



Tea Party: A Brewing Movement

On a cold night in December 1773, some three years after passage of the Tea Act by the British Parliament, colonists were fed up with the British crown's haughty disregard of their rights as Englishmen, and they dumped 342 chests of the iconic British beverage into Boston Harbor, becoming icons themselves. The protesters (estimates range from as few as 30 to as many as 130) refused finally to be placated by repeated promises of change and reform and, rather than wait for legislative response, they exercised the Lockean right of "self-defense" and boldly resisted the alienation of their God-given liberty.



Modern Americans know something of that level of frustration. It's been just over a year since Barack Obama was elected President of the United States and the Democratic Party assumed majority control of both houses of Congress. In that short time, there has emerged a vociferous band within the electorate who, like their tea-tossing forebears, feel they have been precluded from participating in the direction the ship of state will sail, and they have decided to protest the insupportable behavior of a government that habitually oversteps its constitutional boundaries. Fed up and fired up, they have chosen to exercise their constitutional prerogative of peaceful assembly, hence the Tea Party Movement.

The disparate coterie of groups confederated, loosely, under a giant "Tea Party" umbrella, and they attracted devotees by the thousands. Scores of frustrated conservatives were drawn to the movement's assimilation of the patois of 18th-century patriotism. They braved rain and rebuke and gathered in parking lots and municipal auditoriums to listen to speakers selected from the deepening pool of Tea Party celebrities zealously frothing the tea-tainted waters of dissent.

There is not one identifiable spark that set off this conservative conflagration. There are as many "original tea party" claimants as there are reasons for rebellion. One of the earliest demonstrations was held by the ever-active grass-roots legion of volunteers backing the bid for the presidency of staunch constitutionalist Ron Paul of Texas. On December 16, 2007 (on the 234th anniversary of the truly original Tea Party) hundreds of Paul supporters gathered in Boston at the State House steps at 1 p.m. and marched down the street toward historic Faneuil Hall, where they listened to speeches sonorous with Paul's libertarian message.

Prior to the Ron Paul rallies, and throughout the early 1990s, there were numerous tax-day protests held nationwide. From Florida to California, Americans fed up with being referred to as "taxpayers" descended upon harbors and state legislatures on April 15 to demand their governments, local and federal, demonstrate fiscal responsibility and stop wasting money, increasing spending, and raising taxes. These movements, too, added fuel to the raging inferno of resistance that the present-day Tea Party Movement has become.



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More recently, thousands of Americans have united under various banners to voice their consternation for the billion-dollar bailouts rewarding banks, investment houses, car companies, and insurance companies for their malfeasance. This unconstitutional corporate dole was followed by additional egregious government giveaways known as the Stimulus Package. Reminiscent of some 18th-century physician, President Obama set about “curing” the ailing economy by bleeding middle America, hoping to release the harmful humors. What he released was a wave of dissension and demonstrations that continues to thrive, while his own approval ratings continue to dive.

Fast Forward to the Present

While it is impossible to identify who deserves credit for initiating the Tea Party Movement, it is remarkably easy to decide where to lay the blame for making such protests necessary. The federal government, by refusing to restrain themselves and act only within the well-defined sphere created by the Constitution, has invoked the wrath of millions of hard-working Americans vexed by their government’s deafness to or disregard for the citizens’ cries of uncle. Like a playground bully, lawmakers seem to gloat in the fear summoned by their size. Americans, tired of being pushed around, have decided to stand up for themselves and reassert their sovereignty.

As with many incipient movements, there is no central command issuing marching orders to the far-flung Tea Party brigades. These activists are bound together not by a chain of command, but by a common cause: to restore the balance of power in our Republic and place the government in its proper subordinate position to the people. The only “chain of command” to speak of within the Tea Party movement is the chain with which it wishes to restrain those who errantly believe it is their right to command the citizens of this nation.

Given that the only thing many Tea Party adherents share is a mile-wide streak of independence, it is difficult to draw a picture of the typical Tea Partier. There are “birthers” (those who question whether President Obama was born in the United States) and “truthers” (those who question whether some elements in the American government were complicit in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001); there are fans of radio talk-show host Glenn Beck and fans of Ron Paul; there are libertarians and disaffected members of the two major political parties; there are constitutionalists and those who feel we are Taxed Enough Already (a backronym used frequently in the early days of the movement). That is to say, there is no one mold into which all Tea Party activists fit.

There are indications that Tea Party activists are less concerned with the R or D next to a candidate’s name than with the candidate’s dedication to a retrenchment of a government that would make Leviathan blush with embarrassment over its claim to fame. After the result in last year’s election in New York’s 23rd Congressional District where a Democrat defeated Republican Dede Scozzafava owing primarily to money and time donated by Tea Party grass-roots volunteers on behalf of a Conservative Party nominee (Doug Hoffman), many Hoffman supporters said they preferred a wolf in wolf’s clothing to a RINO (Republican in Name Only).

That attitude must send a chill down the spine of establishment Republicans given to scoffing at the “nuts” and “conspiracy theory wackos” that they claim dominate the Tea Party movement and to discounting any threat such a group would pose. Furthermore, that hoary fraternity has grown accustomed to disregarding the right wing of its party, believing that when push comes to shove and in the anonymity of the voting booth, the conservatives and constitutionalists will pull the lever for the GOP.



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Should Tea Party upstarts begin consistently defeating any entrenched and experienced Republicans in high-profile campaigns, perhaps there will be a new 18th-century image added to the Tea Party's patriotic palette, that of the Liberty Bell. And, the Republican establishment will learn not to ask for whom it is tolling, for it will be for them.

Apart from all the different reasons for allying themselves with the Tea Party Movement, most of those most active in the effort are simultaneously involved in other similarly directed groups. Liz Sidoti of the Associated Press described the Tea Party Movement as "an ideological mix of libertarianism and conservatism with the common denominator being lower spending and smaller government." While that is probably a bit of an oversimplification, it is accurate enough. Essentially, members of this movement converge into this camp carrying banners bearing streamers gained in many other crusades. This fledgling army of protesters is composed of soldiers with years of experience in the battle against government excess.

For example, there is the Campaign for Liberty, the organization started by supporters of Ron Paul to promote his bid for the presidency. There are the Tea Party Patriots, the group founded and funded by FreedomWorks, a nonprofit established by former Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey. One of the most vocal and visible ingredients in the Tea Party melting pot is the Tea Party Nation or TPN, the organizers of the first annual National Tea Party Convention, held in February at the opulent Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. This event drew nationwide attention for its exorbitant ticket charge (\$549 per person) and its controversial keynote speaker: Sarah Palin.

While the multi-faceted texture of the Tea Party Movement infuses its sinews with strength, it also vexes those trying to define the movement or to decide for themselves if the movement mirrors their own sense of right and wrong. As there is no formal leadership and thus no official mouthpiece of the Tea Party Movement, no aid is offered from the movement itself to constitutionalists wary of being duped by yet another organized political entity feigning true conservatism only to betray a more Republican bias when faced with unconstitutional measures being proposed or supported by congressional members of the GOP.

There is disconcerting evidence that although it is in its infancy, the Tea Party Movement has begun crawling and will soon walk, then run, away from its roots. In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Ryan Hecker, the author of the Contract from America (a manifesto of Tea Party principles by which to measure candidates' commitment to the Tea Party's brand of conservatism) claimed that the movement of which he is a part should not be confused with a traditional socially conservative organization. "We should be creating the biggest tent possible around the economic conservative issue," he said. "I think social issues may matter to particular individuals, but at the end of the day, the movement should be agnostic about it. This is a movement that rose largely because of the Republican Party failing to deliver on being representative of the economic conservative ideology. To include social issues would be beside the point," he added.

These words are disheartening to the throngs of socially conservative constitutionalists. There are very dedicated, experienced, and savvy political activists for whom issues of social conservatism — abortion, "gay" marriage, gun-ownership rights — are fundamental to their notion of good government and the essential aspect of virtue thereto. They will run from an organization proudly distancing itself from those bedrock values.

Some key players in the Tea Party Movement could not be less disturbed by the specter of a social conservative diaspora. When asked if she worried that the Tea Party Movement may be essentially



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stillborn because of the loss of social conservatives, Jenny Beth Martin, a leader of the Tea Party Patriots, commented in the *New York Times* article cited above, “When people ask about them [social issues], we say, ‘Go get involved in other organizations that already deal with social issues very well.’ We have to be diligent and stay on message.” That message, apparently, is, when it comes to enlisting in the Tea Party Movement, social conservatives need not apply.

Notwithstanding the (more or less) official disdain manifested by self-professed Tea Party luminaries for traditional conservatives and their rock-ribbed devotion to the right side of social issues, there is evidence that the rank and file is staunchly socially conservative and resolved to firmly and fixedly lash economic and social conservatism together with a Gordian knot of strict adherence to the letter of the Constitution.

Among the most inspiring effects of the renewed attention on the Constitution are the concomitant focus on our founding document’s restraints, specifically on federal power as set forth in the enumerated powers listed in Article I and the sovereignty of the states and the people as set out in the 10th Amendment, as well as the fetters placed on government power generally in the Second and Fifth Amendments. Any renaissance of devotion to tenets of constitutional piety is a boon for constitutionalists particularly and for the United States of America in general. We all benefit from a return to the unabashed requirement that all our elected leaders be measured according to the standards set out by our Founding Fathers in the narrowly tailored articles and amendments of the Constitution.

There is hope for the continuing healthy growth and development of the Tea Party Movement. Despite its rather recent beginnings, there is experience and passion to spare in this movement, along with a healthy dose of disillusionment. This wariness has likely broadened the current of separatism that runs through the Tea Party landscape. As Ned Ryun, president of a consulting firm that provides leadership training to Tea Party affiliates, said, “It’s [the Tea Party Movement is] very much anti-establishment at both parties.” “They don’t care what party you’re in; they just want to know if you reflect their values — limited government, fixing the economy,” he continued.

Heedless of the group’s own avowals of autonomy, its popularity and increasing influence have attracted the attention and the attempts at co-opting by numerous more-organized groups. Republicans view the Tea Party Movement as merely a conservative stake of their party’s vaunted “big tent.” Neo-cons and their institutional mouthpieces paint themselves with the patina of popularity by praising the Tea Party in their newspapers and in reports produced by their think tanks.

It isn’t just political parties and ideologues that have sought to make themselves respectably rebellious by association. Candidates in every race from city dogcatcher to U.S. Senator have pinned the Tea Party badge on their lapels. Scott Brown’s victory in the special election in Massachusetts to replace the late Senator Edward Kennedy was due in large measure to the support of Tea Party activists. Though Brown is by no means a constitutionalist, his election signaled that Americans are fed up with big-government Obama-Kennedy-Pelosi liberalism, even in Massachusetts. In the Lone Star State, constitutionalist Debra Medina’s popularity with Tea Party activists propelled her to international prominence and helped her turn a runaway race for incumbent Governor Rick Perry into a race with the specter of runoff constantly haunting the Governor. Medina was ultimately unsuccessful, but her influence was bolstered by the tireless toil of her Tea Party devotees. Another candidate likely to benefit from his conservative bona fides and his appeal in Tea Party circles is Rand Paul, the son and heir of Tea Party favorite Representative Ron Paul, who is vying to represent Kentucky in the United States Senate.



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If any of these candidates could manage to win their respective races, then the reverberations would be felt in innumerable races around the country now and in the future and would jar traditional Republican candidates and the party in general out of their stupor. Typically, Republican incumbents can count on the “hold your nose” vote of conservatives forced to choose the lesser of two evils. If the Tea Party can consistently add genuinely conservative candidates to the ballot choices in primaries, however, then perhaps those of the GOP betting on the begrudging support of conservatives will wake up and realize that the problem is not one of party but one of principle.

Looking Ahead

For his part and for his party, President Obama realizes his responsibility to denounce the Tea Party and marginalize its members. During a town-hall meeting held in a small town south of St. Louis, Missouri, the President provided attendees with his own assessment of the validity and value of the members of the Movement:

[When] you see folks waving tea bags around, let me just remind them that I am happy to have a serious conversation about how we are going to cut our health care costs down over the long term, how we’re going to stabilize Social Security.... But let’s not play games and pretend that the reason is because of the Recovery Act, because that’s just a fraction of the overall problem that we’ve got. We are going to have to tighten our belts, but we’re going to have to do it in an intelligent way. And we’ve got to make sure that the people who are helped are working American families, and we’re not suddenly saying that the way to do this is to eliminate programs that help ordinary people and give more tax cuts to the wealthy. We tried that formula for eight years, and it did not work, and I don’t intend to go back to it.

Then, on April 19, 2009, Senior White House Advisor David Axelrod echoed his boss’s opinion when he told reporters, “I think any time that you have severe economic conditions, there is always an element of disaffection that can mutate into something that’s unhealthy,” and “the thing that bewilders me is this President just cut taxes for ninety five percent of the American people. So I think the tea bags should be directed elsewhere, because he certainly understands the burden that people face.”

Always anxious to be in the mix of controversy, the menagerie of media talking heads have bivouacked around the Tea Party encampment and fired volley after volley of “slings and arrows,” hoping to wound and weaken the movement. From the “legitimate” news desks of Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann on MSNBC, to the satirical sets of the *Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central, commentators of every stripe have taken their best shot at the Tea Party Movement and have filled the air with insults and inquiries all aimed at discrediting the Tea Party Movement and subsequently vitiating its potency and its ability to influence the outcome of elections.

As one would expect from such outlets, the barrage of blows from the liberal media has had the subtlety of an anvil over the head. Ironically, however, the campaign to disparage the Tea Party Movement will likely have the opposite effect, given the tenor and source of the attacks. While the pundits and partisans parade through the sets of one news program after another, taking potshots at the Tea Party, their recriminations will only spray fuel onto the fire that burns in the bellies of dedicated conservatives who have consecrated their time, energy, and talents to the restoration of the timeless principles of liberty and limited government upon which this grand Republic was founded.

Finally, the most promising and potentially most long-lasting effect of the accelerated growth of the Tea Party Movement is the concomitant commitment to the principle of state sovereignty. From Albany to



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Sacramento, from St. Paul to Baton Rouge, state lawmakers are busy repairing the breeches in the barricades protecting their constitutional right to self-rule by passing resolutions nullifying the unconstitutional acts of the federal government. Whether it be Tennessee's legislative refusal to implement impending federal healthcare mandates or Utah's resistance to the Obama administration's proposal to seize millions of acres of wilderness and place it under the control of the Department of the Interior, state legislators are boldly safeguarding those powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution and are refusing to be relegated to subordinate status to the heretofore unchecked encroachments of the national government.

Thanks to the zealous and tireless work of millions of diehard constitutionalists and other conservatives nationwide, the Tea Party Movement in all its varied iterations has grown into a powerful force and one with which all those seeking office must reckon. There are candidates in nearly every state who have pledged to be bound by the fetters of the Constitution, legislate responsibly, and defend the borders of states' rights against the constant advance of the federal government into regions not granted them by the Constitution. While this inchoate movement is undoubtedly young and prone to taking the missteps of youth, thankfully there are scores of seasoned veterans populating the rank and file (and it's all rank and file) of the Tea Party who are anxious and able to midwife this parturient patriotic spirit and give birth to a potent body of activists animated by an ardor for restoring the glory and good government bequeathed to us by our noble Founding Fathers in the Constitution and the other foundational documents of our Republic.



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