

# Pressure Groups - White Or Black Knight?

By STAN GRISWOLD

Probably every organized civic group in this part of the country would have applauded the words of Butler Taxpayers Association president Joseph Falkoski eight days ago in the Anchor Casino.

Mild-mannered, soft-spoken and earnest, he told the annual BTA dinner meeting that he sincerely subscribed to the creed of the association:

"I believe in its ability to lead public efficient government . . . to promote public opinion . . . to act as a force . . . to insure knowledge . . ." for, he said, "There is nothing makes a man suspect much than to know little."

However, Falkoski warned, these powers must be exercised carefully — "never allowed to become a tool for unprincipled causes."

In the same quiet tone but with specific emphasis, he continued, "The decisions of this association should be based on the wishes of an informed majority, not the will of a biased minority."

Skirting any elaboration on that point he added, "An association of this type is subject to misuse if not properly policed from within its own ranks."

There was little doubt about Falkoski alluded to a hierarchy that had often called the shots in borough affairs under the BTA banner, but not necessarily with the BTA consensus.

The audience seemed to know precisely what he meant. And when he said that he and his fellow BTA officers were researching plans "that would permit the membership to maintain better control over association policies," everybody clapped. Several clapped less than others.

One of the latter was Bill Bishop, a charter member of the organization, whose thinning hairline and bellicose views testified to seniority one generation ahead of Falkoski.

"Aah," Bill grumped. "This is a pressure group. No matter how you cut it, Rabble-raising — that's what it's for. To stir folks up. Talk loud. Beat drums. Be a-rin."

"Kind of a harsh connotation," a dinner companion murmured. "S' truth," he rejoined, "and it's how you get what you want. Lick what you want to lick. More fun too." He chuckled. "We used to meet in Charlie's basement, just a few of us, and figure what we'd do—" Falkoski's words, floating down from the speakers' table, again captured his attention.

"In trying to catalog the history and accomplishments of the Butler Taxpayers Association," Falkoski said, "its greatest

achievement, in my mind, is the fact that it exists."

Never once did the president of the BTA indulge in recrimination or reproach. No use raking over the coals of dissension that had time and again threatened to reduce the BTA to ashes, or to spell out the clashes and conflicts of interest that had stripped it of much of its original prestige in the community.

Falkoski and Paul Brush, BTA vice-president, and the other officers of the board, were among the newer members of the association, typical of the new young men that have been gradually moving into civic groups everywhere. They are the younger men that are quietly taking over. They aren't angry.

"We have no axe to grind," Brush said. "We just want to examine every question, study every issue, find the best answer, get the best and the most for our tax dollars."

"We don't buy anything on face value, because some colorful character paints a picture. Even if it does look good, we want to know if it's slanted." He said, "We want to study the other side, too."

The John Birch Society in nearby Oakland, for instance, would have a tough time winning these men to the cause of the "ultra-rightist." These are a level-eyed species to whom the John Birch's would have to explain, by chapter and verse, exactly what is meant by "the facts at hand," the charge that "the government of the United States has done nothing in the past few years," and what the specific findings are behind the desire for impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren.

"Look," said BTA's Jack Whealan, "We would hope to be right every time. But we know you can make a mistake. We're human, like everybody else. And when we do make a mistake — which we have — we aren't afraid to admit it."

Over the long pull, Falkoski said, "the aim of our group is to maintain a respected and influential role in the affairs of the community."

Community looms large in the thinking of these value-minded men. Since World War II and the ensuing population spread, concern for the community, pride in the community, fear for the community, demands for the community generated any number of civic groups.

One that took shape several years ago, the Pompton Lakes Home Owners Association, was designed to thwart a zoning amendment that would enable construction of garden apartments in residential zones.

The borough fathers looked kindly on the idea. But William De Young, the cool young determined type, organized a crusade, not with panoply, but with devastating thoroughness. He enlisted 3,000 homeowners in a defense of the residential community. This was their single cause. And they won it. Then quietly the association passed into limbo.

The Kennelon Civic Organization moved into the public scene some ten years earlier. Equipped with a state charter, a constitution, a 24-section book of by laws, a governing board of 15, 100 paid members and a pledge of lofty community service, it burst with promise. However, partisanship and politics crept in, stripped away its community welfare guise and stamped it "reduced," a pressure group.

During that same period, The Better Government League of Pequannock started out unfurling a banner for government improvement. Strong, a unit of articulate citizens, it brought local election candidates to their knees. "Say which of us you will support," the candidates implored. But the league declined, the members disagreed and finally departed, some to join the Republican Club and some, the Democrats.

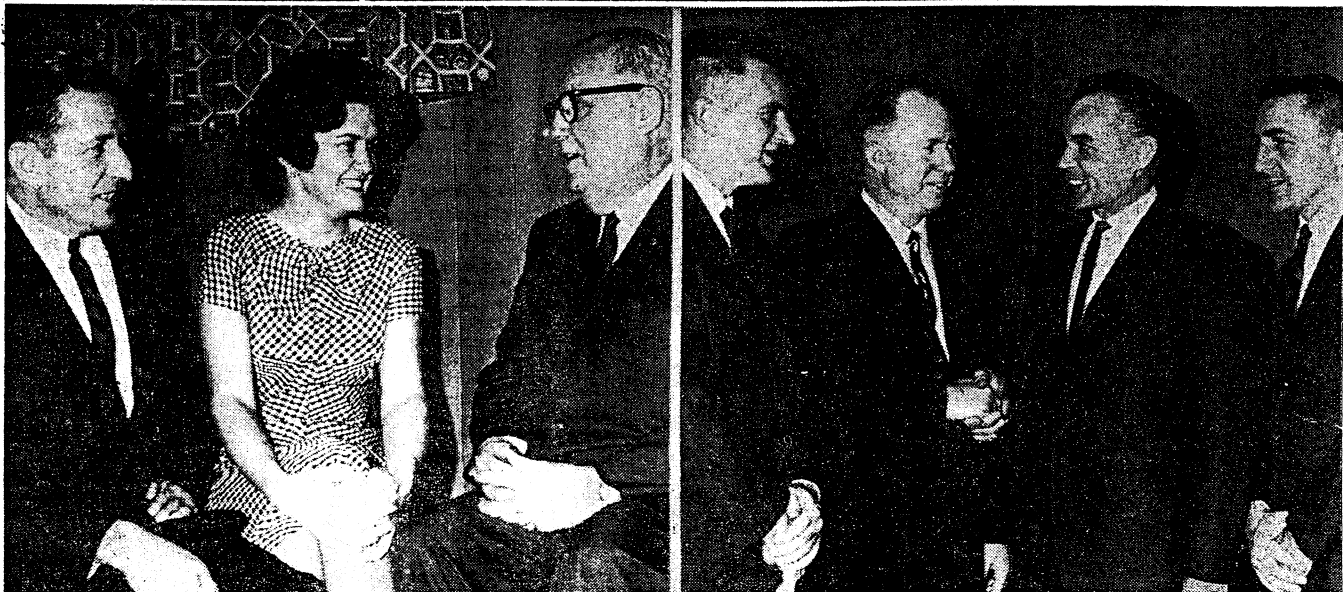
The Wanaque Borough Homeowners Association also disintegrated after several of the officers used it for a political springboard and dived into the election arena only to fail, losing both council and Board of Education bids.

Right now, in West Milford, a group labeled TIE (Taxpayers Interested in Education) controls the Board of Education — lock, stock and barrel. The school candidates they sponsored last year and this year (except for one) dominate the nine-member board. They trounced a recent new facilities referendum. And last week, after toppling the proposed school budget and after the board chopped \$60,000 out of current expense, TIE again threw its weight, said no, still too much fat, and knocked it down the second time.

In the moment of truth that followed, a shocked TIE trustee said, "Every board member voted for that budget . . . we were 100 per cent for it. There is such a thing as pushing power too far." Resentment rang clear in his voice.

Has TIE tolled the bell of its own demise?

These "pressure groups" are, for the most part, interested only in community service. Their aims are high and very often some of their achievements are just as high. But unfortunately, politics and power replace the lofty ideals and limit the goals.



THE OLD . . . The "Old Guard" of the Butler Taxpayers' Association is pictured above. One of the group's founders, Bill Bishop, right, is shown with Councilman Martin DeBante and Mrs. Joan Farrington.

AND THE NEW — Young men, but not angry young men, have invaded the association with their own views. President of the Association, Joseph Falkoski, second from right, gets a handshake from Mayor Clayton Browne. Also pictured are Paul Brush, left, and Jack Whealan, right. Brush is the association's vice president and Whealan is the treasurer.