



# IRS targeting of Tea Party is no mere political scandal

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Alabama Tea Party leader Becky Gerritson was roundly applauded yesterday when her voice cracked as she concluded her testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee about the illegal harassment of an estimated 500 conservative, religious and pro-Israel groups by the IRS during the 2010 and 2012 campaigns:

"This was a willful act of intimidation to discourage a point of view. What the government did to our little group in Wetumka, Ala., was un-American. It isn't a matter of firing or arresting individuals. The individuals who sought to intimidate us were acting as they thought they should in a government culture that has little respect for its citizens.

"Many of the agents and agencies of the federal government do not understand that they are servants of the people. They think they are our masters and they are mistaken. I am not interested in scoring political points. I want to protect and preserve the America that I grew up in, the American that people cross oceans and risk their lives to become part of, and I am terrified that it is slipping away."

Gerritson's words highlight the crucial element of the IRS scandal that sets it apart from previous abuses of the federal tax agency: Where before the power of the IRS was used as an opposition research tool or against a very small number of groups representing a relatively narrow slice of one end of the ideological spectrum, the present outrages were systematically committed by officials in multiple offices across the country over a long period of time against representatives of a grassroots political movement supported by major portions of the American electorate.

Most of these Americans were political neophytes in the democratic process, having never before participated in any significant manner beyond voting. As Gerritson so vividly described it, these Americans became involved not from attachment to either political party or some intense ideological cause, but out of simple love of country and a genuine fear that American liberty and prosperity are being destroyed by Washington politicians who refuse or are unable to control their spending excesses and bureaucrats who keep imposing costly new rules and regulations.

Before, Presidents Roosevelt and Nixon surreptitiously perused the tax returns of opposition candidates and contributors in search of "dirt," not for evidence of their political principles or religious faith. And when President Clinton deployed the IRS against conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation, the comparatively few individuals involved were mostly veteran public policy advocates long accustomed to political hardball.

What the IRS has done during the Obama years far exceeds previous abuses of the tax agency and threatens the fundamental health of the nation's political system. It's one thing for the tax returns of a few politically powerful individuals to be scanned. But forcing hundreds of organizations representing millions of people to endure endless interrogation and other degrading harassment is typical of authoritarian regimes. It is, as Becky Gerritson put it so well, un-American. No effort should be spared to bring all of those responsible to a full accounting and just prosecution.