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Tea Partiers shouldn't date the GOP

*JOHN SAMPLES**Special to The Detroit News*

In recent months, the most influential political party in the country may not be the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, but the Tea Party. This murky, largely leaderless grassroots movement has been the driving force behind the derailment of President Barack Obama's dearest agenda items, notably health care reform and climate change legislation.

What are the goals of this movement? In part, that is the wrong question. The Tea Party effort rejects the notion that a politician or a pundit should define their movement. Rather, citizens themselves will tell us what the movement means.

As their name suggests, these citizens want to revive the ideas at the heart of the American Revolution: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. One chapter in Texas adopted these principles: limited government; fiscal responsibility; personal responsibility and the rule of law.

Tea Party groups are conducting online polling and deliberations to determine the priorities of the movement. This process will create a "Contract from America" to serve as a template for reforms to come. The most popular ideas now include a flat tax, congressional term limits and abolishing the U.S. Department of Education.

Those ideals and policies sound like what the Republican Party once espoused but have not practiced for at least a decade.

Not surprisingly, establishment conservatives have recently tried to make hay of the Tea Party movement's apparent lack of a recognizable face or national headquarters. Grover Norquist, the Rasputin behind countless conservative organizing activities, has offered tips to Tea Party organizers. Old (and perhaps new again) Republican apparatchiks like Dick Armey and Newt Gingrich have proclaimed their oneness with the Tea Party faithful and essentially offered their services as the movement's leaders. No doubt many Republican leaders would like to direct the energy of the Tea Party against the Obama administration and to receive the votes of these idealists come November.

We pray thee, Tea Partiers: Do not go there.

The quality that gives the Tea Party movement its legitimacy is that it is so fundamentally illegitimate: outside the establishment, bereft of representation on K Street, and without an identifiable face to speak for it on "Meet the Press." This is a movement that sprang deep from within the viscera of America, not from some political poll or focus group.

It is not Republican; it is not even conservative. It has no interest in debating the merits of No Child Left Behind, abstinence-only sex education or George W. Bush's rationale for going to Iraq. Replacing a "spend and borrow" Democrat with a "spend and borrow" Republican is not the goal of the Tea Party movement.

This movement is simply saying: "We are fine without you, Washington. Now for the love of God, go attend a reception somewhere, and stop making health care and entrepreneurship more expensive than they already are."

Machiavelli once said a republic stays healthy by returning to its first principles from time to time. The Tea

Party movement is trying to get our nation back to its first principles to prevent our decline. For their trouble, they have been denounced by many in the media and the Obama administration.

But they will continue to fight. They still believe in the promise of America. That faith may spread as Election Day approaches in the second and perhaps final year of what is supposed to be the Age of Obama.

What began as angry town meetings and grew into a political movement may end as a third political party in 2012. Maybe then Washington will finally listen.

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