

[elephant in the room]

Tea Party Crashers

While the movement boasts of independence, it is little more than a GOP adjunct: loud, colorful, but still advancing the establishment's ends.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

JUDY PEPENELLA, co-director of New York's Tea Party Patriots, insists that she has just blown my mind. "It's 'We the People'," she repeats. "That's the Tea Party—those three silly words: We. The. People." She says it's impossible to explain to an outsider, even a sympathetic one. "It doesn't make any sense, but it makes all the sense in the world. In Massachusetts the people put out the call, and we helped Scott Brown. And no one can figure us out."

Pepenella may not be able to define the Tea Party appeal, but she has the ingredients right. It is loud, self-regarding, incoherent, and endowed with a bottomless confidence that it speaks for real Americans. It sounds just like Republicans did circa 1994.

The year-old movement is credited with reviving right-wing populism, annihilating President Obama's healthcare reform, and electing Brown to Ted Kennedy's seat. Rasmussen and ABC opinion polls reveal that the American people have a more favorable view of the Tea Party than they do of the Republican Party. The *Wall Street Journal* compares it to the Whiskey Rebellion, heralding it as the fruition of Perot-style populism, a great third force in American politics.

But in reality, the Tea Party is not Pepenella's mysterious vehicle of demo-

cratic will, nor does it signal the emergence of an alternative to Republicans and Democrats. It's a leaderless coalition of conservative activists who for all their revolutionary vim look less likely to take over the GOP than to be taken over by it.

The partiers provide a wellspring of fundraising and volunteers, as they did for Scott Brown and currently are for Republican candidates in Kentucky, California, Colorado, New Hampshire, and Florida. During the healthcare debate, they supplied GOP shock troops for town-hall meetings. At its sharpest edge, the Tea Party phenomenon represents the angry conservative base, punishing incumbent Republicans for any number of infractions: bailouts, support for amnesty, softness on terrorism, or, in the case of Charlie Crist, hugging Obama. But even these most militant rebels aren't upending the establishment. They're still playing safely within the confines of Republican orthodoxy.

At the recent Tea Party confab in Nashville, Sarah Palin suggested, "The GOP would be smart to absorb the Tea Party movement." But it doesn't have to absorb anything. The two are already inseparable. RNC Chair Michael Steele, who recently used teacups as a prop during a speech, says, "If I wasn't doing this job, I'd be out there with the Tea

Partiers." Eating rubber chicken and collecting a pretty good paycheck, no doubt.

The madness began on Feb. 19, 2009 as a bizarre suggestion by Rick Santelli on CNBC. In a disjointed and baldly hypocritical rant, Santelli asked why we should "subsidize the losers' mortgages." The former Drexel Burnham Lambert exec, who supported bailouts for his own industry, thought Washington was going too far when it tried to help Detroit. After shouting that Americans hadn't made an attractive car since 1954, Santelli screamed, "We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists who want to come to Lake Michigan, I'll start organizing."

Santelli's yawp came precisely, perhaps suspiciously, at the same time that Beltway institutions were encouraging their activists to start protesting. His YouTube clip became a sensation, and "tea" suddenly stood for "taxed enough already." Brendan Steinhauser, who directs Federal and State Campaigns for FreedomWorks, a libertarian-leaning D.C. operation, recalls that in the week leading up to Santelli's rant, the nonprofit had been bombarded with calls from conservative activists awaiting orders. "They had already jammed the phone lines on Capitol Hill," he says, "so we sent out a newsletter, signed by Dick

Armey, telling them to go out into the streets.”

FreedomWorks had the resources to break the Tea Parties big. It began in 1984 as part of Citizens for a Sound Economy, a group financed by libertarian oil magnate David Koch—also one of the wallets behind the Cato Institute. In 2004, CSE split, with one faction becoming Americans for Prosperity (another Tea Party organizer) and the other merging with the Bill Bennett-Jack Kemp policy shop Empower America to become FreedomWorks. Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey was brought in as chairman, with an annual salary in excess of \$550,000; Steve Forbes serves on the board of the group, which commands a budget in the \$8 million range and claims 860,000 members. As the outcry rose, Steinhauer made himself a kind of switchboard operator, connecting activists to each other and arranging lessons in how to get permits. “It’s very Saul Alinsky,” he says of FreedomWorks’ role.

SPOKESMAN MARK SKODA BRUSHED ASIDE TALK OF THIRD PARTIES:

“WE’RE NOT ATTEMPTING TO REPLACE THE RNC.”

Whether this was an authentic grassroots uprising or—as agents of our community-organizer cum president claim—the product of “astroturfing,” the reins were swiftly seized by Republican hacks and opportunists. Internet organizer Michael Patrick Leahy set up conference calls for new Tea Party activists and gave strange marching orders, demanding, for instance, that the first round of protests be called the “Chicago Tea Party” wherever they happened to take place. He went on to publish a book, *Rules for Conservative Radicals*, and now works for longtime Republican operator Richard Viguerie. The popular speaker at Tea Party rallies has also

been charged with six figures’ worth of tax evasion.

Within ten days of Santelli’s rant, Tea Party protests were put on in 40 different cities and began to gain national notice. But as the movement transitioned from Facebook to Fox News, its character began to change. “One of the signs I saw at the first D.C. rally read simply, ‘Atlas Shrugged,’” Steinhauer recalls. “But as the movement went out to the rural areas, it took on a more traditional Republican image, more hawkish on foreign policy, more conservative on social issues.” Less Ron Paul, more Sarah Palin. Talk of abolishing the Fed gave way to partisan shouts about Obama’s socialism. The young revolution began to sound a lot like the brash talk-radio Right.

The Tea Partiers moved to institutionalize themselves, which also helped to lash the movement to the GOP. Tea Party Patriots, the largest group, boasts 1,000 local organizations with 15 million “associates.” Then came Tea Party

Express, which played a major role in Glenn Beck’s 9/12 demonstration in Washington. It organized a caravan of buses to bring activists from across the country, protesting on their way to the protest. The Express is run by Our Country Deserves Better PAC, whose board is made up exclusively of professional and long-experienced Republicans, such as former California State Assemblyman Howard Kaloogian. It is planning another caravan, which launches in Nevada with an attack on Harry Reid and arrives in Boston on tax day.

Another group, Tea Party Nation, which runs a social-networking site for

activists, put on the National Tea Party Convention in Nashville, grabbing headlines when it nabbed Sarah Palin as speaker in return for a fat \$100,000 fee. TPN, run by lawyer Judson Phillips, was criticized for starting out as a for-profit organization, but Phillips deftly used the conference to launch a PAC, Ensuring Liberty Corp. At the announcement, spokesman Mark Skoda brushed aside talk of third parties: “We’re not attempting to replace the RNC.”

This coziness has prompted backlash from more radical Tea Partiers. “What I am witnessing is an attempted defilement of the concept of what the Tea Party’s purposes are and where we are going to be,” Dale Robertson, founder of TeaParty.org, shrieked in a spittle-flecked press release. “The bastardization of our message I find bilious and disingenuous on its face.” Robertson fears that Tea Partiers are being seduced by GOP operatives. “Has our message become so contaminated and ineffective as to be mistaken for the same old political clap-trap vomited from the kool-aid drinking mouths of the Republican elite?”

Even the Tea Party’s Beltway contingent claims to fear a takeover. Steinhauer notes that Michael Steele has been calling FreedomWorks more frequently these days.

But keeping a healthy distance is impossible. Because most Tea Partiers consider themselves conservatives, they have invited the backing of long-established conservative institutions—and the Republicans who come with them. At the National Tea Party Convention in Nashville, local activists signed up for classes from the Leadership Institute, a Morton Blackwell Beltway operation that trains young conservatives to be party organizers, campaign managers, and pundits. The Leadership Institute helped launch video provocateur James O’Keefe on the world, before he dressed

as a pimp or got arrested for tampering with Sen. Mary Landrieu's phones. O'Keefe's accomplice, Joseph Basel, even appeared at the Tea Party Convention.

Activists on the ground, when they consider their relationship to the GOP, either say, "it's complicated" or admit outright that their interests are, for all intents, twinned. "Everyone I know is basically Republican," said Todd Harvey, who organized a Tax Day Tea Party rally in Dutchess County, New York and currently belongs to a small Tea Party group in Sebring, Florida. "I went to the premiere of the Tea Party documentary, and everyone who spoke was a Republican: Jim DeMint, Marsha Blackburn, Dick Armey, and Joe Wilson."

Harvey says that his local group in Florida gets together on a weekly basis. "We talk about the Tea Party movement. It's a feel good session." Anything else? "We support Rubio," Harvey says, of the conservative primary challenger to incumbent Republican Gov. Charlie Crist. Of his efforts in suburban New York, Harvey says that his Tea Party activists mostly busy themselves with getting Republicans elected: "We replaced some incumbents on the town boards and got some people on the county legislature." His experience—from anger to activism to Republican politicking—is being replicated in the hundreds of Tea Party cells nationwide.

Curiously, the phenom got the most energized and received the most credit for backing Scott Brown, a pro-choice Republican, who supported Mitt Romney's Massachusetts healthcare plan—one similar to the Senate scheme he now claims to oppose. He is, by all appearances one of those dread "RINOs"—Republican in Name Only—that conservatives once despised.

At the National Tea Party conference, attendees wore pins with Scott Brown's figure under the "American Idol" logo.

Palin referred to him and recently elected New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie as "ours." It didn't matter that Brown and Christie won as moderate Republicans running against badly damaged Democratic candidates. Their victories infuriated liberals, and that counts most of all to Tea Partiers.

Already, the GOP is implementing strategies to enfold the Tea Party within its tent forever. The South Carolina state GOP announced in early February that it would unite with Palmetto State Tea Party groups to share resources. State Chair Karen Floyd says, "This is not something the state party by edict pushed down. This is something the grassroots pushed up with an understanding that we are stronger together than apart."

THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT CREATES THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH THE ACTIVIST BASE OF THE GOP CAN FEEL LIKE IT IS PART OF THE GAME AGAIN.

In Texas, the Tea Party is even threatening to swallow Rep. Ron Paul, the Texas Republican whom many still call the Father of the Tea Parties. While his 2008 presidential campaign helped inject the Tea Party language back into popular discourse, his three congressional primary challengers this year all claim allegiance to the Tea Party. Paul's sins, according to them, are in foreign policy. So much for the movement being united by fiscal issues only.

What is the future of the Tea Party? Harvey believes the mutineers will satisfy themselves with electing more conservatives and then go home, having done some good. J.P. Freire, the *Washington Examiner* editor instrumental in organizing the D.C. protest, thinks that as long as the Tea Party stays decentralized, and even battling among various factions, it can do some good on the state level. "That's a goal that is way

more easily accomplished than winning a presidential election," he says. Steinhilber, cribbing from Tocqueville, believes that as the Tea Parties mature they will simply become a movement dedicated to "civic engagement based on the Constitution and Founding Fathers."

They're all wrong. Despite the real idealism of some of its activists both inside and outside the Beltway, the Tea Party is nothing more than a Republican-managed tantrum. Send the conservative activists into the streets to vent their anger. Let Obama feel the brunt of it. And if the GOP shows a modicum of contrition, the runaways will come home.

That plan is working perfectly. The power of Washington seems so remote

to most people that even a scripted acknowledgement of their grievances tends to pacify them. Attendees at the national conference were treated to every kind of insult that could be hurled at McCain and, to a lesser extent, Bush. "A McCain presidency would have been as bad, or worse than the Obama administration," Phillips said.

RedState.com editor Erick Erickson said upon watching the Tea Party activists in Nashville that Republicans should be afraid. But what does it matter if malcontents holed up in a southern hotel pour their anger on has-beens who will never run again? Especially when it seems to soften them to Sarah Palin.

The Tea Party movement creates the conditions in which the activist base of the GOP can feel like it is part of the game again. They can forget Bush-era betrayals, swallow their doubts, and vote Republican this November. The

next Reagan is coming, the next Contract With America will work, the next Republican nominee will be one of us. All it takes is for someone to appreciate the anger—and it doesn't matter that she supported the bailouts that enraged them or the candidate who forsook their ideas and support. Just as in 1994, Republicans have only to keep up the pretense that they, and they alone, are responding to an urgent uprising across the country.

Brilliantly, Sarah the Maverick mentioned her husband's "independence" from the GOP during her Tea Party Convention speech, referring to Todd Palin's membership in the Alaskan Independence Party. Her suggestion of outsider status charged her bond with the conventioners, but the veep nominee was not introducing Tea Partiers to possibilities outside their GOP abode. She was merely validating their feeling that Republicans have to win them over. Eventually, they will give in. They always do.

Judson Phillips, playing the affable host, told the crowd that just two words scared our nation's liberals, then almost whispered them: President Palin. He could easily have come up with two words to scare Republicans: third party. He could have found a pair that would rock the entire establishment: Revolution Now! But that's too risqué, even when everyone is hopped up on tea.

The Tea Party movement may be a bit frisky and unpredictable, but it will always have a warm cup to serve the GOP. In Nashville, the chanting went up tentatively at first, then gained force: "Run, Sarah, Run!" She graciously accepted their adoration—then left in the company of the Republican professionals who make up her entourage. ■

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No Life on MARS

This latest populist revolt is not the rise of the Right.

By John Derbyshire

The social class on which [Will Herberg] and I both once pinned our hope of national regeneration, those whom we jokingly referred to as 'the Archie Bunkers,' has gone the way of the dinosaur. It has been replaced by a multitude of vastly more radicalized versions of Meathead, Archie's fashionably liberal son-in-law who by now could be an editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal*.

—Paul E. Gottfried, *Encounters*

THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT seems to put the lie to Professor Gottfried's despair. At the movement's February convention, the Archie Bunkers were out in force: politically unsophisticated working- and middle-class Americans asserting themselves against the Meatheads of fashionable liberalism, into whose hands the levers of power had passed barely a year before.

As Herberg and Gottfried pinned their hopes on those Archie Bunkers, so Sam Francis, a few years later, saw the possibility of national regeneration in the conservative surge that had helped elect Ronald Reagan. Examining the base of citizens from which that surge drew its strength, Francis borrowed a tag from sociologist Donald Warren, calling them "Middle American Radicals." These insurrectionists, Francis said in his 1982 essay "Message from MARS," had grasped the essential power conflict in postwar American society. That conflict is not between rich and poor, as both Old Left and Old Right had supposed,

but between, on the one hand, an alliance of meritocratic elites with underclass government clients, and on the other, those whose work and enterprise feeds both components of that alliance. Our political contest is not top vs. bottom, but top-and-bottom-united vs. middle.

In a different essay 16 years later, by way of pooh-poohing secessionist talk, Francis gave his clearest statement of this dichotomy:

Today, the main political line of division in the United States is not between the regions of North and South (insofar as such regions can still be said to exist) but between elite and nonelite. As I have tried to make plain ... for the last 15 years, the elite, based in Washington, New York, and a few large metropolises, allies with the underclass against Middle Americans, who pay the taxes, do the work, fight the wars, suffer the crime, and endure their own political and cultural dispossession at the hands of the elite and its underclass vanguard.

Francis's thought shows an interesting development. "Message from MARS" is written in the rather abstract diction of Machiavelli and James Burnham. A ruling class had established itself with aid from underclass allies to whom it had given promises of provision and protection. This ruling class had become careless and decadent. A rising group sought to replace it. Middle American radicals could be that rising group, said