on Americans to “make and accept” revolutionary technological, economic, and social change “with greater order and restraint”, PBC supporters jeered, and chanted “Jobs not speeches” and “Live free or die”. A handful of protesters, who waded into the river, a huge American flag flying high above their heads, were forced back by police. It was a highly symbolic clash over the meaning of Americanism: the PBC described those who had attended the protest as the “new Sons and Daughters of Liberty”, facing down the “apologists and protectors of today’s economic royalists.”⁵⁷ Kopkind, who had made his name covering the tumultuous protests of the 1960s, was not

⁵⁵ *The P.B.C.: A History*, 51-52; ‘The Second Midnight Ride to Concord’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, ‘They Spoke and Sang for Economic Democracy’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 12; Tom Mathews with Jane Whitmore, ‘Up-to-the-Minutemen’, *Newsweek*, 19 May 1975, 29; Andrew Kopkind, ‘The Spirit of ’76’, *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 1975, 29-30; An Oral History of the 1976 Celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, Tammy Gordon, ‘Interview with David Helvarg’, 28 December 2011, 2. Copy in possession of author.

⁵⁶ *The P.B.C.: A History*, 52; ‘New Patriots Unanimously Adopt Declaration of Independence’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 16.

⁵⁷ ‘Thousands Boo Ford Speech; Recapture North Bridge’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 19; *The P.B.C.: A History*, 52; John Kifner, ‘160,000 Mark Two 1775 Battles; Concord Protesters Jeer Ford’, *NYT*, 20 April 1975, 49; David M. Alpern with Bernice Buresh, Sylvester Monroe and Jeff B. Copeland, ‘Not So Happy Birthday’, *Newsweek*, 28 April 1975, 32. For Ford’s speech see ‘Remarks at the Old North Bridge, Concord, Massachusetts, 19 April 1975 at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4847> accessed 17 November 2010; Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 41-43.

convinced, writing that the various speeches “fell on surprisingly polite but inactive ears”, and claiming that “only a minority of the multitudes came out of political interest or conviction; despite the PBC’s worthiest hopes and claims, most of the crowd was there ‘for a good time’.”⁵⁸

(iv)

The PBC’s invocation of the ‘spirit of ‘76’, and its wider claims to patriotism, did not go unchallenged. Conservative critics sought to portray the group as a dangerous, radical force that was using a cloak of patriotism to deliberately obscure its desire to bring about a socialist revolution in the United States. One early broadside came on 20 December 1973, when Missouri’s Richard H. Ichord – a long-standing anti-communist and chair of the House Internal Security Committee (the successor to HUAC) – denounced the PBC from the floor of the Congress. Ichord sought to discredit the PBC by drawing attention to its roots in, and links to, leftist organizations and activists, and he singled out John Rossen, a leading member of the Chicago chapter of the PBC, as a particular cause of concern. Ichord described Rossen as the “owner of a ... Chicago moviehouse of dubious reputation”, a former Communist organizer, and a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who “still affects ‘revolutionary’ garb consisting of black suit, black turtleneck and black beret.” The Congressman argued that the PBC’s strategy of forging a “Red, White and Blue Left” could be traced to Rossen’s earlier call (developed in a series of pamphlets published from 1969 onwards) for a “New Patriotism.” The “New Patriotism” was, in Rossen’s words, based on the notion that “the American Revolution is a continuing, ongoing liberatory process, an unending drama of ever-present conflict and the

⁵⁸ Kopkind, ‘The Spirit of ‘76’, 29.

forward march of human over property rights.” Any “political movement or party based on the New Patriotism”, Rossen explained, would be “socialist, humanist and internationalist in substance and content” but “nationalist in form and rhetoric...” Patriotism, then, would be used tactically for the purposes of building popular support and to counter the argument that “radicalism and revolution are alien or un-American.” Attacking the PBC for having “duped many responsible Americans into believing that it was a legitimate patriotic organization” involved in celebrating the founding of the nation, Ichord declared that it was, in fact, “a new revolutionary force based on a combination of Marxism and American nationalism.”⁵⁹

Eighteen months later, the *Chicago Tribune*'s veteran reporter Bob Wiedrich described John Rossen as an “over-the-hill Leftist” and former supporter of Stalin who was, through his involvement with the PBC, “doing his best to see to it that Americans see only red during their red, white and blue Bicentennial celebration.” Wiedrich characterized the PBC demonstration at Concord as a “juvenile beer party” involving a “hooligan brigade” of teenage PBC supporters. It had, he said, been little more than Sixties-style “guerrilla theater...in the guise of red, white, and blue bunting.” Wiedrich also claimed that the activists’ heckling of President Ford on the morning of April 19 “was an insult to the brave and embattled Americans who stood their ground against British redcoats on that same sacred spot 200 years earlier.”⁶⁰ It was a line repeated in the *New York Sunday News*, which decried the “stoned activists” who had mouthed “course and drunken epithets” at the Commander in

⁵⁹ Congressional Record, 22 December 1973, Congress-Session: 93-1 (1973), Extensions of Remarks, 43442-43443.

⁶⁰ Bob Wiedrich, ‘Seeing Only Red for the Bicentennial’, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 August 1975, 5. On Weidrich see Erin Meyer, ‘Robert Wiedrich, 1927-2012’, *Chicago Tribune*, 15 April 2012 at http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-15/news/ct-met-obit-wiedrich-20120416_1_city-hall-reporter-watchdog-neighborhood-news-section accessed 20 November 2015.

Chief, and argued that they had “defile[d] the spirit of the Revolution.”⁶¹ The American Legion, meanwhile, launched a campaign to remove PBC publications from the nation’s libraries – even suggesting that patriotic legionnaires check out the books themselves and then refuse to return them, paying the fines if necessary as a patriotic duty.⁶²

The PBC’s apparent hostility to America’s free enterprise capitalist system and its attacks on corporations and big business were also latched onto by critics. In a 20 December 1975 editorial, for instance, the *Chicago Tribune* denounced the PBC for its “running tirade against the American economic system”. Claiming the organization had an “affinity” for Communism, the *Tribune* declared that while PBC literature was “clothed in patriotic colors” the group’s activists were “imposters whose purpose is to destroy our economic system.”⁶³ A few months later, an article in South Carolina’s *Spartanburg Herald Journal* stated that the PBC’s “crusade against private enterprise” and attempts to “re-create the American Revolution along the lines of Marxist ideology” were “enough to set our Founding Fathers spinning in their graves.”⁶⁴ In this telling, the activists of the PBC were more akin to traitors than patriots: “However loudly its members may proclaim themselves to be the spiritual heirs of Sam Adams and Tom Paine”, the paper declared, “their deliberate attempt to pervert the real significance of our struggle for independence more clearly identifies them with Benedict Arnold than with the sons of liberty.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Quoted in Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 43.

⁶² *The PBC: A History*, 6.

⁶³ Editorial, ‘Hijacking the Bicentennial’, *Chicago Tribune*, 20 December 1975, S6

⁶⁴ On the heckling of Reagan see, for example, David M. Alpern with Thomas M. DeFrank in Washington and Gerald C. Lubenow on the Reagan Campaign, ‘A Dose of “Common Sense”’, *Newsweek*, 26 January 1976, 17.

⁶⁵ H. C. Gordon, ‘Hijacking the Bicentennial’, *Spartanburg Herald Journal*, 1 February 1976 (South Carolina), 3.

The questioning of the PBC's patriotism culminated in March 1976, when the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee held two days of "closed-door" hearings into the organization.⁶⁶ In his opening remarks on the morning of March 17, Mississippi Senator James Eastland explained that:

it is important that the Congress and the public be aware of the existence of organizations of the revolutionary left, which seek to pervert the legitimate meaning of the American Revolution, and who with the tacit connivance of front organizations, have engaged in a massive campaign to try and 'capture' the Bicentennial celebration for themselves.

By hearing testimony from experts in the study of far-left organizations, and by exploring the facts objectively, Eastland stated, the committee planned to "peel back the patriotic veneer" of the PBC.⁶⁷ The first witness was Francis M. Watson, Jr., a retired army officer with expertise in counterinsurgency and propaganda. In his opening statement, Watson set out his stall: while it claimed to be a patriotic organization dedicated to restoring the nation's founding ideals, the PBC was, in fact, "a propaganda and organizing tool of a small group of New Left political extremists" who were intent on using "the Bicentennial to further their own goals."⁶⁸ Watson quoted extensively from Rifkin's own writings and PBC literature to support his argument that the group's adoption of the rhetoric and symbols of the American Revolution was part of an attempt to promote radical socialism in a "sanitized" form. The aim, he claimed, was to draw support from people who would otherwise "not have touched" the PBC "with the proverbial '10-foot pole'."⁶⁹ According to Watson the "absolute core of the whole PBC idea" was "the propaganda strategy of trying to

⁶⁶ On "closed-door" see *The PBC: A History*, 61.

⁶⁷ *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-5; see also 6-7.

transfer the patriotic attachment for the revolutionary figures, events and spirit of 1776 to an endorsement of leftist revolutionary aims in the 1970s.”⁷⁰

In her testimony the following day, Mary O. Walton, a patriotic Illinois housewife and self-styled expert in the study of revolutionary groups, similarly painted the PBC as the “brainchild” of John Rossen and expressed her alarm that the organization had apparently been able to gain widespread acceptance, and secure a good deal of favorable publicity.⁷¹ Using apocalyptic language, she claimed that the “radical Old and New Left, cloaked with patriotic trappings” was “diabolically using the commemoration of our Nation’s birth” to “ensnare Americans and lead them down the path to a Soviet or Castro style socialism.”⁷² Such claims also found their way into mainstream political discourse: back in October 1975, the former California governor Ronald Reagan had condemned the PBC’s attempts to “prove that the American Revolution was in reality a kissing cousin to Marxism and Leninism.” A few months later, in the midst of his failed bid to wrest the Republican Party’s presidential nomination away from Gerald Ford, Reagan rubbished Rifkin’s arguments, telling a crowd of Dartmouth students that he did not associate the nation’s founders with “the dungeon states created by Lenin and the others.”⁷³

Although the PBC had “saluted” the North Vietnamese/NLF victory following the fall of Saigon at the end of April 1975, there was no convincing evidence that the group was a tool of Soviet, Cuban or Chinese Communist forces, or that it was a doctrinaire Marxist organization.⁷⁴ In fact, its founders had quite deliberately sought

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁷¹ Ibid., 37-40, 40-41.

⁷² Ibid., 41.

⁷³ Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 606-607.

⁷⁴ Editorial – ‘The War Is Over’, *Common Sense*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2; Rossen claimed to have “reject[ed] Marxism and Stalinism and Maoism” and “abandoned any ideas that were purely Marxist”. He also criticized the U.S. Left for its addiction to Marxist dogma and failing to take into account the “unique realities of American society”, in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 87, 90-91.

to distance themselves from the fractious, ideological politics of the traditional Left.⁷⁵ Moreover, the PBC had hardly been shy about its biting criticisms of America's economic system or its proposed solutions. As Robert Reinhold pointed out in the *New York Times*, the group had "never concealed its true intentions."⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the message from its conservative critics was clear enough: the PBC's claims to patriotism were disingenuous; little more than a tactical ruse, designed to exploit the Bicentennial celebrations and trick Americans into supporting an organization that was far more radical – and more dangerous – than it initially appeared. Rather than representing any sort of continuity with the ideals of the Founding Fathers, the PBC was committed to un-American values and constituted a menace to the nation.⁷⁷

(v)

Assessing the legacy of the PBC is no easy task. On the one hand, the group could boast some genuine achievements. It scored an early and high profile victory when it passed leaked secret memos from inside the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission to the press, resulting in front-page claims that the official body tasked with planning the national celebrations had become little more than a partisan tool of the Nixon administration and a slave to big business. The leaked documents revealed ARBC chairman David Mahoney (CEO of Norton Simon, Inc., the makers of Canada Dry) declaring that "We, the businessmen, have much to gain if we take a positive leadership role in the nation's 200th anniversary", and the Commission's director, Jack LeVant, arguing that the Bicentennial "could be the greatest opportunity Nixon, the Party and the Government has as a beacon of light for reunification within the

⁷⁵ Gordon, 'Interview with Ted Howard', 3.

⁷⁶ Robert Reinhold, 'Radical Group Presses New Bicentennial View', *NYT*, 18 January 1976, 38.

⁷⁷ On the history of 'Un-Americanism' – and the ways in which the term is routinely traded by political opponents – see George Lewis, 'An Un-American Introduction', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4 (November 2013), 871-79.

nation and with the world.” Although an official investigation would later dismiss some of the more serious charges, the Commission had been severely weakened (LaVant resigned on 1 August 1972); in 1974, it was finally disbanded and replaced with the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA).⁷⁸ Even such a conservative luminary as James J. Kilpatrick was moved to write that the PBC appeared to be “a lot closer to the true Spirit of ’76 than the promoters, politicians and public relations men in charge of the ARBC.”⁷⁹

The PBC also secured favorable press coverage for its critique of the crass commercialism of the ‘Buy-centennial’ (among the treats offered up by enterprising retailers were patriotic yo-yos, clocks, egg timers, beer cans – and even a Bicentennial toilet seat).⁸⁰ An April 1975 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, described the PBC as a “private activist group” apparently “motivated by an old-fashioned egalitarianism” that “eschews commercial products altogether” in favor of distributing “literature aimed at reacquainting Americans with social, economic and political issues in the Revolutionary era that still exist today.”⁸¹

The PBC was also effective, and highly professional, in promoting its message, helped in part by an annual budget that, at its peak, reached \$300,000. Much of the money came from royalties from the sale of publications, and grants from bodies including the Stern Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities (leading Ronald Reagan to complain about “gullible” federal bureaucrats). One high-profile donor was Stewart Mott, described in a *New York*

⁷⁸ Capozzola, “‘It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country’”, 32, 37; Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 231; Lieber, ‘Jeremy Rifkin’s Big Beefs’, 29; Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 74-75.

⁷⁹ *The PBC: A History*, 33-34.

⁸⁰ On the commercialization of the Bicentennial see, for example, ‘Marketing: Bucks from the Bicentennial’, *Time*, 29 September 1975; Capozzola, “‘It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country’”, 33; Lawrence Van Gelder, ‘Why 1976 is Beginning to Look Like \$19.76’, *NYT*, 3 April 1976, 45.

⁸¹ Gail Bronson, ‘The Spirit of (19)76; Is it a Bicentennial or a Buy-Centennial?’, *Wall Street Journal*, 15 April 1975 in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 82-84.

Times report as “the General Motors heir and sugar daddy to the left”, who, as Rifkin put it, had “been helpful”.⁸² The relatively generous budget enabled the PBC to place expensive, full-page adverts, including copies of its ‘Declaration of Economic Independence’ in the *New York Times*; on one occasion it spent \$80,000 on a 650,000-piece direct-mail solicitation; it also secured the endorsement of the Organization of American Historians for its Bicentennial educational display. In March 1975 Rifkin boasted that 65,000 churches, as well as thousands of school boards, libraries and community groups, were using the PBC’s study guides and other materials.⁸³ The circulation of the group’s newsletter, *Common Sense*, peaked at around 70,000; a radio series, *The Voices of ’76*, was aired on 1,000 stations; and the group also produced a television program that was picked up by 100 affiliates.⁸⁴ The critic Gene Shalit even reviewed *America’s Birthday: A Planning and Activity Guide for Citizens’ Participation During the Bicentennial Years* on NBC’s *The Today Show*. The guide, which was published by Simon Schuster in 1974, provided citizens, teachers, students, churches and community groups with ideological instruction and practical advice for creating exhibitions, forming organizations, and staging political protests.⁸⁵

The PBC did, though, suffer a major setback in the spring of 1976 when it launched “Campaign Corporate Exposure.” The group first wrote to the wives of business leaders suggesting that they ask their husbands “probing questions” in an

⁸² Lieber, ‘Jeremy Rifkin’s Big Beefs’, 29; *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 25, 86; Robert Reinhold, ‘Radical Group Presses New Bicentennial View’, *NYT*, 18 January 1976, 38; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, 606.

⁸³ Robert Reinhold, ‘Radical Group Presses New Bicentennial View’, *NYT*, 18 January 1976, 38; ‘The Government Bicentennial Is Very Shallow’, interview with Rifkin, in *U.S. News & World Report*, 24 March 1975, in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 84-85. For OAH see Walton testimony in *Steal*, 63. On proliferation of PBC literature see Walton testimony in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 50.

⁸⁴ Christopher B. Daly, ‘The People’s Bicentennial Commission: Slouching Towards the Economic Revolution’, *The Harvard Crimson*, 28 April 1975; *The PBC: A History*, 28.

⁸⁵ See Walton testimony in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 56; *The PBC: A History*, esp. 6-7; Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 75-76.

attempt to uncover evidence of corporate corruption and criminal activity (cassette tapes were helpfully included, so that the interrogations could be recorded). It then followed up with a letter to “10,000 of the nation’s highest placed secretaries”, offering a \$25,000 reward to anyone providing “concrete evidence” that led to the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of “a chief executive officer of one of America’s Fortune 500 corporations for criminal activity relating to corporate operations.”⁸⁶ The response from the mainstream press was ferocious. On 6 May 1976 the *New York Times* published an editorial, ‘Bicentennial Follies’, which claimed that while the PBC’s “lofty proclamations about a ‘reaffirmation of the principles of American democracy’” had “long since been superseded by sophomoric pranks”, this new development was far more disturbing. The group had “stooped to that oldest of totalitarian subversions – the organizing of internal spy systems in family, business or community.” As a result, the *Times* declared, the PBC had “totally destroyed whatever credibility it had left...”⁸⁷

In the end, the PBC went out with a whimper. Jeremy Rifkin had promised a crowd of between 150,000-250,000 in Washington, D.C., on 4 July 1976, to “call for a rebirth of the democratic promise of social, political and economic justice.”⁸⁸ In the event, only 5,000 turned out to march from the Jefferson Memorial to the Capitol under a banner proclaiming “Independence from Big Business.”⁸⁹ Although David Helvarg believed that a rally in Boston, “where we had a history”, would have fared better, the PBC’s best days were, in all honesty, already behind it. As Ted Howard explained, “it was ... clear we were at the end of this process, because we weren’t

⁸⁶ Marilyn Bender, ‘Staff Informers Offered Reward’, *NYT*, 12 April 1976, F1, 46; Bodnar, 236; ‘The Bicentennial: In Dubious Battle’, *Newsweek*, 26 April 1976, 91.

⁸⁷ ‘Bicentennial Follies’, *NYT*, 6 May 1976, 36; Capozzola, ‘“It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country”’, 37; Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 78-79.

⁸⁸ PBC press releases printed in *The Attempt to Steal the Bicentennial*, 188, 189.

⁸⁹ John L. Hess, ‘A Day of Picnics, Pomp, Pageantry and Protest’, *NYT*, 5 July 1976, 18; Capozzola, ‘“It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country”’, 39; Lieber, ‘Jeremy Rifkin’s Big Beefs’, 30.

going to slog it through till 1783, continue to the Constitution and the War of 1812 [laughing]. We knew this was the final shot.”⁹⁰ Although the group re-launched as the ‘People’s Business Commission’ in the fall of 1976, it quickly faded into obscurity.⁹¹

In the final analysis, the failure of the PBC’s attempts to create a “Red, White and Blue Left” owed less to conservative charges that it was ‘un-American’, its own missteps, or the ‘sophomoric’ behaviour of some of its supporters, than to broader political currents that lay largely outside its control. For one thing, the PBC was on a different track to the wider American Left – which, more fragmented than ever following the disintegration of Students for a Democratic Society, was becoming ever more focused on social and cultural affairs, at the expense of the sort of radical economic agenda favoured by the PBC. As Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin have noted, during the 1970s “the activist Left largely shed traditional Marxist concerns for issues centering on the workplace and economic growth, groping instead for a new synthesis of environmentalism, feminism, antimilitarism, and interracial solidarity.”⁹² It is telling that, while only a few thousand turned out for the PBC’s final rally in Washington, some 30,000 white radicals, feminists, gay rights activists,

⁹⁰ Tammy Gordon, ‘Interview with David Helvarg’, 4, 6; Tammy Gordon, ‘Interview with Ted Howard’, 6.

⁹¹ On the name change see *The PBC: A History*, 78. The group’s most prominent activists have fared better: Jeremy Rifkin has enjoyed a long, and controversial career, as a political activist and organizer – campaigning against biotechnology, genetic engineering, GM foods, and the American beef industry; after leaving the PBC, Ted Howard worked as the communications director for The Hunger Project (a California-based non-profit organization, dedicated to sustainable strategies to end world hunger); while David Helvarg founded (and continues to lead) the marine-conservation group, Blue Frontier. See David Lieber, ‘Jeremy Rifkin’s Big Beefs’, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 1992; Dick Thompson, ‘The Most Hated Man In Science: JEREMY RIFKIN’, *Time*, 4 December 1989; Phillip M. Boffey, ‘Working Profile: Jeremy Rifkin’, *New York Times*, 11 April 1984, B10; Steven H. Lee, ‘Picking Food Fights’, *The Dallas Morning News*, 10 May 1994, 1D; <http://www.foet.org/JeremyRifkin.htm>; Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 140; <http://thp.org> and <http://www.bluefront.org>; and Helvarg, *Saved by the Sea*.

⁹² Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, ‘The Failure and Success of the New Radicalism’ in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 229. See also Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1996). Ted Howard, email correspondence with the author, 21 May 2016.

Puerto Ricans, and black nationalists, attended a rival event in Philadelphia, where they heard Elaine Brown denounce American history as a story of “murder and plunder”, and cheered calls for Puerto Rican independence.⁹³

Although running against the grain of the American Left was always going to be a challenge, there are grounds for thinking that the patriotic, populist radicalism of the PBC might have fared better, especially given the growing anti-business and anti-elitist sentiment that characterised much of the 1970s.⁹⁴ A national opinion poll, undertaken by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, and commissioned by the PBC in July 1975, revealed that 45% agreed that both the Democrats and Republicans favoured big business over the average worker; 58% agreed that the nation’s major corporations wielded significant influence over the political process; and 49% agreed that Big Business was the source of most of the nation’s ills.⁹⁵ There is also some evidence – albeit anecdotal and impressionistic – that the PBC’s message was capable of resonating outside of traditional left constituencies. Writing to *Common Sense* in 1975, ‘M. P. H.’ of Forest Hills, New York – a self-described “hardhat construction electrician and one time organizing secretary for the Free Libertarian Party of New York State” who was “not a ‘leftist’ by any stretch of the imagination” – expressed his “general agreement” with the PBC’s arguments. There was, he said, “no point in pretending that the Corporate State which has been built around the icon of Free Enterprise is anything but a clear and present danger to American liberty and world peace.” Although he “strongly dislike[d] supporting a group” that had “hailed” the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese, he felt that he had “little choice if I want to

⁹³ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 236-37.

⁹⁴ Sandbrook, *Mad As Hell*, xiii, 333.

⁹⁵ *The PBC: A History*, 55; Robert Reinhold, ‘Radical Group Presses New Bicentennial View’, *NYT*, 18 January 1976, 38.

see some efforts made to resume the American experiment.”⁹⁶ David Helvarg, meanwhile, recalled an encounter with a police officer during a PBC protest outside the offices of the Lockheed Corporation: “this cop [came] up and ask[ed] what we were doing. We told him we were tar and feathering it [in effigy]. By the end of the conversation this cop who was ready to arrest me when he came up was laughing. It was a good conversation ... it was a unique moment.”⁹⁷

Ultimately, though, the kind of populist approach favoured by the PBC would prove a more powerful source of strength for conservatives than for those on the Left. Anti-tax protesters and opponents of big government, for instance, secured major successes in the late 1970s, most notably with the passage of Proposition 13 in California, by attacking bureaucratic, political and corporate elites (while, in recent years, much of the PBC’s style has been adopted by the Tea Party movement).⁹⁸ And, while historians continue to debate the exact moment that American political culture shifted decisively to the right, Natasha Zaretsky has made a persuasive case that the Bicentennial itself helped to pave the way for the triumph of modern American conservatism. Her 2007 book, *No Direction Home*, frames the anniversary as an “attempt to redress the intertwined anxieties about national and family decline that had come to the fore by mid-decade.” By encouraging a decentralised, localized celebration, detached from the federal government, and by valorising the “pure American family” of the revolutionary era – “economically self-reliant and ostensibly freed from the corrupting influences of modern state intervention and mass consumption” – ARBA officials shaped a Bicentennial that, Zaretsky argues, helped to “articulate a widening public sentiment against the government over the course of

⁹⁶ *Common Sense* vol. 3, no. 3, 8.

⁹⁷ Gordon, ‘Interview with David Helvarg’, 9.

⁹⁸ Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*, chapter 5; Jill Lepore, *The Whites Of Their Eyes*, 84. See also Lepore, ‘Tea and Sympathy’, *The New Yorker*, 3 May 2010.

the 1970s.”⁹⁹ By the middle of the 1970s, she claims, “one could already make out the contours of the Reagan Revolution that was just around the corner.”¹⁰⁰

On March 31, 1976, while campaigning for the GOP’s presidential nomination, Ronald Reagan had told the American people “there isn’t any problem we can’t solve if government will give us the facts. Tell us what needs to be done. Then, get out of the way and let us have at it.” He also presented a characteristically optimistic vision of the future:

I would like to be president, because I would like to see this country become once again a country where a little six-year old ... can grow up knowing the same freedom that I knew when I was six years old, growing up in America. If this is the America you want for yourself and your children; if you want to restore government not only of and for but by the people; to see the American spirit unleashed once again. To make this land a shining, golden hope God intended it to be, I’d like to hear from you...¹⁰¹

It would be this version of Americanism, rather than the one advanced by the self-styled “modern-day rebels” of the PBC, that would prove the more consequential in the decade that lay ahead.¹⁰² *

⁹⁹ Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 22, 143-81 (esp. 149, 171).

¹⁰⁰ Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*, 181. See also Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*. Similarly, Tammy Gordon has argued that “if the Reagan presidency was the country’s new morning, the bicentennial was its dawn.” See Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 134.

¹⁰¹ ‘To Restore America’, Ronald Reagan’s Campaign Address, March 31, 1976, available at <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/3.31.76.html> accessed 20 May 2016.

¹⁰² Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 132-34.

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