

The Stories New York Times Liberals Tell Themselves About the Tea Party
By: Clay Waters
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In his Monday column, "[Tales of the Tea Party](#)," Ross Douthat, the New York Times' idea of a conservative, exploded four common Tea Party myths spread by the left. The text box read "The stories liberals tell themselves." What Douthat couldn't mention was that all four kinds of "stories" have been told by Times reporters as well.

Douthat began by debunking the Tea Party racism myth, one spread by the paper's Tea Party beat reporter Kate Zernike on several occasions, to the point of considering opposition to the minimum wage [racially suspect](#).

A month ago, a U.C.L.A. graduate student named Emily Elkins spent hours roaming a Tea Party rally on the Washington Mall, photographing every sign she saw.

Elkins, a former CATO Institute intern, was examining the liberal conceit that Tea Party marches are rife with racism and conspiracy theorizing. Last week, The Washington Post reported on her findings: just 5 percent of the 250 signs referenced Barack Obama's race or religion, and 1 percent brought up his birth certificate. The majority focused on bailouts, deficits and spending -- exactly the issues the Tea Partiers claim inspired their movement in the first place.

The easy thing would be to take them at their word. But for liberals, that would be too simple. The Democrats are weeks away from a midterm thumping that wasn't supposed to happen, and the liberal mind is desperate for a narrative, a storyline, something to ease the pain of losing to a ragtag band of right-wing populists. Something that explains the Tea Parties -- and then explains them away.

The "Tea Partiers are racists" theory is the most inflammatory storyline, but there are many more. Let's consider them, in order of increasing plausibility.

Douthat then posted some paragraphs under the following four bullet headlines of stories liberals tell themselves about the Tea Party. Under Douthat's headlines are examples of how Times reporters have told their readers those same liberal stories.

#1 The Tea Parties Are Driving Republicans Off a Political Cliff.

Tea Party beat reporter Kate Zernike on [April 5, 2010](#) suggested that Republicans were blowing their chance to defeat Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was by choosing Tea Party supported Republican Sharron Angle. Colleague Adam Nagourney concurred in a [July 8, 2010 post](#), arguing Reid was fortunate in his opponent. And Zernike suggested on [September 19, 2010](#) that the GOP take a step away from the movement's "extremes" if they wanted a good run in the November elections.

#2 The Tea Parties Are Puppets of the Sinister Rich.

The Times has also suggested that the Tea Party is merely an “Astroturf” movement backed by rich secretive donors (Douthat also used the term “Astroturf” in his column). Here’s an excerpt from Liz Robbins’ [April 16, 2009 story](#) covering the nationwide Tea Party rallies marking Tax Day:

Although organizers insisted they had created a nonpartisan grass-roots movement, others argued that these parties were more of the Astroturf variety -- an occasion largely created by the clamor of cable news and fueled by the financial and political support of current and former Republican leaders.” The paper ensures mentions of the Tea Party are linked to the free-market nonprofit FreedomWorks, headed by former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, which has helped train Tea Party activists.

#3 The Tea Parties Are Just The John Birch Society All Over Again

Investigative reporter David Barstow wrote in a [February 16, 2010 cover story](#) for the Times Sunday Magazine:

[Former Arizona sheriff Richard] Mack said he has found audiences everywhere struggling to make sense of why they were wiped out last year. These audiences, he said, are far more receptive to critiques once dismissed as paranoia. It is no longer considered all that radical, he said, to portray the Federal Reserve as a plaything of the big banks -- a point the Birch Society, among others, has argued for decades.

Sam Tanenhaus, who edits both the Sunday Book Review and the Sunday Times Week in Review, went on the Rachel Maddow show on MSNBC [April 26, 2010](#) and called the John Birch Society a “precursor” to today’s Tea Party movement

But there were many on the right who actually supported [John Birch Society president Robert] Welch on the principle we're seeing in action today - no enemies on the right. If they can be useful, you keep them in the tent....They were useful. In the Goldwater campaign in '64, they were the foot soldiers. In some sense, they're the precursor to the tea partiers we're seeing now, so the right is always nervous about evicting people like that.

#4 The Tea Partiers Are Hypocrites

Tea Party beat reporter Kate Zernike made this argument in her snidely headlined March 28, 2010 report “[With No Jobs, Plenty of Time for Tea Party](#).” An accompanying photo caption read: “Tea Party supporters, many of whom argue for smaller government even as they argue it should do more, rallied Saturday in Searchlight, Nev., Senator Harry Reid’s hometown.”

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