

Teabag, or Die: This Year's Conservative Revolution

By [Tom Risen](#) / November 5th, 2009

Conservative backlash in Tea Party marches is a knee-jerk reaction to invoke the American Revolution when voters protest a powerful government.

From the Civil War to the Red Scare, from Bush to Obama, revolutionary rhetoric from the Founding Fathers can bend to support many arguments. Second Amendment protests alongside health care town halls this summer and Glenn Beck wearing a powdered wig are only the latest examples, according to Allan Lichtman, professor of American Political History at American University.

"It's great to feel that you're on the righteous side of things and a lot of American conservatives believe that they are conserving our traditional American values," said Lichtman. "I think our revolution has been so enduring because it wasn't dependent on a particular regime, unlike the Bolshevik Revolution or Mao Zedong's cultural revolution. Other countries were well-established civilizations, but we so clearly identify our country with revolution. We're still very individualistic."

This sense of identity from the success of America's revolution is unique from those of other countries due to our stable Constitution. Moreover, Thomas Jefferson and his writings have been held particularly high in political debate. His support for states' rights versus government expansion, freedom of speech and assuming the national debt draw admirers from many political groups.

"People on the left and the right both think Thomas Jefferson is their patron saint," said Lichtman, author of "White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement."

"You can pick anything out of Jefferson. His writings are so prolific. President Franklin Roosevelt claimed to be a Jeffersonian and dedicated a monument to him. FDR talked about the aristocratic Alexander Hamilton as the forerunner of aristocratic Republicans and Jefferson of the yeoman farmers against the moneyed interest."

Just as FDR invoked a Jeffersonian image for his liberal reform, so did his opponents for their criticism. Politicians who had served in the Woodrow Wilson administration, the Blue Dog Democrats of their day, called themselves Jeffersonian Democrats to oppose FDR's expansive government reform. This concept is central to the Tea Party conservative opposition against President Obama, according to David Boaz, executive vice-president of the Cato Institute.

"This is more like the reaction to the New Deal than anything else," said Boaz, author of "Libertarianism: A Primer."

"You have a president interested in accumulating increasing power, especially over the economy. The bailouts and spending all started with Bush and Obama has doubled down on that."

While Americans have consistently used the Spirit of '76 as a rally cry, there was not as much interest in constitutional rhetoric until the Bush administration when liberals appealed to their First Amendment rights against surveillance expansion in the aptly named Patriot Act.

"There was less appeal to the American revolution in the '60s when people were saying 'We need to have a revolution,' because some on the Left believed the American Revolution had left the country with a failed system," said Boaz. "Constitutional and revolutionary rhetoric are very different things."

Certainly during the Bush administration there was rediscovery of the Constitution among the left.”

Wiretapping and questions of wartime patriotism were also challenged by a different kind of revolutionary invocation during the Vietnam War in the '60s. Until the 1950s American conservatives held a platform of isolationism from foreign wars as originally advocated by George Washington.

“George McGovern’s slogan in the 1972 presidential campaign was ‘Come home, America,’ which meant come home from Vietnam but also come back home to a basic American principle,” said Boaz. “Conservatives used to think, ‘America is better than other countries. We came here to get away from their wars and kings and we don’t need to be involved in that.’ That changed with the William F. Buckley right in the 1950s and McGovern was trying to draw on that.”

For all the invocation and stories about Jefferson and Washington in grade school, historians in recent years have drawn a harsher light on the lionization of American history. While Princeton University’s African-American Studies Professor Cornel West warns against living in a deluded “Disneyland,” where people don’t seek out the catastrophic truth, he believes rehashing the Founding Fathers is not a corny slice of Americana.

“Back in those days when the Founders brought their thoughts and writings to the world they were acting out of courage and making something original,” said West, author of “Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism.”

“We need to remember our other American originals like Frederick Douglass, who was an advocate for women’s suffrage along with abolition and African-American rights. We’ve been seeing this invocation too much at the right-wing Tea Parties, where are the Progressives?”