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Gene Healy

Healy: Partisanship has so far been tea party activists' big mistake

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Examiner Columnist
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Who are the tea party activists? When the movement first swept the country last year — rudely interrupting congresscritters' stage-managed town halls — politicians asked that question frantically.

Pollsters have started providing answers recently, deigning to ask the protesters who they are and what they think, most recently in last week's New York Times-CBS News survey of nearly 900 supporters.

Among other things, we've learned that the tea party activists are disproportionately white and well-off. Some in the Washington, D.C., commentariat seem to think that alone serves to discredit the movement (have any of these pundits ever been to an anti-war rally?).

As a tea party sympathizer, I couldn't care less about the protesters' complexions (except insofar as they affect the movement's future success), and I can't imagine why anyone thinks that their middle-class status justifies discounting their complaints.

But there was at least one disturbing revelation in the new NYT-CBS poll: While 58 percent of Americans disapprove of President George W. Bush, 57 percent of tea party activists view our last president favorably.

What's going on here? Tea party activists claim they're a group with a principled opposition to big government in all its forms. How can anyone take that claim seriously when the membership embraces a president who personifies everything they're supposed to hate?

Aren't these activists opposed to profligate spending? Then why do they look favorably on 43, who led the largest debt expansion in American history and spent more than his six predecessors, doubling the federal budget during his tenure?

Don't the tea party activists hate bailouts? Have they forgotten which president rammed through the \$700 billion TARP, bailed out Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, and gave \$17 billion to Chrysler and General Motors after Congress refused to authorize tax dollars for failing automakers? (Here's a hint: He vacations in Waco, Texas, not Martha's Vineyard.)

We hear a lot about President Barack Obama's "arrogance," but has he ever done anything as arrogant,

contemptuous and contemptible as Bush's skit at the 2004 Radio and Television Correspondents' Dinner, when 43 showed a slide of himself looking under a desk and cracked, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere!"?

Har, har.

Of course, the tea party activists are well justified in their disgust with Obama, who's just engineered a takeover of one-sixth of the U.S. economy by ramming through his health care bill with payola, extortion and backroom deals shameless enough to make a Tammany ward boss gag.

And maybe it's poor form to beat up on Bush, an ex-president who's at least had the decency to hang his head, keep quiet and cut brush.

Political scientist Theodore Lowi once proffered a "Law of [Presidential] Succession": "Each president contributes to the upgrading of his predecessors." The corollary? "This is the only certain contribution each president will make."

Maybe that was the impulse behind the billboard an irate Republican put up in Minnesota recently, featuring a picture of Bush and the caption, "Miss me yet?"

But no right-minded supporter of limited government could possibly "miss" a Republican president who, in Medicare Part D — the free-pills-for-seniors program — engineered the biggest expansion of entitlements between President Lyndon Johnson's Medicare and Obamacare.

This isn't a matter of rehashing stale history and settling old scores. If the tea party activists are serious, they can't afford to look partisan — as if they're OK with big government when someone who passes for a good ol' boy is at the helm, but cry "socialism" when an arugula aficionado makes his own power grab.

Both parties got us into this mess. Partisanship won't get us out.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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