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Something New on the Mall

By [Michael Tomasky](#)

We have never seen, at least in the modern history of the United States, a right-wing street-protest movement. Conservatives who oppose *Roe v. Wade* march on Washington every January 22, the anniversary of that 1973 decision; but aside from that single issue and that single day, the American right over recent decades has, until this summer, carried out its organizing in a comparatively quiet fashion, via mimeograph machine and pamphlet and book and e-mail and text message, and left the streets to the left.

So we have something new in our political life—the summer's apoplectic and bordering-on-violent town-hall meetings, and the large "9/12" rally on Washington's National Mall that drew tens of thousands of people to protest America's descent into "socialism" (or "communism," or, occasionally, "Nazism"). How extreme is this movement, and how seriously should we take it?

The September 12 rally, the culminating (for now) event of the "Tea Party" movement that sprouted to life earlier this year, was organized chiefly by FreedomWorks, a conservative lobbying organization founded in 1984, and supported by nearly thirty conservative organizations, ranging from the well known (Club for Growth, Competitive Enterprise Institute) to the obscure (Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights). It was also promoted heavily on the Fox News Channel, especially by the hard right's new man of the moment, Glenn Beck.

Much of the sentiment on display expressed a genuine fury on the part of citizens who believe in limited government and are opposed to the bank bailout, the auto bailout, health care reform, the deficit, and other policies of the administration. But another kind of anger, less respectable, was also expressed, and most of it was directed at one person in particular. "Parasite-in-Chief" read one sign, showing Barack Obama standing at the presidential lectern. "TREASON" read another, the "O" rendered in the familiar Obama campaign poster style, with the receding red lines suggesting a horizon. Another maintained that "Obammunism Is Communism."

Many placards reproduced the widely circulated image of Obama as the Joker character played by Heath Ledger in last year's Batman film *The Dark Knight*. On Pennsylvania Avenue, a group of marchers I was walking with spontaneously began chanting "No You Can't!" I did not see any overtly racist signs (although a TV reporter showed a poster of a largely naked African, and the Joker placards have affinities with old Sambo cartoons).

There was also plenty of animus toward Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, and Ted Kennedy—I saw several attendees carrying a sign that said "Bury Obamacare with Kennedy," which had been printed by a group called the American Life League, a leading Catholic anti-abortion rights group. Its motto is "From Creation to Natural Death," and its president wrote recently that the fact that the "pro-abortion" Kennedy received a Catholic burial was "a total, absolute insult to Christ the Lord" that went "beyond anything I have witnessed in my more than 65 years of life."¹

There were many signs devoted to the idea of purging Congress, and not a few marchers carrying brooms, symbolizing the desire to sweep clean the halls of the Capitol. Across from the National Archives Building—a nine iron away from the revered documents we read so differently—I ran into (actually, he, and his baby stroller, almost ran into me) Grover Norquist, the influential head of Americans for Tax Reform, the conservative lobbying and advocacy group and one of the cosponsors of the march. I've

interviewed the accessible Norquist several times. I'd never seen him giddy, as he was while describing to me the growth of these protests since a smattering of anti-tax marches last spring. He was like an alumnus just before kickoff at the homecoming game. He reluctantly agreed that health care reform will probably pass: "They've got the votes to do something," he said. "The question is how damaging it is."

But he quickly regained his optimism—he argued that once there's a final, written-down bill, "you have a bigger target, not a smaller target," and he moved to an assessment of next year's elections: "They've already given us enough votes to lose twenty to forty House seats," he told me.

Mid-term election predictions seem absurdly premature. By next fall, the economy could well be growing at a good pace (Alan Greenspan says it will happen this year), unemployment could be decreasing, and Obama could be back near a 60 percent approval rating. What is not hypothetical is that the Tea Party movement has materialized, to those who don't monitor conservative Web sites and media outlets, seemingly out of nowhere, with an intensity no one would have predicted three months ago (certainly the White House did not). It does not represent a majority of the country, or probably anything close to a majority. Perhaps, based on certain indicators—Sarah Palin's popularity, George W. Bush's at the very end, the percentages in polls that strongly disapprove of Obama's leadership—we can conclude that its followers make up 25 or so percent of the electorate.

But we kid ourselves if we think they are not capable of broader impact. We've seen it already: the degree to which self-identified independent voters flipped on health care over the summer from support to opposition, in part because of the toxic town-hall protests, was astonishing. One oft-quoted poll from mid-August by *USA Today* found that independents said, by 35 to 16 percent, that they had become more sympathetic to the town-hall protesters.^[2] (Obama regained some ground among independents after his September 9 address to Congress.)

This movement could flame out, and the September 12 march be forgotten. It's worth recalling that the AFL-CIO organized a march on the mall eight months into Ronald Reagan's first term that drew 250,000 people, three or four times the September 12 group's total. That movement had little impact on the course of subsequent events.

This conservative protest movement, though, has three powerful forces supporting it: bottomless amounts of corporate money; an ideologically dedicated press, radio, and cable television apparatus eager to tout its existence; and elected officials who are willing to embrace it publicly and whose votes in support of the movement's positions can be absolutely relied upon. The 1981 marchers and all the left-leaning protest movements with which we've been familiar over the years—and that serve in our minds as the models for street protests and political rallies—have typically had none of this kind of support. For the foreseeable future, what we witnessed on September 12, and over the summer at the town-hall events, is likely to be a permanent feature of the political landscape.

The Tea Party movement started in February, during the debates over the stimulus bill and the bank bailout. The right-wing blogger Michelle Malkin was among the early agitators for protest. But all remained inchoate until February 19, when CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli delivered what has become famous in some circles as the "Santelli rant." Santelli is a former Chicago trader who joined CNBC in 1999. During one of his regular reports from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, reacting to an earlier on-air segment about the Obama administration's \$75 billion plan to help several million homeowners avoid foreclosure, Santelli—who called himself an "Ayn Rander"—erupted:

The government is promoting bad behavior.... I'll tell you what, I have an idea.

You know, the new administration's big on computers and technology—how about this, President and new administration? Why don't you put up a Web site to have people vote on the Internet as a referendum to see if we really want to subsidize the losers' mortgages; or would we like to at least buy cars and buy houses in foreclosure and give them to people that

might have a chance to actually prosper down the road, and reward people that could carry the water instead of drink the water?

As he carried on, the traders who normally serve only as his backdrop began to turn, face him, and cheer. He asked them how many of them "want to pay for your neighbors' mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" They booed loudly—not at him, but at the idea. He announced plans for a "Chicago Tea Party" for July (whether he did this spontaneously or not is an interesting question^[3]). Thus was born the current grassroots movement, on a stock-trading floor ("This is America!" he roared at one point, gesturing toward the traders around him as if they were representative of average folk) and animated by anger at "the losers" and their mortgages.

Within hours, Web sites started popping up. FreedomWorks, a conservative lobbying organization founded in 1984 with a current budget of undisclosed millions (its most recent report to the IRS covers 2007), helped support this activity from the start. It is funded in part by Steve Forbes and headed by former Republican Congressman Dick Armey of Texas, who was a featured speaker at the September 12 rally. FreedomWorks has a history of setting up "astroturf" groups, so named because they resemble grassroots organizations but in fact have significant hidden corporate backing, on a range of issues.

While President Bush was trying to promote Social Security privatization, a woman in Iowa who identified herself as a "single mom" won a coveted spot on the stage from which she praised Bush's plan. It was later revealed that she was FreedomWorks's Iowa state director. She had spent the previous two years as spokeswoman for something called For Our Grandchildren, a pro-privatization group that is itself, according to SourceWatch, the nonprofit monitoring Web site, an offshoot of another group, the American Institute for Full Employment (an outfit advocating reform of welfare that was funded initially by a multimillionaire in Klamath Falls, Oregon, who made his fortune in doors, windows, and millwork).

I mention all this because it suggests how astroturfing works. An existing nonprofit group sets up an ad hoc one devoted to a particular cause or idea. It is given an otherwise good-sounding name, and is presented as having sprung up spontaneously. But always, there is corporate money behind it, donated by rich conservatives who have the sense to see that an image of broad populist anger will be more convincing to the unpersuaded (and to the press) than an image of a corporate titan pursuing a narrow and naked interest.

With respect to the Tea Parties and especially the summer's town-hall meetings, a key corporate titan appears to be Koch Industries of Wichita, Kansas. Fred Koch (pronounced "coke") founded the company in 1940 as an oil business but it has expanded into natural gas, pharmaceuticals, fertilizer, and many other areas. He helped create the John Birch Society in the late 1950s and died in 1967. His two sons who run the business now, David and Charles, have foundations that donate millions to conservative and libertarian causes and groups, including notably the Cato Institute. One Koch-funded group used to be called Citizens for a Sound Economy. It became Americans for Prosperity (AFP) in 2003, a group that has advocated limited government and opposed climate change legislation. Earlier this year, Americans for Prosperity launched a Web site called Patients United Now, which ran frightening television ads opposing health care reform (showing, for example, a Canadian woman who supposedly couldn't get treatment for a brain tumor in her native country^[4]). According to the liberal Web site ThinkProgress, the AFP helped distribute signs and talking points at a town-hall event hosted by Virginia Congressman Tom Perriello.

Think Progress is one of three organizations that did extensive reporting over the summer on how the town halls were organized. Media Matters for America, the group run by David Brock, set up a comprehensive Web site, now publicly available, that tracks the complex relationships between donors, nonprofit groups, and the activist organizations to which they funnel money.^[5] Campaign for America's Future, the labor-funded advocacy group that's been trying to keep a public option in the final health care bill, produced a helpful flow chart laying out the connections.^[6]

The sources of money can be hard to track. These are mainly 501(c)4 groups, which are allowed to lobby

and engage in political activity. They are like 501(c)3 groups, which are supposed to be purely educational, in that groups in both categories do not pay federal taxes. However, (c)3 donations are tax-deductible for the donor, while (c)4 gifts are not. The groups have to file annual reports listing major donors, but the fines for late filing are so light that many groups prefer to pay the fines, or file extensions, thus putting off disclosure for months or years.

It isn't just conservative (c)4 groups that backed the town halls. America's Health Insurance Plans, or AHIP, is the enormous lobbying organization for private health insurance companies headed by Karen Ignagni, who makes frequent television appearances discussing health care. According to ThinkProgress's Lee Fang, AHIP mobilized 50,000 of its employees to attend town-hall meetings and otherwise lobby against the inclusion of a public health insurance option in the reform.^[7] AHIP's effort was coordinated by Democracy Data & Communications (DDC), which has helped various corporate clients set up front groups. DDC is headed by B.R. McConnon, who was once an employee of the Koch-funded Citizens for a Sound Economy.

Not everything is hidden under such layers. The Web site for the September 12 march, for example, lists its sponsors on its home page (first among them: FreedomWorks Foundation). And the high-powered operations of these groups do not mean that none of the opposition to Obama's policies is genuine and spontaneous. Liberal and conservative bloggers have sparred over this question, the former tending to overstate the control that astroturf groups have over people, the latter tending to deny it completely.

The argument over spontaneity versus coordination largely misses the point, which is the way that a loose network of groups sustains and encourages opposition to the administration and gives the movement currency and power it would not otherwise have. Money is the ultimate lubricant of politics, and the potential money supply for Tea Parties and other astroturf contributions is virtually limitless. In this case, though, it may not be the most important force contributing to the rise of this movement.

Many signs at the march were critical of the press. The universal view among these folks is that the country's major media outlets are virtually state-controlled and obedient to Obama's every wish.

They have tuned out NBC, CBS, CNN, and others completely. This, too, is a new thing: millions of Americans who get their "news" only from outlets that will tell them exactly what they want to hear.

Rush Limbaugh and the Fox News Channel are by now familiar even to people who never listen to or watch them. But if you don't do so, you have no idea the extent to which they very directly fuel talk of socialism, and twist and sometimes invent information, and create scandals that keep their listeners agitated. To liberals, and to non-ideological Americans who might have heard of him, Cass Sunstein is a highly regarded Harvard law professor who might someday be a plausible Supreme Court nominee and who, if anything, is not a lockstep liberal on such matters as civil liberties. To consumers of the right-wing mass media, however, Sunstein is nothing short of a nut, who believes that meat-eating and hunting should be banned, that pets should be able to sue their owners, and that the government should order that organs be ripped fresh from the bodies of people who die in emergency rooms.

These spurious charges are based largely on selective and distorted quotations from his writings and in any case have nothing to do with the White House job to which he was nominated. But the United States Senate has taken notice of them. Sunstein's nomination by Obama to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, announced January 8, was held up by Republicans for months. On September 9, he finally—but just barely—survived a cloture vote to allow his confirmation to proceed. He was confirmed the next day by a vote of 57–40, with just five Republican votes.

The charge against Sunstein was led by Fox's Glenn Beck, who now, even more than Limbaugh, is the guru of this new right wing. Beck, famous for saying that Obama is a "racist" with "a deep-seated hatred for white people or white culture," now has (on some nights anyway) more than three million viewers and has surpassed Bill O'Reilly as the leader among cable news hosts.^[8] Beck has been crusading against Obama's "czars"—the appointees who don't require Senate confirmation. Obama is hardly the first

president to name such officials—the practice dates to the 1940s and presidents of both parties have named them. And many of them are just subcabinet-level appointees whom the press—or Beck himself—happens to have labeled czars. For example, Dennis Blair is the director of national intelligence. But he's also the "intelligence czar," adding to the supposedly terrifying total of unaccountable, unconstitutional radicals infiltrating the government.

The September 12 marchers carried many a placard denouncing the czars, urging Obama to take them back to Russia and so on. "Russia," of course, means "communistic," which the czars, of course, were not. But all that matters is that the conservative base be kept in an excitable state and that Obama suffer political defeats, as he did when Beck was able to claim the scalp of Van Jones, the "green jobs czar" who resigned in September after it was revealed that he'd signed a petition with language suggesting that members of the Bush administration may have known that the September 11 attacks were impending and didn't stop them.

These right-wing outlets—which include "news" Web sites like Newsmax and World Net Daily, the latter affiliated with Jerome Corsi, a writer connected with Swift Boat Veterans for Truth—create a world in which their consumers have a reality presented to them that is completely at odds with the reality the rest of us live in. Their coverage of the town halls helped drive the way those meetings were presented in other media. E.J. Dionne reported in *The Washington Post* that North Carolina Democratic Congressman David Price was told by a stringer for a television network: "Your meeting doesn't get covered unless it blows up."¹⁹

The third source of support for this movement is Republican elected officials. Thanks in part to millions of dollars of donations to Republican senators like Charles Grassley and Mike Enzi, the Tea Party movement can count on virtually every Republican in Congress to vote with it on major bills. Only Maine Senator Olympia Snowe seems not to bother with them much, which is one reason why she might yet vote with the Democrats on health care. (She has made her opposition to the public option clear, but she did on September 17 sign a letter with three Democrats indicating that she might back a bill without one.) This, again, is a situation without precedent. When the labor or anti-Vietnam War or civil rights movements held their marches, they knew they still faced a battle within Congress to win over a broad majority of Democrats. Within today's congressional Republican Party there is little or no such tension.

This is hardly surprising, given the increasing homogeneity of the GOP in recent decades, as most moderates from New England and elsewhere have left the party. But it is striking to see elected officials staying silent in the face of extremism or even egging it on, as are the eleven Republican cosponsors of a House bill that would require future presidential candidates to produce their birth certificates when they file their statements of candidacy, an obvious sop to the so-called "birther" movement whose adherents claim that Obama is not an American citizen. Instead of elected officials acting as a sort of restraining ego to the activists, everyone here shares one big id.

There is, of course, one last trait all these people have in common. They, or at least 98 percent of those I saw on the mall on September 12, are white. It's difficult to say what part race plays in their anger. But because they are so overwhelmingly white, everything these folks say about "their" country being taken away from them has an inevitable racial overtone. Would this movement have started if, say, Hillary Clinton or John Edwards were president? I think it probably would have—Lord knows, there are few Hillary Clinton admirers among these groups. And I think it does have ideological rather than racial roots and causes. But it seems unlikely that it would have emerged with quite this ferocity—unlikely, for example, that the presence of a President Edwards would have led to people carrying guns to presidential speeches, as happened when Obama spoke to veterans in Phoenix this summer. And there seemed a racial angle, too, in the anger that exploded last spring about having to pay for "losers" mortgages.

We can't measure this, and I'm not sure what good it would do us to know even if we could. What we do know is that this movement is backed by corporate millions, powerful media organizations, such as Fox News, and votes in Congress, and that it will be around for quite some time, advancing new fake scandals

and lies. The next phase in all this, if health care passes, might well be "nullification" lawsuits or resolutions in states that don't want to have to implement Obama's reform.

There's a name for the followers of this movement, too—the "tenters," as in the Tenth Amendment, which reserves unenumerated rights to the states. So far this year, thirty-seven states have introduced so-called "sovereignty resolutions," and North Dakota, South Dakota, Idaho, Alaska, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Tennessee have passed them. South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint, Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, and Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty have all intimated that if Obama's health care plan is enacted, nullification may be the best course of action. If they choose it, I'm sure there will be another march.

—September 24, 2009

Notes

^[1]The essay, by ALL President Judie Brown, was posted on the Web site LifeSiteNews.com on September 1, 2009.

^[2]See Susan Page, "Poll: Health Care Views Take Sympathetic Tilt," *USA Today*, August 13, 2009.

^[3]An article on *Playboy's* Web site by Mark Ames and Yasha Levine suggested that Santelli's performance was "a carefully planned trigger" for the Tea Parties. CNBC threatened libel, and *Playboy* removed the article from its site. Santelli issued a statement after that piece appeared denying any affiliation with Tea Party movements, swearing that he had no political agenda, and even saying he hoped that Obama would succeed in passing his stimulus bill.

^[4]Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell picked up on the story of this woman, Shona Holmes, giving it wide circulation. A Canadian newspaper reported later that while she was indeed told under the Canadian system to wait months for treatment and chose to go to the Mayo Clinic for quicker treatment, she did not in fact have a brain tumor, but something called a Rathke's Cleft Cyst, which is benign. See Julie Mason, "A Reality Check on a Reality Check," *The Ottawa Citizen*, July 29, 2009.

^[5]See www.mediamattersaction.org/transparency.

^[6]See Sarah Shive, "Who's Paying to Kill Health Reform?," at CAF's Web site, www.ourfuture.org.

^[7]See Lee Fang, "Health Insurance Lobby's Stealth Astroturf Campaign Revealed!," August 28, 2009, at www.thinkprogress.org.

^[8]Fox is way ahead of its competitors. It averages around three million nightly viewers; MSNBC, around 1.1 million; CNN, around 900,000. See tvbythenumbers.com.

^[9]See E.J. Dionne Jr., "The Real Town Hall Story," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2009.