

Reading the Tea Leaves

Written by James Crabtree

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JAMES CRABTREE, OCT 25 2010

On 12th September 2009, hundreds of thousands of people gathered for a “taxpayer march” in Washington, DC. Many of them brandished signs: “Socialism is not the answer,” one read, using the style of Barack Obama’s campaign livery. Others painted Obama as the Joker from the Batman movies. Still more quoted the founding fathers, or the US constitution. Handmade, multicoloured, sometimes poorly spelled; all the signs raged at the collapse of America.

Welcome to the Tea party.

In the year since, this rabble of libertarians has joined forces with America’s conservative media to build a powerful movement, which has deepened the sense that Obama is an unpopular, failing president. The Tea party claims no formal party allegiance, but it is having an enormous effect on the Republicans. American conservatives saw their onward march checked in 2008, when Obama’s election seemed to herald a liberal moment. But as this prospect has faded, Republican leaders have struggled to respond to the fiscal crisis and rising economic insecurity. The Tea party stepped into the gap.

The movement now exerts a gravitational pull on Republican leaders, who are eager to tap the energy and money flowing from its ranks in advance of the midterm elections on 2nd November. Commentators are even entertaining the notion that the Tea party might propel a hardliner, possibly 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, to the next Republican presidential nomination. So how has this seemingly amateurish, incoherent cause elbowed aside the traditional religious, cultural and business Republican elites in only two years to become the most talked-about force in US politics?

It was perhaps natural for those organising protests against the newly inaugurated Obama in early 2009 to co-opt the name of the Boston Tea party—the iconic 1773 event when colonists objected to the British taxation of tea by throwing three shiploads into Boston harbour. Yet the protests last year may not have marked the real beginning of the Tea party; some people credit Ron Paul and his supporters. Paul, who would abolish income tax, had invoked the anti-tax sentiments of the Boston tea party before.

Some of the Tea party’s supporters are orthodox libertarians. But most are less ideological, united instead by a distrust of America’s political and business elite. Their demands show little coherence: lower taxes, but also lower government debt; worries about jobs, but protests against government action to boost demand and preserve the banking system. The combination of economic hard times and bank bailouts, stimulus packages and healthcare reforms, was the catalyst for action.

David Frum, a former speechwriter to George W Bush and an eloquent voice for moderate conservatism, explains to me that the Tea party offers “an explanation of President Obama’s failure that makes sense within pre-existing US ideology. The mainstream of this country never absorbed the Keynesian revolution, so these are people who think that if you have lots of debt, it doesn’t make sense to make more of it.” Equally, the movement’s potency stems from broader failures in a US economy which has been generating declining real incomes for the majority, creating a deepening gap in income and esteem between the educated bicoastal professional elite who voted for Obama, and

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the middle Americans who did not.

Yet it would be a mistake to see the Tea party in purely economic terms. Below the surface, the movement shares much of the worldview of its conservative predecessors. Few Tea partiers, and virtually none of those Republicans claiming their mantle, think the government should be neutral on abortion. Race, too, plays a part. Some notable early attendees were the “birthers,” who believe that Obama was born outside the US and is therefore ineligible to be president—a view that polls suggest close to one fifth of Americans might harbour. These are not the old-fashioned racists of a generation ago, but resentment remains a factor. A University of Washington survey found that three quarters of Tea party supporters agree that “if blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as whites,” compared to just a third of the US population as a whole.

All of these economic, cultural and racial factors create anxiety; a feeling of a changing country exacerbated by a black president, a rapidly diversifying ethnic make-up, an uncertain footing within the social hierarchy, and a weak economy. Against this backdrop it seems less surprising that the Tea party cleaves to traditional symbols: an extraordinary veneration for the constitution, a belief in investing in gold, and a cold war-era suspicion of socialism.

Despite its origins in the recent recession, the Tea party has a familiar feel; it is an example of what sociologist Richard Hofstadter, writing in Harper’s magazine in 1964, called “the paranoid style in American politics.” Hofstadter noted how right-wing movements often coalesced around the feeling that “the old American virtues had already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism had been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers”—just as the Tea party rages against Wall Street or plans to make citizens buy health insurance.

It seems the long-term impact of the Tea party will be twofold: the Republican party will move right, and the US government will work even less well. If the Republicans do take the House, congress will be even more divided than over the past two years. And if the Tea party and its media backers stay vocal, the chances of a moderate winning the 2012 Republican presidential nomination will be diminished too. Candidates will have to tack to the right, as Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich have already done. And behind them stands Sarah Palin, who over the past year has built up an impressive record of endorsing winning candidates and raising money. She also has a communication style—a blend of Facebook and Fox News—which is ideally suited to the Tea party moment.

Perhaps those who will find life most difficult will be Republican moderates. In the age of the Tea party, the bad news is likely to keep coming—and a comeback for moderate Republicanism looks some way off.

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