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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Seduction of the Tea Partiers

By ROSS DOUTHAT

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On the surface, the [Pledge to America](#) that House Republicans unveiled last week, in obvious imitation of Newt Gingrich's famous [Contract With America](#), feels like a triumph for the Tea Party.



Josh Haner/The New York Times

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Whereas the Gingrich-era contract was a terse, 865-word list of legislative priorities, the 2010 pledge reads like an expansive, even radical manifesto. It runs to almost 8,000 words, bristles with charts and graphs and inspiring quotations, and includes a lengthy preamble modeled on the Declaration of Independence. And whereas the original contract's language was carefully poll-tested to appeal to squishy moderates, the pledge has the aggressively small-government tone of a Rand Paul stump speech, complete with attacks on "self-appointed elites," praise for Americans' speaking out "in town halls and on public squares," and pledges "to honor the Constitution as constructed by its framers."

But style can be deceiving. House Republicans have adopted the atmospherics of the Tea Party movement, but they've evaded its most admirable substance.

The Tea Party is a grass-roots movement — wild, woolly and chaotic — which sometimes makes it hard to figure out exactly what it stands for. But to the extent that the movement boasts a single animating idea, it's the conviction that the Republicans as much as the Democrats

have been an accessory to the growth of spending and deficits, and that the Republican establishment needs to be punished for straying from fiscal rectitude.

The Tea Partiers have a point. Officially, the Republican Party stands for low taxes and limited government. But save during the gridlocked 1990s, Republican majorities and Republican presidents have tended to pass tax cuts while putting off spending cuts till a tomorrow that never comes.

Conservatives have justified this failure with two incompatible theories. One is the "starve the beast" conceit, which holds that cutting taxes will force government spending

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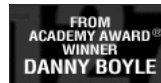
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downward. The other is the happy idea that tax cuts actually increase government revenue, making deficit anxieties irrelevant.

The real world hasn't been kind to either notion. Cutting taxes without cutting spending, the Cato Institute's [William Niskanen](#) has shown, may make voters more likely to support big government, because spending feels like a free lunch. And while some tax cuts can raise government revenue, the income-tax cuts of the Bush years emphatically did not.

To their credit, the House Republicans don't invoke starve-the-beast in their 2010 pledge, or pretend that renewing the Bush tax cuts would single-handedly push the nation into the black. But their fiscal vision practices the same kind of free-lunchism that the Tea Party supposedly abhors: it promotes low taxes without coming close to identifying the spending cuts required to pay for them.

There's a sound political rationale for this, of course. Reducing spending is always difficult, and a Republican Party coasting toward a midterm victory has little incentive to stake out controversial positions. And as everybody knows, the only way to really bring the budget into balance is to reform (i.e., cut) Medicare and Social Security, a topic that nobody in Congress — save the indefatigable Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan — is particularly eager to touch.

But that means that the pledge is ultimately less about the triumph of the Tea Partiers, and more about their potential co-option by Republican politics as usual.

That would be unfortunate. Their eccentric elements notwithstanding, the Tea Parties have something vital to offer the country: a vocal, activist constituency for spending cuts at a time when politicians desperately need to have their spines stiffened on the issue. But it's all too easy to imagine the movement (which, after all, includes a lot of Social Security and Medicare recipients!) being seduced with rhetorical nods to the Constitution, and general promises of spending discipline that never get specific.

It wouldn't be the first time a mass protest movement won a rhetorical victory without achieving a lasting policy shift. The antiwar movement, for instance, seemed to effectively take over the Democratic Party in the middle years of the Bush administration. But here we are, two years into a Democratic presidency, and Gitmo is still open, the U.S. is still in Iraq, and Barack Obama has escalated the war in Afghanistan.

Whether the Tea Party's zeal for limiting government meets a similar fate may depend on the class of Republicans elected in November. From Sharron Angle in Nevada to Joe Miller in Alaska to Marco Rubio in Florida, many of the party's insurgent candidates have gone further than the Republican leadership in acknowledging the painful necessity of entitlement cuts — and it hasn't yet cost them their chances at high office.

Democrats are eager to paint these candidates as dangerously extreme. But on the evidence of last week's pledge, a little more extremism in the defense of fiscal responsibility is exactly what the Republican Party needs.

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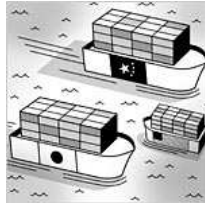


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