

**Newsweek**

## The GOP's Marriage of Convenience

*How establishment Republicans in FreedomWorks and diffuse Tea Partiers hooked up in a bid to take the midterms by storm.*

by [Ben Adler \(/authors/ben-adler.html\)](/authors/ben-adler.html) November 01, 2010



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Matt Kibbe, president and CEO of FreedomWorks

The Occidental Grill, a couple blocks from the White House, is the kind of place you would expect Washington, D.C. insiders to dine. Step into the hallway and you are greeted by paintings of the current president and his predecessors. The food is classic upscale Washington: fancy without being creative or tasty. And this is where Matt Kibbe, president and CEO of FreedomWorks, a conservative advocacy organization led by former House majority leader Dick Armey, was eating lunch last week. He was with the co-chair of his group's board of directors, C. Boyden Gray, a former White House counsel under the first President Bush, whose red-striped tie and courtly accent reflect what he is: a member in good standing of the Washington elite that the insurgent [Tea Party movement \(/tag/tea-party.html\)](/tag/tea-party.html) says it wants to liberate the country from. The irony, of course, is that FreedomWorks is one of the driving forces in Tea Party politics—organizing and funding its grassroots efforts—and Kibbe is one of its masterminds.

What You Missed: Midterm Elections in 7 Minutes Haven't been paying attention this election season? Here's everything you need to know in brief

This election, Armey and Kibbe, the long-time Beltway insiders running FreedomWorks, have seamlessly allied themselves with the insurgent political neophytes of the Tea Party movement. It may be a marriage of convenience, but with their shared passion and different strengths, the two are a good match. The Washington group offers political know-how to the unstructured activists, and the latter provide free labor in battleground districts—as well as street cred—to the former. Armey and Kibbe even wrote the somewhat coattail-riding new book, [Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto \(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0062015877/?tag=nwswk-20\)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0062015877/?tag=nwswk-20). There are some unlikely aspects of this partnership. Some Tea Party-backed candidates are staunch social conservatives, for example, while FreedomWorks takes no stance on those issues. But the bond

between FreedomWorks and the Tea Party movement is so far going strong. Their relentless focus on a less-activist federal government is at the center of the fiscally conservative insurgency that has dominated this election, from Florida to Alaska. Going forward, FreedomWorks sees its inside knowledge of congressional appropriations as an important tool the Tea Party can use in holding Republicans accountable to the small-government platform next year.



</photo/2010/10/20/political-meltdowns.html>) The News

Journal

PHOTOS: Memorable political outbursts and stumbles

[When Our Lawmakers Lose It: Classic Political Meltdowns \(/photo/2010/10/20/political-meltdowns.html\)](/photo/2010/10/20/political-meltdowns.html)

FreedomWorks was founded in 1984 under the name Citizens for a Sound Economy. The group trudged along for years, issuing position papers on federal legislation, encouraging members to militate for or against bills, and arguing for the enduring right-wing goal of a flat federal income tax. Arney became chairman after quitting Congress in 2003, claiming to be disgusted with the way congressional Republicans had fallen into the pockets of special interests and had become the big spending politicians they had arrived to replace. Kibbe joined Citizens for a Sound Economy as a policy analyst 25 years ago, after dropping out of George Mason University, where he was doing graduate work in economics. He went on to a series of jobs in the conservative D.C. establishment before returning to Citizens in 1997. Kibbe, who'd discovered libertarian writer Ayn Rand as a teenager—after the rock band Rush dedicated an album to her—was a true believer in the free market. But, 10 years ago, when George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" was in ascendance, small-government conservatism was marginalized. For the last decade the FreedomWorks political action committee, which unlike the main organization is allowed to work on behalf of electoral candidates, was, in Kibbe's delicate phrasing, "dormant."

But the deficit kept mounting. And in the summer of 2008, the Bush administration was pushing Congress to pass the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) to save major American banks and businesses. FreedomWorks opposed the move, as it later would be against Obama's auto-industry bailouts and the stimulus package, as an anti-free-market government intervention that would set a precedent of taxing winners to prop up losers and socializing risk. "Tough years for us are when a Republican president is bailing out Wall Street and we're fighting him," says Kibbe.

But out of that bitter defeat rose FreedomWorks's opportunity. Conservatives across the country, fed up with what they saw as government meddling and corporate favoritism in both parties, finally rose up. Grassroots conservatives who were against TARP flooded their congressional representatives' phone lines, and the ground was set for February 2009 when CNBC's [Rick Santelli had his legendary on-air rant decrying government assistance for homeowners](http://www.cnbc.com/id/15840232?video=1039849853) (<http://www.cnbc.com/id/15840232?video=1039849853>)—and announcing that he was going to have a

“Chicago Tea Party” for capitalists. Seeing an opportunity, FreedomWorks launched a Web site called [I'm With Rick \(http://www.freedomworks.org/petition/iamwithrick/index.html\)](http://www.freedomworks.org/petition/iamwithrick/index.html), the next day. The site raised the group's profile among Tea Party activists and helped FreedomWorks build connections with them. FreedomWorks had found its army. “The rise of the Tea Party was very fortunate for FreedomWorks,” says Richard Rahn, Kibbe's former boss at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. “It's made them much more influential than they would have been without it.”

As the Tea Party movement grew, FreedomWorks networked with local activists. Many FreedomWorks members were the same people getting involved with Tea Party activism, so coordinating events between the D.C. office and the Tea Party leaders rising throughout the country grew organically. Their partnership culminated in the massive protest on Pennsylvania Avenue on Sept. 12, 2009, at which FreedomWork's Gray spoke to a crowd of more than 100,000 Tea Party supporters, leading them in an impromptu refrain of “no more bailouts.” Gray chuckles with self-awareness at the irony of a patrician turned populist. “Matt must have been smoking dope, because he was predicting only 50,000 people,” he jokes.

As the midterm election started to heat up, FreedomWorks capitalized on its new connection with grassroots energy and the technology for harnessing it. The last time Freedom Works tried to use its political action committee was in 2000, when the group was still called Citizens for a Sound Economy, and online fundraising had yet to take off. Kibbe recalls that they spent as much on fundraising as they actually raised, about \$100,000. But, with the explosion online of grassroots conservative activism in this cycle—Kibbe concedes that the left had, until recently, made better use of new media—they were able to raise more money at a lower cost, using the Internet. “The online fundraising base allowed for us to play,” says Kibbe. Connecting with grassroots activists in the field has allowed FreedomWorks to save money on mobilization. “We replaced field operatives with top-notch volunteers,” says Kibbe.



<http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/04/07/conservative-reactionary-movements.html>) Shane Bevel / AP

PHOTOS: A History of American Conservative Movements

[A History of American Conservative Movements \(/photo/2010/04/07/conservative-reactionary-movements.html\)](http://photo/2010/04/07/conservative-reactionary-movements.html)

This year, it has raised \$500,000 and in most of the 85 races where FreedomWorks endorsed candidates—all Republicans—the group is providing materials for local Tea Party volunteers. At a staff meeting last week at FreedomWorks's office, just down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Occidental, staffers crowded around a conference table under paintings of George Washington

and that other Founding Father, um, Dick Arney. Field organizers called in from Alaska and West Virginia, where they were on the ground helping the Tea Party-backed Senate candidates Joe Miller and John Raese. In Colorado, FreedomWorks staff will set up a temporary election headquarters to welcome and coordinate Tea Party activists coming in from other states to help their preferred candidate, Ken Buck, unseat Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet. “The best Tea Party guy in Colorado owns a brewery in Ft. Collins,” Kibbe says. “I got to give a speech there with a beer in my hand. It was as close as I’ll get to heaven.”

FreedomWorks, which believes its might is in grassroots organization, doesn’t spend on ads. “People ridicule ads and tune them out. You’re spending massive dollars on people who mostly don’t care,” says Kibbe. On the political margins you need to target your efforts at mobilizing the people who are sympathetic to you, not winning over swing voters. FreedomWorks has a network of 50,000 volunteers it can send doorhangers to, which Kibbe points out is a lot cheaper than a television ad or a giant database of swing voters. The FreedomWorks staff make materials for the activists, like doorhangers and yard signs and gives them instructions for canvassing.

The partnership between the two groups probably works so well because Kibbe, despite his establishment resume—he’s a former staffer for the Republican National Committee, Congress, and the Chamber of Commerce—is not your traditional conservative. The 47-year-old wears jeans, stylish, square-framed glasses, and sideburns that creep across his cheeks, threatening to turn into full-on muttonchops. He salts his speech with hippie references: “Tea Party protests are like a parking lot outside a Grateful Dead concert,” he says. And he likes to quote the Bob Dylan line—“I don’t expect politicians to solve anybody’s problems”—from a 2006 *Rolling Stone* interview, and calls the folk hero his “favorite public-choice economist.”

But will FreedomWorks and the Tea Party activists get the spending cuts they’re counting on if their candidates make the cut on Tuesday? Their opponents on the left are skeptical that those politicians would actually shrink the size of government once they’re in office. “It seems to me that their own numbers add up to an increased deficit even if they achieve the preposterous goal of cutting 20 percent of domestic spending,” says Robert Borosage, director of the liberal advocacy group Campaign for America’s Future. “Are they prepared to go after entrenched corporate subsidies? Will they go after military spending? They never have in the past.” FreedomWorks does target those lines of spending, but the libertarian wing of the GOP has been stymied in the past by the party’s foreign-policy hawks, representatives from districts with military bases and defense contractors, and other corporate influences.

Kibbe is a realist. “We don’t place a lot of faith in electing better people,” he says. His group seeks to elect people who run on the right platform and to keep the pressure on them once they get to Washington not to fall for earmarks for their district or subsidies for their donors. “What’s different about the Tea Party movement is it’s a constituency for fiscal responsibility that is not going away after the election,” Kibbe says of his support brigades.

If the current crop of Republicans does disappoint Kibbe, it won’t be the first time. “He’s a very highly principled guy,” says Don Todd, research director at Americans for Limited Government and Kibbe’s former boss at the RNC. “He left us when [George H.W.] Bush went back on his ‘no new taxes’ pledge. I never held it against [Kibbe]. I understood it. It was against his principles when somebody broke his word like that.” Kibbe knows it’s a possibility, but right now, he says, “I’m having the most fun I’ve ever had.”