



The Mad Hatters The Tea Party Movement and its Impact on American Politics

In colonial America felt hats were a luxury. Hatters had to use mercury to separate the beaver fur from its pelt. The mercury often drove many of them mad. Lewis Carroll popularized the character of the *mad hatter* in his 1865 political satire *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The character appeared in a chapter entitled *A Mad Tea Party*. While the left has denounced members of the *Tea Party Movement* as crazy radicals, they have confused anger for the madness of Carroll's literary character.

The Spirit of '73

In American political discourse, *Tea Party* has become synonymous with protest. According to Newt Gingrich's new book, *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine*, the Boston Tea Party in 1773 was *an act of defiance meant to show the British government that it could not impose its will on Americans*. The current tea parties can be viewed in the same vein. They are a dedicated reenactment of the *spirit of 1773* where the colonists banded together to change things in an historic way.

The *Boston Tea Party* was a colonial revolt against the British Parliament's oppressive tax policies, especially its tax on tea, left over from the unpopular Townshend Acts of 1767. This tea tax served as a reminder of Parliament's control over the colonies and partly as a boon to the financially stressed East India Company.

Protests sprung up in New York and Philadelphia to prevent the tea from being unloaded. Protesters in Charleston, South Carolina forced the British representatives to store the tea in government warehouses. In Boston, three tea ships arrived but remained unloaded. Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused to let them leave until they paid the duties. A group of indignant colonists led by Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and many others disguised as Mohawk Indians, boarded the ships on the night of Dec. 16th and summarily dumped 342 chests of the iconic British beverage into the harbor.

The lessons of the Boston Tea Party should be clear to elected officials all over America today. The colonists' bold exercise was a revolt against the arbitrary infringements on their rights as Englishmen. In effect it was a precursor to screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky's legendary character from his 1976 film, *Network*, the irrepressible Howard Beale who rallied the forces

of popular discontent because he was *sick and tired* of the wrongdoing by the people in power and vowed to do something about it.

Tea Party Nation

Like their 1773 forebears, tea partiers face the daunting task of thwarting the will of an over-bearing central government that seems oblivious to the freedoms and concerns of its people. Trillions of dollars of bailouts, pork barrel spending, and redistribution schemes threaten to deprive hard-working taxpayers of their livelihood and rob their descendants of their legacy. As in 1773, the tea partiers are sending a message to another imperious government that has lost sight of its constitutional responsibilities to citizens.

The tea party movement, sometimes called *Tea Party Nation*, is essentially a *big-tent* organization that has not directly concerned itself with the major social issues, such as abortion, gun control, or gay rights that have fractured the body politic. Their sole focus has been on freedom, lower taxes, and less government. Yet the fact that their goals would indirectly affect all of the social issues has not been lost on their supporters.

The tea partiers come from all over America, waving their tea bags in protest. They come from Main St. not Wall St. and share a common anger and distrust of the government that stems from its plans to dismantle the country's constitutional basis. They are as diverse as America with black, white, Hispanic and many naturalized citizens. Their numbers include Glenn Beck fans, Rush Limbaugh dittos-heads, disaffected Republicans, Democrats, as well as scores of libertarians, constitutionalists and independents, united in their common purpose against the tyranny of government.

Tea Party Avatar

The seminal event in the tea party's history was Texas Congressman Ron Paul's celebration of the 234th anniversary of the original tea party on December 16, 2007 on the steps of the Boston State House during his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Paul graduated from Gettysburg College and the Duke University School of Medicine. He and his wife Carol moved to Texas in 1968, where he began his medical practice as a specialist in obstetrics/ gynecology, having delivered over 4,000 babies during the course of his career.

After being elected to Congress, Dr. Paul served on the House Banking Committee during the late 1970's and early 1980's, where he was a strong advocate for sound monetary policy and an outspoken critic of the Federal Reserve's inflationary measures. An unwavering advocate of pro-life and pro-family values, Paul has consistently voted to lower federal taxes, spending, and regulations. He tirelessly argued for the return of government to its proper constitutional role. His conservative voting record prompted one colleague to say that he *personifies the Founding Fathers' ideal of the citizen-statesman*.

After a 12-year hiatus, Dr. Paul returned to Congress in 1997, and has remained unwavering in his advocacy of reducing the size of government and reforming the nation's fiscal and monetary policies. His 2009 book, *End the Fed*, boldly calls for the Federal Reserve dissolution. His ideas for limited constitutional government, low taxes, free markets, and a return to sound monetary policies based on commodity-backed currency have made the 74-year old Paul the avatar of the tea party movement.

Imperial Rule

It is apparent that the causes of the tea party movement have been simmering in the political pot for over two generations. For years, politicians of all stripes have promised smaller government, reduced spending, and constitutional government in their campaign speeches. Few have delivered. After sweeping into power in 2008, Democrats assumed they had redrawn the political map forever. They interpreted their ballot box victories as a mandate for imperial rule. They forged ahead with the most radical extension of political power since FDR. Federal control of health care, costly bailouts and subsidies for their special interests---all financed by insurmountable mountains of debt--- created a tangible fear of the future.

Democrats were woefully unprepared for the popular reaction that fogged up their mirror of one-party rule. The drama may not have been what it was in December of 1773, but the anger and frustration directed at the federal government was comparable. Democrats were also surprised by how much the tea partiers dislike President Obama. Despite attempts to paint them as such, the tea partiers were not racists or part of a wild conspiracy. The Democrats and the media completely missed or ignored the fact that it was not Obama's race but his policies that warranted their visceral reaction.

Not surprisingly, Rush Limbaugh has played more than an encouraging role in the popularity of their movement. Zev Chavets, the author of *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One*, noted that when the tea party movement emerged, Limbaugh embraced it as his own since they were both fighting against the Democrats' putative desire to remake America in the image of European social democracies.

Blogging in Seattle

While the idea lacked pageantry of the original Boston Tea Party, its beginnings were just as spontaneous. The tea party movement found its verbal wings in Seattle, Washington where blogs such as Keli Carender's *Liberty Belle*

protested the passage of what she called the trillion-dollar *Generational Theft Act* of 2009. These throwbacks to the colonial *Committees of Correspondence* galvanized the movement so that thousands attended rallies in Mesa, Arizona and Denver, Colorado.

The salient moment was CNBC talk show host Rick Santelli's Feb. 19 *rant heard round the world* in which he called for a *Chicago tea party* for July 4th. Clips of Santelli's rant spread like a freedom wildfire as Americans emulated their colonial ancestors by *thinking and talking about their rights, responsibilities and what it means to be an American*.

Since Santelli's rant, tea-party protests spread like spores on a windy day. At first they drew hundreds, and then thousands, to marches in over 300 cities nation wide, such as Orlando to Kansas City to Cincinnati from Chicago to St. Louis, to New York City to Greenville, S.C., and even Washington, D.C. Thousands of people fed up with government waste of tax dollars and mounting debt took to the streets in protest, dumping symbolic bottles and packages of tea while carrying placards that said: *Your mortgage is not my problem* and *No taxation without deliberation*.

Another Tea Party leader is Atlanta's Jenny Beth Martin. *Time Magazine* recently profiled her as one of the *100 Most Influential People in the World*. Her commitment to building an infrastructure for this burgeoning grass roots movement has made her one of its stalwarts. She is the co-founder and national co-coordinator of the *Tea Party Patriots*, which is an umbrella organization that claims 1,800 local affiliates with some 15 million members. The Nationwide Tea Party Coalition, co-founded by Heritage Foundation analyst Michael Johns, has also assumed a leading role.

A Mad Party

Despite their widespread popularity they attracted little mainstream media coverage at first. The lone network willing to cover the tea parties was the FOX News Channel. According to Joseph Curl the big three television networks virtually ignored the seminal movement of the new century. This validated conservatives' suspicions that the Obama-oriented media liberals, who had fully embraced President Obama's agenda, operated most media outlets.

When the tea partiers focused on ObamaCare the liberals recognized them as a threat to their agenda. At that point the mainstream media clearly set the movement in its gun sights. It unleashed its *top gun journalists* Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann on MSNBC, the satirical rant of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* to sully the tea partiers and their movement. In these journalists' virulent imaginations, the tea partiers quickly became a *Carrollian Convention of Mad Hatters* who welcomed conservatives, anti-Semites, fascists, libertarians, racists, constitutionalists, militiamen, and homophobes.

In one celebrated case, CNN correspondent Susan Roesgen argued with people she was interviewing, calling them *anti-government* and after catcalls and boos were directed at her, *anti-CNN*. Studio coverage was even worse. Many respected journalists lost credibility with a wide segment of the American public for their open bias.

The 7th Commandment

With regard to an official Catholic position or even role in the tea party movement, ambivalence has been the reigning stance. Though many Catholics have attended the tea parties, the Church hierarchy has not warmed to the movement. While tea partiers have limited their national protests to smaller government and tax protests, many Catholics see a resemblance to the Solidarity Movement in the 1980's that effectively undermined Poland's Communist government.

Church critics cite that the movement violates the hierarchy's dedicated policies of accommodation and cooperation that has deeply embedded the Church in the rewards of a big government. Catholic opinion has also been conflicted by the charges, mostly from the liberal left, that the tea partiers are racists, bent on destroying the Obama presidency. This is also complicated by the fact that 54% of Catholics voted for Obama and that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is in favor of ObamaCare, sans its provisions for abortion expansion.

Some fear that the tea party protests will turn into a revival of the nativist movement in the 1840s that persecuted Catholics and immigrants. Others compare them to the late Father Charles Coughlin who attacked big government from his Little Flower pulpit in Royal Oak, Michigan. Critics point out that many tea partiers are strict libertarians who hold individual freedom above all else. Such thinking tends to support abortion rights, gay marriage and revile social justice ideals.

Amid all the speculation, the Catholic leadership seems oblivious to the fact that Washington's immeasurable spending and its attendant debt is defiant of prudence and is a direct violation of the 7th Commandment. The nation's politicians are literally stealing from one segment of the population in order to seek the votes and political support of other segments. For example, encouraging people who could never afford to repay their mortgages fosters rampant irresponsibility and immorality.

As author George Marlin warns, the Church should instinctively practice what Pope Pius XI defined in his 1931 Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* as subsidiarity, *the fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry*. Catholics should remember that while true social justice is always needed, without subsidiarity, it is neither Catholic nor justice.

A Big Splash

Pundits have offered a myriad of explanations for the tea party phenomenon. Many see the tea parties harkening back to the 19th century Populists, a Southern rural movement that balked against the unfettered business tactics of the monopolies of that era. There was a substantial difference. The Populists lobbied for more government control over business, not less. And like most third parties with good ideas, one or both of the major parties would steal the ideas while their guard was down. By the early 20th century both Republican and Democratic Progressives did just that. Hopefully the Republican Party will follow suit. The choice is theirs.

Now Democrats will do everything in their power to distort the tea party success. Former president Bill Clinton has already resurrected his playbook from 1995 when he blamed the Oklahoma bombing of the Murrah Federal Building on talk radio, more specifically Rush Limbaugh. Obama has chimed in by calling them *domestic terrorists*.

In honestly assessing the historical role of the tea party movement, one should first look at the special elections and party primaries this year. The Republicans victories of Bob McDonald in Virginia, Chris Christie in New Jersey and Scott Brown in Massachusetts, and the defeat of several incumbents in both parties, demonstrated a roiling dissatisfaction with Obama's reliance on big government and increased taxation. The May and June primary victories of tea party candidates, especially the Kentucky and Nevada Senate races, underscored the tea party message and underscored their voter impact.

With that in mind as the 2010 election approaches, the importance of the tea party movement shines more brightly. While Republicans have the ball, voters remember that they fumbled it during the Bush administration. Big government is the target---not the Democratic Party. To counter this, the Republicans must discard their *me-too* attitude of conciliation and adopt the essential reform ideas of the tea partiers or go the way of the Federalists and the Whigs. Modern tea partiers may not dress like their Boston forbears but one thing is certain---in 2010 they will make a big splash in political harbors all over the nation. Americans should remember that while the first tea party started a revolution, this one wants to stop one.

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Wisdom From Washington

In his first Inaugural Address as President of the United States, George Washington reverently acknowledged our country's dependence on Almighty God:

"It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe – who presides in the council of nations – and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States, a government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes."

After serving as our President during probably the most important two terms in our history, Washington advised us again that religion and morality are necessary for good government. In his Farewell Address on September 19, 1796, he clearly said:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

The Importance Of Primaries

Most voters don't investigate the Primary candidates or even find out who they are. Only a minority of Americans vote in the Primaries. One reason is that you usually must declare yourself as a voter in one Party or another. Rules might vary from state to state.

Taking a Party ballot gives YOU, the voter, the chance to **SELECT** the candidates you believe are the best of your political party to be on the ballot in the **GENERAL ELECTION**.

Also consider: there often are vital **ISSUES** on the Primary ballot for your approval or rejection. Don't you want to have a voice in this important selection?

ST. PAUL TO TITUS 2:11-12

For the grace of God, our Savior has appeared to all men, instructing us that rejecting ungodliness and worldly lusts, we may live temperately, justly and piously in this world.