

Rednecks and Socialists

The Tea Party, the conservative media, and the state of electoral politics in a fearful and confused America

By Mark Worth – December 2010

The Tea Party of Fort Lauderdale is proud to be the “Longest Running Tea Party in the Country.” They’ve met every Saturday afternoon – at the same time and same place – since February 2009. They have a website, an online newsletter, YouTube videos, T-shirts, bumperstickers and a lot of very large American flags.

But their headquarters isn’t an office with a bank of phones and precinct maps pinned to the walls. They do their business at the corner of U.S. Highway 1 and Oakland Park Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in the parking lot of a very large Target store. Chanting with bullhorns and receiving some 1,500 honks per hour from passing cars (yes, they count them), it also might be the loudest Tea Party in the country.

You’d also have a tough time finding a group of Tea Partiers that is more hardcore. They think President Obama is a “Muslim sympathizer,” if not a Muslim himself. They think his health care plan and corporate bailouts are strides toward socialism or communism. They openly don’t like immigrants, environmentalists, labor unions (especially the teachers’), lawyers, welfare recipients, gays or “professional politicians.” They think *all* of the mainstream media is run by the Democratic Party. They get their information from Fox News and conservative talk-radio, which runs on a popular AM station in Miami from dawn ‘til midnight.

The group was even feistier than usual in front of Target the Saturday following the November 2 midterm elections. Their flags were bigger. Their signs were wittier. They sang jingles mocking Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. When a driver waiting for the light to change at the intersection started arguing with them, a few Tea Partiers carrying flags and signs surrounded the car while one of them videotaped the scene. “I got him! I got him!” she shouted, with a mixture of rage and joy. It was hard to tell whether she was more angry that someone would dare disagree with them, or more happy that she could record it and post it on the Internet. “That guy called me a redneck,” the woman said. “Well, if that’s what it means to be in the Tea Party, then I’m proud to be a redneck!”

Speaking individually with Tea Party “patriots”, as many of them now prefer to be called, one understands how their collective anger led to the Democrats’ poor showing in the midterms. The depth and ferocity – and what could easily be called irrationality – of their anger, however, is what is difficult to understand. They actually believe that Barack Obama is attempting a communist overthrow of the U.S. government. That he wants to take away their guns. That he doesn’t want to protect the country from terrorists. That he wants to institute Islamic (*Sharia*) law. That he isn’t really a U.S. citizen.

“He’s taking away our freedoms. This damned health care law – he’s trying to tell me what doctors I can and can’t go to. He’s telling me what kind of car I can drive. What kind of food I can buy. What kind of light bulbs I have to buy. I want my Constitutional rights back!”

Tea Partiers recite this same line or something very similar, which reflects their uncritical reliance on the conservative media. While it reveals their anger, it also exposes a paranoia and

a fundamental misunderstanding of issues and the political process that would be hilarious if it weren't so disturbing – and if the Tea Party weren't so influential.

One Tea Partier at the streetcorner rally in Fort Lauderdale complained that Obama is infringing on his rights and violating the Constitution. When asked to compare the current situation to George W. Bush's Patriot Act, he said he didn't know what that was. "Well, I'm a *patriot*," he said, "so that sounds like a really good law to me." Another said he doesn't want the government involved with health care because Europeans have to wait weeks or months to see a doctor. Asked whether he'd ever been to or read anything about Europe, he said, "I've never been to the Moon or to Jupiter, but I know what it's like there."

"Why doesn't Social Security money go where it's supposed to go?" said another, without explaining who she thinks is actually getting it. Said another, without any apparent context but with plenty of anger, "France is 50 per cent Muslim!"

This is the level to which the political debate in the United States has sunk. People take the twisted information they receive from the conservative/populist media, twist it further with their own poor information and wayward, fear-based opinions, and the result is profound ignorance – even about the issues they claim to care about most. Most Tea Partiers can't tell you what is actually in Obama's health care plan. They can't define cap-and-trade. They can't tell you which taxes are going up and which are going down. The best-known Tea Party gaffe was when an audience member at a town hall meeting held by a Republican congressman said, "Keep your government hands off my Medicare!"

Too wacky to scrutinize?

As misinformed as its members are, the Tea Party's power has been discounted by many mainstream commenters, and the Tea Party movement has been underreported outside the U.S. But it is real – and growing. The *New York Times*' front page headline the day after the midterms read: "Victories Suggest Wider Appeal of Tea Party." According to exit polls, 41% of all voters said they support the Tea Party and, unsurprisingly, 87% of voters associating themselves with the Tea Party voted Republican.

Just as their influence is growing, so is their ignorance – and this ignorance is beginning to shape public opinion more broadly. One in five Americans now think President Obama is a Muslim. More than one-third of conservative Republicans believe this – nearly twice as many as 2009, according to a Pew poll.

Here are more disturbing numbers that should serve as a caution to those who are quick to dismiss the Tea Party. According to a March 2010 survey of Republicans by Harris:

- 67% believe Obama is a socialist
- 51% believe he wants to fold the U.S. into a one-world government
- 22% believe he "wants the terrorists to win"
- 38% say that he is "doing many of the things that Hitler did"
- 45% think he is a "domestic enemy," as defined by the Constitution
- 24% believe he is the "Antichrist," as defined by the Bible

Granted, this is only what Republicans are on record as thinking and believing. But such reckless and paranoid views – bloviated daily by conservative television and talk-radio hosts – are steadily and materially infiltrating mainstream American media and culture. Absent an

equal and opposite alternative, they are slowly hardening into established and accepted truths. At the very least – even among Obama supporters – they are re-packaging and re-imaging the president as someone who can't be trusted or is even a traitor.

The takeaway here is that the Tea Party should not be ignored. Dismissing it as a collection of paranoid, conspiracy-minded doomsdayers has had the effect of allowing it to grow into a bonafide political and cultural force. It is actually *because* they are so comically misinformed that they have escaped analysis from credible observers. Why devote serious study to something if it's not serious itself?

One effect of this is that the media generally does not report on the Tea Party's more ridiculous views. They're just too wacky and embarrassing for journalists to broadcast or write about. (Following the journalistic concept of objectivity, a reporter writing a balanced article would have to quote someone saying that Barack Obama is *not* the Antichrist.) So in the end, the Tea Party comes across like a credible movement because it is usually not publicly portrayed as what it really is.

Moreover, the Tea Party is randomly defined and decentralized – with no clear leader, organization or even political platform. (One wonders whether they are just too agitated to organize themselves.) Googling “Tea Party,” the top hit is teapartypatriots.org, which has no address, telephone number, mission statement, bylaws, or names of staff members – just e-mail addresses for “Mark” and “Jenny Beth.” This anonymity, and a lack of accountability and transparency, has also permitted it to spread without the scrutiny to which political movements – especially those so widely influential – are normally subjected.

More radical, more enemies, more mainstream

Fringe movements are as old as the United States itself, and even older – from the Salem witchhunts and the Red Scare, to alien invasions and Y2K.

In the case of the Tea Party, the mass hysteria it is feeding – and feeding upon – is rooted in fear from within and without. As economic problems and terrorist threats drone on year after year, Americans' worries about their financial and physical well-being – reinforced daily by foreclosure figures and Orange Alerts – have escalated into full-blown paranoia the likes of which the U.S. has not seen in three generations. Glenn Beck is urging people to build food-storage facilities, stock up on flour and learn how to make homemade bread. People routinely call the police to be escorted to ATM machines. Add misinformation and ignorance to a fear-fatigued nation, and the end result is the Tea Party.

But this is more than just a post-9/11 phenomenon. You have to look deeper – in time, culture and politics.

When Tea Partiers stage rallies and protests, they are channeling decades of pent-up anger over perceived U.S. military weakness since the Vietnam War, the expanding welfare state, affirmative action, paying U.N. dues, the outsourcing of jobs, the Endangered Species Act – even the obscure and innocuous Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which Rush Limbaugh calls “rot-gut,” and the income tax, which they say Democrat Woodrow Wilson imposed unconstitutionally. (Never mind the fact that the proceeds helped win World War I, and that it was Republican Teddy Roosevelt who proposed the constitutional amendment that institutionalized the income tax).

Scoop up so many decades of frustration over so much, and what you have is an irrational, ultra-conservative force that combines Ronald Reagan God-and-country patriotism, Ross Perot nativist anti-internationalism, and the Christian Right. Then, add a dollop of survivalism and Armageddonism. Hence, Glenn Beck's food-storage tips and the belief that Obama is the Antichrist.

It's little wonder that the mish-mash of signs and slogans at street-corner Tea Party rallies seem so incoherent. Find a umbrella big enough for people who don't like the United Nations, Al Gore, Muslims, Rosie O'Donnell, China and George Soros, and who think we should all be buying gold because the dollar is on the verge of collapsing.

This bizarre laundry list of enemies and priorities helps explain why voters in Oklahoma – obviously sensing an imminent threat – overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment banning international and *Sharia* law (which the courts quickly threw out). Such is the Tea Party's work – the sum of fear and ignorance. They also use guilt by association, rumor-based smears, compiling lists and other McCarthy-like tactics.

The mind of the typical Tea Partier is nimble – able to catastrophize just about anything. Nutrition advice can lead to a government takeover of farms. Any *this* could and probably will lead to any *that*. Just minutes into a conversation with a typical Tea Partier, and they reveal themselves as unreasonable and not at all interested in the facts. They have difficulty staying on the topic, making it difficult to have even a simple discussion. They are eager to believe whatever they are told from their favored sources, and refuse to believe anything from anyone else. This unreasonableness, however, is a key to their strength as a movement.

Don't think the Tea Party doesn't have a sense of humor. You can listen to Todd Schnitt for the latest sexist limericks about Nancy Pelosi, and Muslim women can tune in to Glenn Beck for clever tips on how to wear their burkas to attract a husband.

But the jokes end here. When progressives compared Bush to Hitler, it was dark humor. But when conservatives compare Obama to Hitler, they're serious. Hard-core Tea Partiers are convinced that concentration camps (for whom, it is unclear) are on the way. So does Jesse Ventura, who featured this on his new cable TV show, "Conspiracy Theory" (which has 1.5 million viewers).

This New American Right is on the verge of becoming mainstream – not just within the Republican Party, but within the electorate. Compared to the Religious Right, which came close to overtaking the GOP in the 1980s, this new Right is broader yet more radical. So it actually has a better chance of redefining Republican politics, and with it, American politics as a whole.

'I want to believe': The new X-files

Make fun of Glenn Beck all you want, but he's the third most popular radio host in the U.S. (behind only Rush Limbaugh and John Hannity), and he's #12 on *Time* magazine's list of the most influential people in the world. His infamous conspiracy-theory chalkboard charts – in which he finds delusional ways to link Mao to Jimmy Hoffa to Malcolm X to Captain Kangaroo – make for great late-night comedy fodder. But his combined 11 million viewers and listeners believe every word the guy says.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, he calls his show “The Fusion of Entertainment and Enlightenment.” And, just as strangely, he flashes split-second images of Martin Luther King and Ghandi during the show’s intro. Currently, the main subject of his paranoid web-spinning is George Soros, who Beck thinks is set on destroying the dollar – presumably to boost sales for the gold dealers that advertise heavily on Beck’s radio show.

Like Tea Partiers, the rantings of Beck, Limbaugh, Hannity, Schnitt and the pied piper of paranoid insomniacs Mark Levin would be funny if they weren’t so popular and influential. And just like the Tea Party, it is fear and ignorance that lead people to listen and repeat whatever they hear on Fox and right-wing radio. The conservative media feeds on this fear and paranoia, and vice versa.

Fully aware that their viewers and listeners lack the knowledge or will to question what they say, these commentators concoct bizarre doomsday scenarios and conspiracy theories based on rumors and innuendo – and sometimes outright lies.

Recently they have riled and ruffled their audiences with scary tales of the Obama administration “nationalizing” or even “hijacking” or “confiscating” their 401(k) investments. They falsely claim Obama has increased the EPA budget 124% since taking office. They falsely claim Obama’s recent Asia trip cost U.S. taxpayers \$200 million a day (more than the war in Afghanistan).

Beck’s latest doomsday tale is that runaway inflation will drive up the price of milk to \$30 a gallon and bread to \$20 a loaf. (As usual, Beck offers absolutely no evidence to support this. “I’m not a journalist,” is his favorite disclaimer.) Their strategy very well might be to broadcast so much false information that no one has the time to truth-squad all of it.

It is little surprise that 60% of people who think Obama is a Muslim said they got this information from the media – “suggesting that their opinions are fueled by misinformation,” according to the *Washington Post*.

It’s a nifty, closed circle: conservative radio hosts broadcast false information, which their callers embellish with additional rumors and half-truths, which then empowers the hosts to be even less concerned about the real truth. Like a soap opera, there is a story-of-the-day that keeps the audience enraged or frightened or titilated just long enough until the next day. But the stories are rarely followed up. So these fear-mongering stories – no matter how untrue they might be – become true in the minds of listeners and viewers.

Within this closed circle, emotions can sometimes get out of control. On Nov. 10 – eight days after the midterm elections – someone called South Florida-based, conservative talk-show host Joyce Kaufman and threatened to carry out a mass shooting in the Fort Lauderdale area. Authorities took the threat seriously and immediately instituted a “lockdown” at all schools in Broward County, keeping children (including this writer’s 10-year-old son) inside their rooms for several hours. Why was the call placed to Kaufman? Because while attending a Fourth of July Tea Party rally at the Target store on U.S. Highway 1, Kaufman exhorted people to join militias, “If ballots don’t work,” she shouted to a cheering crowd, “bullets will!” In reference to this, the caller said, “I’m so glad that you said we should use our weapons.”

Presumably to lighten the mood, Beck, Hannity and particularly Schnitt drop in jingles and limericks that taunt liberal leaders and ideas, often with race-baiting accents and carachatures.

While presumably intended to be funny, these tactics only feed the public's most base desire for scapegoating.

Of course, when the truth comes out and the misrepresentations made by Fox and talk-radio are exposed, the hosts hardly ever correct them. But by then, the damage has been already done. Their followers continue to believe the myths despite the facts – like people who still believe the Bigfoot video and Loch Ness Monster photo even though the forgers themselves have publicly said they were faked.

It is fitting that the radio show following Mark Levin at midnight in South Florida is a call-in show for people who claim to have been abducted by aliens. On a recent edition of “Coast to Coast,” callers debated about which group of aliens would be taking over which parts of Earth. (The Pleideans, it seems, have their eye on North America.)

‘Fair and Balanced’: Winning the media war

As reckless and even delusional as the conservative media has become, the hard truth is that it has succeeded in convincing at least a third of the country that the mainstream media is fundamentally liberal and biased – and that *it*, in fact, is the real mainstream media that should be trusted to deliver unbiased news. It is beginning to win a media battle it has been fighting for some 40 years – at least since the seminal moment in media history in 1968 when Walter Cronkite on national television questioned the wisdom of continuing the Vietnam War.

The conservative media’s strategy is simple but powerful and effective: fill the airwaves with lies and half-truths, and then when these are not repeated by the mainstream media, claim that this is because the mainstream media is liberal and biased. Today there are actually two full-fledged media establishments broadcasting parallel “truths”: Fox and its allies on one side and the traditional major networks on the other.

The final split came when the conservative media claimed Sarah Palin was treated unfairly in interviews by CBS’ Katie Couric and ABC’s Charlie Gibson during the 2008 presidential campaign. To make sure this doesn’t happen again, Palin is being shielded from having to answer non-softball questions. Not only is she appearing almost exclusively on Fox, but she is a paid Fox commentator and the subject of a reality-type show on Fox about her life, family and outdoor hobbies called “Sarah Palin’s Alaska.”

The conservative media has even gone so far as to claim that former President George W. Bush was treated unfairly in a recent interview with NBC’s Matt Lauer, who simply asked Bush about the budget deficit he left for Barack Obama. Don’t be surprised if Republican candidates and leading GOP figures completely stop appearing on the major networks and only show up on Fox and conservative radio.

Part of this strategy is to rewrite history and revise Bush’s legacy – just as was done with Reagan – and to use Bush’s polished-up image to rally the Republican base in the 2012 presidential election. So naturally, Bush’s memoir was released just after the midterms, as the 2012 presidential campaign season essentially began.

Obama and the false messiah syndrome

Standing in the middle of a Barack Obama rally in the fall of 2008, as thrilling as that was, one couldn't help but look around and wonder why 20,000 people would fill a basketball arena and listen to a man who was virtually unknown two years earlier talk about hope and change.

Perhaps deafened by their own cheers, that's all that many of them actually heard. Anything that could fit on a button or a bumper-sticker. Asked what they thought Obama would specifically do if he were elected, many people simply said, "You know, hope and change."

As it turned out, many Obama voters wanted the hope but they weren't ready for the change. Obama talked extensively during his campaign about health care reform and global warming. You could argue, in fact, that apart from ending the Iraq War, health care was the main specific reason that people voted for him. Based on what has become an irrational opposition to Obamacare – even among many people who voted for him – it's clear that voters didn't fully know or understand who they were voting for or why.

Somehow, they expected Obama to extend health care coverage to millions of Americans without passing any new legislation or spending one additional penny. And they expected him to deal with climate change without introducing a cap-and-trade system, which the EU has had since 2005.

As much as progressives would like to believe that Obama's victory represented a shift toward their values and also a shift in the country's values, the reality is that his victory was a false one. Conservative opposition to Obama's policies since he took office should have been expected. No surprise there. But the opposition and skepticism from independents who voted for him – and even from some liberals who worked on and donated to his campaign – proves that many among the cheering mobs in fact were not voting for progressive values. They bought into the hope and the hype, but unfortunately not into the policies.

The conservative media has spun all of this brilliantly. In order to free Obama voters from any accountability for their "mistake," Fox and talk-radio are blaming the mainstream media and essentially Obama himself for being elected. It's not their fault – they were duped. The conservative media's strategy is to attribute the election of conservative presidents to the power of the people, but the election of liberal presidents to other forces – primarily lies by the candidate and the biased "liberal media."

Going a step further, the conservative media propagandizes the feeling that the U.S. is somehow entitled to conservative presidents who are all about family, faith and flag. They think that liberal presidents who act liberally when they take office don't have a right to do this – that ignoring their political opponents is undemocratic. Meanwhile, conservative presidents have the right to act conservatively, regardless of any opposition.

Just compare the opposition to Bush's Iraq War with the opposition to Obamacare. Bush had the perfect right to ignore his critics – and even a majority of the American people. But, according to the conservative media, Obama doesn't have this right. Especially since the midterms, Obama is expected to back down to Republicans. This tactic further serves to create two media establishments – a prevailing mainstream media that reports criticism evenly, and a conservative media that ignores criticism of conservative politicians.

The result – and this is precisely what the conservative media and its Republican backers want – is a confused electorate.

Exit polls from the midterm elections show this strategy is working. Even though Democrats were turned out in droves at every level of government, 65% of voters blamed either Wall Street bankers or former President Bush for the economic crisis, compared to just 23% for Obama. Despite Tea Party-fed rage over Obamacare, only one in five voters said health care was the top issue for them – compared to 62% for the economy. Despite alleged public opposition to increased federal spending, more than a third of voters said they supported more government funding to create jobs. And, a surprising 57% of voters said their financial situation is better or the same compared to two years ago.

So not only do we have a country that is divided by ideology, we now have an electorate that is split between voting with their minds or voting with their emotions. The midterms showed that the conservative media succeeded in motivating people to vote with their emotions – and, of course, the driving emotion in the election was fear.

2012: Patriots vs. Pinheads

A new TV ad features a stone-faced George Washington look-alike at the wheel of a Dodge Challenger with an American flag sticking out the window, barreling through an open field toward a line of retreating Redcoats. “America got two things right,” the narrator says, “Cars and freedom.”

As if the metaphor isn't too obvious, the Challenger is the Tea Party and the fleeing British soldiers represent the Obama administration.

We should become accustomed to hearing words like “freedom” and “tyranny” over the next two years, because this is what the 2012 presidential election will be all about. The Democrats will be pictured as despots who want to tax your last penny and institute restrictive new laws against your will. Meanwhile, the Republicans will be portrayed as freedom fighters ripping off the shackles of an oppressive, undemocratic regime. The Challenger ad could be just the beginning of a metaphor frenzy.

Unless the U.S. economy recovers significantly – and soon – we should prepare ourselves for President Palin. This is the goal of Fox News. It's what Glenn Beck and other right-wing commentators are pushing for. And it's what nearly half of American voters now say they want.

Obama's election has lit the fuse of a right-wing movement that may even surpass in strength and stamina the Reagan Revolution – if for no other reason than Obama is seen as being even more liberal, more weak on defense, and more unpatriotic than Jimmy Carter. The Tea Party has succeeded in equating liberals as being anti-American even more effectively than when George Bush mocked Michael Dukakis with the “L” word in 1988.

People want another Ronald Reagan – literally. Hence the “Reagan 2012” bumper-stickers and “He'd Vote for Palin” T-shirts starting to appear around the country. They want to wave their flags like Reagan did. They want the Reagan rhetoric. They want the Reagan swagger. They want the Reagan saber-rattling. They want a president who will call countries evil if they don't like us.

In Palin, however, conservatives have a packaging problem. Instead of a tough-seeming, horse-riding, former lifeguard, the likely Republican nominee in 2012 is a 5-foot-5 fishing and kayaking enthusiast who wears glasses and red skirts. So to deflect rather than attract heat, Palin is being packaged as a martyr – someone who has been unfairly beaten up by the liberal mainstream media. Her handlers have gone so far as to plant her 20-year-old daughter, Bristol, as a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*, knowing full well she would be pilloried, but also knowing – rightly – that it would advance her mother’s political career.

Palin's emergence – and that of ultra-conservative Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal as a potential running-mate – clearly shows that the United States is fundamentally a center-right country. The extreme right-wing reaction by millions of Americans to what actually are only the mildly liberal policies of Obama reveals that Obama has established a boundary of progressivism beyond which much of the country is not willing to go.

Obama's policies could also very well become a measuring stick for the future. Presidents who, for example, try to increase the government's role in health care or become more engaged in international solutions to economic or environmental problems could be labelled as “another Obama,” and their policies doomed on arrival.

What we are now seeing is a hardening of traditional American values, which many Americans – however misinformed and paranoid they are – firmly believe President Obama has violated. National values always harden at a time of war. But the wars now being fought are unlike what the country has ever been through before. The “war on terror” is so ill-defined – and perhaps deliberately so, with no clear enemy or theater – that the associated fear among the populace is even more bizarre than what we saw during the Cold War.

The prime American value is freedom, and this has become the Tea Party's rallying cry. Many Americans have now been convinced that they are better off being uninsured and sick than to have the government require insurance companies to give them health insurance. (So actually it’s not freedom for citizens, so much as it is freedom for the health care industry.)

The 2012 presidential campaign will not come down to who has better policy ideas. Less than two years into Obama's presidency, it is clear that the fearful and confused Americans of today do not have the patience or understanding for drawn-out policy debates about health care and taxes. They want their president to be a “Daddy” who can protect them from dangers and unknowns, not a “Mommy” who will take care of them when they're sick.

Sad to say, Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly has been right all along: There truly is a culture war being fought in the U.S. Taking another of O'Reilly's phrases, the war is between “Patriots and Pinheads.” The pinheads won in 2008. Barring a significant economic turnaround, 2012 could be the year of the patriots.