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Tea Partying Like It's 1954

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In the early fifties, Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) used his position to smear establishment Americans as agents of the Soviet threat. (Photo: [History In An Hour](#))

The power of the Tea Partiers who refused to raise the US government's debt ceiling this past week, despite the pleading of Republican pundits and the powerful, echoes the 1950s when Sen. Joe McCarthy, Fighting Joe, went after those who thought themselves his masters.

It's true; the right-wing lobbies Club for Growth and FreedomWorks both cheered on the 25 or so Tea Partiers who sabotaged an already reactionary bill from passing in the House. Conservative [journalists](#) tell us South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint flexed his Tea Party cred and convinced the South Carolina House delegation to buck House Leader John Boehner and his bill.

Today, Ann Coulter [tells](#) Sean Hannity, "I had admired the Tea Party and praised them for standing firm on taxes. But now, with success in their grasp, they threaten to hand a victory to a president who regards raising taxes as the Holy Grail."

But all of this strum and drang had other bankrollers of the Tea Party takeover like the US Chamber of Commerce unhappy. A House aide described the Tea Party freshman as "[buckets of crazy](#)" to conservative Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin. Meanwhile, conservative [journalists](#) tell us, South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint flexed his Tea Party cred and convinced the South Carolina House delegation to buck House Leader John Boehner and his bill. The right-wing lobbies Club for Growth and FreedomWorks both cheer on the 25 or so who stopped the already reactionary bill from passing. But all of this strum and drang had other bankrollers of the Tea Party takeover like the US Chamber of Commerce unhappy. This wasn't what they wanted.

All this reminds me of 1952.

Back then, Maine Sen. Margaret Chase Smith's Declaration of Conscience against Joe McCarthy, signed onto by a few other prominent Republicans in 1950, had faded feebly away. McCarthy had proved himself an able attack dog and his party put him first on the podium of their Republican convention, then on the campaign trail with General Eisenhower, their presidential candidate. Wealthy Republicans paid for him to go on television to attack the Democratic presidential candidate. In the famous speech, he said, "Tonight I shall give you the history of the Democrat candidate ... who endorses and would continue the suicidal Kremlin-shaped policies of this nation."

McCarthy painted establishment Americans as agents of the Soviet threat. As Richard Rovere wrote in his masterful biography from that era, "Nothing about it was more distressing than the fact that this flagon of poison was bought by men of power in the country and recommended for consumption by the party that was about to win control of the government; that and the fact that poison could be made of such ingredients." Republicans saw McCarthy as the ticket back to power and they used it. Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio tucked him away on the government operations committee "where he can't do any harm," then watched as McCarthy continued to concoct conspirators and communists in the Republican-controlled government before finally being toppled when he attacked the US Army in 1954. (In one of his first forays, he went after the president's old comrade Brig. Gen. Ralph Zwicker, "You are a disgrace to the uniform. You're shielding Communist conspirators. You're not fit to be an officer. You are ignorant.")

McCarthy rose to power as the United States (through the fig leaf of the United Nations) was really at war with Communists, in North Korea. He rode and wrestled with the patriotic fervor of war, directing it at nonexistent enemies like Zwicker. Today's Tea Party rises as the United States government pretends it doesn't need to raise taxes on the wealthy and corporations to fund its obligations. But they wrestle their fear of the collapse of the US government under debt into a crisis that would itself challenge the creditworthiness of their beloved country.

To help him understand McCarthyism and the far right, historian Richard Hofstadter first formulated the idea of right-wing populism driven by status anxiety among a sector of the middle class losing influence.

Chip Berlet, my former colleague at Political Research Associates, defines right-wing populism today as a white supremacist, middle-class movement that challenges elites above them. while scapegoating immigrants and blacks as the cause of the problem below them.

Certainly, some of that is in play.

There are interesting differences with the 1950s, of course. In the 1950s, McCarthy's core supporters in local Republican parties included old line Republicans who refused to accept the basic logic of the New Deal and were defeated by the moderate and liberal Republicans in the establishment that believed the party's survival depended on that. William F. Buckley was prominently among them. Today, in pockets across the country, the Tea Party Republicans are the newcomers who took over local parties in Idaho or New Jersey or Nevada from already right-wing conservatives they sometimes deemed, wildly, as Communists or, at best, RINOs (Republican in Name Only).

But while the Cato Institute and other Koch-funded beltway organizations want to claim a libertarian small government-loving coherence to the movement, we can readily see that is not the case. Polls and interviews show many local Tea Partiers continue to support big government programs and just fear the feds have overreached, putting their entitlements at risk. One small business owner I interviewed who wants tax cuts for the wealthy also supports Medicare and Social Security and thought media disinformation was to blame for statements to privatize the programs by his candidate of choice for Senate. The Tea Party activists and freshly minted politicians are more anti-entitlement than their base and instead ally with beltway right-wing establishment in wanting to "privatize" Medicare and Social Security.

Once analyzed in all its diversity, we can see the Tea Party rebellion as a perfect storm bringing together five major political and economic trends of the last 20 years that are distinct from the anti-Communism powering the McCarthy age. The right-wing populism shown by Tea Partiers of more modest means is only one response to diverse trends.

1. Some of the rich are separating themselves from the rest of America. They no longer see themselves as part of a civic community and have been powering a (legal) tax strike for the last 30 years or more. As is well known by now, they have been funding efforts to promote their anti-tax ideology in both secular realms (seen in the great New Yorker article about David Koch), but also in religious arenas. It is bearing fruit as regional elites and small business people are having their grievances shaped by this ideology. Didn't someone once say the ruling ideas of an age are those of the ruling class? Well, there's a battle raging. The Tea Partiers side with this part of the ruling class and often show racial resentment of immigrants and blacks, scapegoating them as "tax eaters" who are

taking their money just like the ruling class resents their tax money going to the common good.

2. A legitimization crisis. This is when the public loses faith in the government's ability to accomplish anything. The government may absorb the problems of capitalism and is unable to deal with them for whatever reason: partisan gridlock, counterproductive ruling class control, or it could be the overwhelming nature of the economic problem. For her book "Boiling Mad," Kate Zernike of The New York Times interviewed economically insecure people who feel abandoned by government and figure government has already absented itself from trying to address the problems of everyday people, so let's make it official.
3. The growing free-market ideology on the Christian right. Free-market Christianity pre-exists the Tea Party, of course. You see it in former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann and Sarah Palin. The Heritage Foundation and the Christian right have been building ideology together for the past 15 years and it is bearing fruit, particularly since Glenn Beck popularized it. All these obscure Christian right ideologues tracked by people like Chip Berlet, Sarah Posner and Michelle Goldberg became regulars on the "Glenn Beck Show," like Skousen (the John Birch Society thinker, who is now dead, but whose books are high on Beck's reading list) and David Barton (Christian individualism undergirds the Constitution and promotes the free market). Koch created libertarian institutions to try to create a free-market base to the Republican Party to counter its reliance on evangelicals. These institutions, Cato, Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks et al are not always happy with the conservative Christian elements powering parts of the Tea Party.
4. The increasing flexibilization of the economy. Corporations outsource jobs and show little loyalty to their employees. Some classes think they respond better to a "flexible" economy than others. They feel they don't need/don't benefit from the larger infrastructure of government. Many Tea Partiers of the more privileged Tea Partiers I've interviewed feel they will manage if entitlement programs disappear.
5. The disintegration of party institutions because of big money, makes parties minimally responsive to local conditions. Americans identify less and less with a particular political party. The powerful part of parties are now campaigns that do not build a base of party members, but rely on big money to look for voters with well-crafted sound bites. This opens the way for Tea Party influence. The local Tea Party allied with beltway players to make the establishment party regulars irrelevant. I saw this in Nevada; The New York Times' Matt Bai documented the same dynamic in Delaware. This means they are not indebted to the party leaders in the House or Senate. This means they can make trouble.
6. Bureaucratization, the flip side of the flexible economy. Efforts to rationalize an out-of-control economy, bargaining with economic sectors leading to complex

unintelligible reforms like health care create a backlash against an administered society.

Despite all of our social and political challenges, the Tea Party, like the anti-Communists of the McCarthy age, sound a one note solution - cut government. The government itself is the problem.

McCarthy - though not anti-Communism - was only stopped when a Republican establishment lawyer stood up to him in front of the US Senate and asked him whether he no longer had any decency. Will any in the Republican establishment play this role today, or are they too allied to the Tea Party's goals?

What interesting times in which we live.



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