

Tea Party Draws Wide Range of Protesters

Tax Day Activists Attacked Government Spending, Media, Illegal Immigration and Foreign Policy

By [David Weigel](#) 4/15/09 7:06 PM



Protesters attends a Tax Day Tea Party event in Washington. (Photo by: Aaron Wiener)

The Washington Tax Day Tea Party started off with a few short bursts of confusion. Before the rally began, an 11th hour brainstorm by organizers to dump one million tea bags in front of the White House, in full view of an embedded Fox News reporter, was canceled due to the lack of a permit. Organizers had planned to host two rallies, one in Lafayette Park outside

of the White House, and one outside of the Treasury Department. That was scuttled, too, by a last minute permit smack-down from the Secret Service, which had second thoughts about the location. Speakers gathered on a small stage with a weak sound system, unable to throw their voices more than a few yards into the crowd.



Image by: Matt Mahurin

It didn't really matter to the crowd of several hundred people—peaking at over 1,000 in the afternoon—who showed up to compare signs, hear from libertarian and conservative speakers, and, in the words of one attendee from Virginia, “feel like we're not alone.”

“I go back and forth between thinking: Is Obama in over his head? Or is he on the this path to socialism intentionally?” said Martha, a Virginia businesswoman who, like several other attendees, declined to give her full name. “People fear being called a racist, and they fear his popularity, so no one wants to stand up to him.” Martha held a homemade sign that called for Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to resign and be replaced by Fox Business host Dave Ramsey.

The Tea Parties staged today in hundreds of cities, egged on by conservative groups and think tanks but populated by flesh-and-blood, fed-up opponents of President Obama, were less direct than the 1773 political revolt that inspired them. Organizers and many attendees used the Washington event to decry deficit spending and a lurch toward socialism, but worked in attacks on the media, illegal immigration, foreign policy, and the sense that Obama's government was trying to take away their liberties. When the rally was abruptly ended at 2 p.m. by park police — after tea bags had been thrown over the White House fence — the remnants of the crowd pointed to government oppression and lost rights.

Yesterday's news that the Department of Homeland Security had warned local police departments about a rise in far-right extremism spread like chain mail among everyone involved with the Tea Parties. It was the reason many people cited for keeping their names out of reporters' notebooks. It also manifested in the jokes of multiple speakers, who mocked the idea that this event was a meet-up of “right-wing extremists,” and in signs that read “Napolitano: Obama's Gestapo Queen” and “Fight Federal Fascism” and “Kulacs tomorrow? Then what? Gulags. History repeats.”

“Now anybody who doesn't believe in Obama's policies is a terrorist,” said

Bob Hughes, who said the DHS report was his motivation for coming to the protest. “This is just like what the Nazis did. Stormtroopers. Secret police. It’s been done before and it looks like we’re going in that direction again.”

The protest, which despite steady, driving rain, was more than twice as large as a Feb. 27 protest at the same site, was a demonstration of how embattled opponents of Obama feel as his agenda moves through Congress. Parents gave their children signs that decried the way the president had taken away their future earnings (and in one case “my trip to Disney World”) with deficit spending. Activists who said they’d voted for Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) or a third party candidate for president — one man said he’d written in “Joe the Plumber” — waved Gadsden flags and talked up Gov. Rick Perry’s (R-Texas) declaration that Texas was re-asserting its Tenth Amendment rights.

The protesters, some of whom decried the way the media had portrayed today’s Tea Parties as corporate-run rallies, also revealed how rapidly negative stories about the president and Democrats travel through the fast-growing conservative media infrastructure. Stories that had broken in the seven weeks since the last protest were turned into fodder for signs— pictures of President Obama’s greeting of Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah appeared next to the words “Don’t bow to kings, bow to US.” The accusation that the president can’t speak without a TelePrompter appeared again and again: “Don’t talk to me (I forgot my teleprompter)” and “Obama’s teleprompter needs a rest, but still sends a thrill up Chris [Matthews]’s leg.” One parent could be overheard explaining to her son what those signs were referring to: “A teleprompter is something they put on the stage that you can’t see, that makes it look like the president is talking instead of reading a speech.”

There was a flavor of the anti-Iraq War rallies that had previously filled Lafayette Park — despite the “anti-tax” message of the event, and the “Taxed Enough Already” signs some protesters had pulled off the Web, nearly every other conservative or libertarian cause was represented. Beltway conservative think tanks, which have staged tax day events for years, arrived on the scene to promote their own projects. Young Americans for Freedom passed out “I Love Capitalism” signs for people whose hands were empty. The Heritage Foundation passed around promotions for its anti-government spending projects. The Libertarian Party asked attendees to come to a 2 p.m. speech by 2008 party presidential candidate Bob Barr, and interns from the Libertarian Cato Institute arrived holding Cato umbrellas and philosophically-inclined signs with quotes from scholars like the late economist Murray Rothbard.

The support from the established conservative movement led to some surreal moments. “This is the beginning,” said one speaker, “of this grassroots movement to take back this country from the elites!” The crowd erupted in cheers and chants of “USA!” before he continued: “Join us! Join Americans for Prosperity! Join the Institute for Liberty! Join RealClearPolitics!”

Some of the protesters, who bristled at the idea that they were not real

grassroots activists, had problems with the establishment support. “The term ‘AstroTurf’ comes to mind,” said Scott Cragg, a technology consultant who’d moved to the area recently. “I do appreciate seeing so much support from people. But I think of Godwin’s Law — as soon as you mention Hitler, you lose the argument — and I think there’s a little demagoguery going on at Fox.”

That wasn’t a popular opinion. Many protesters were united in a deep loathing of most press outlets and an appreciation, just as deep, for Fox News. One man who declined to give his name bragged that he’d interrupted an ABC News reporter who was trying to record an introduction to his report that pointed out most Americans didn’t agree with the Tea Party protesters. “It’s hard to lie, isn’t it? But it isn’t hard for them because they do it all the time.”

At the same time, Fox News and CNBC personalities were welcomed as rock stars. Stephen Moore, the Wall Street Journal op-ed page writer who appears on the business channel to argue for spending cuts and simpler taxes, was surrounded by well-wishers and fans asking for photos. Laura Ingraham, who hosts a conservative radio talk show and guest-hosts on “The O’Reilly Factor,” was mobbed by fans when she appeared for an interview with Griff Jenkins of Fox News. After they were done talking, Jenkins and Ingraham were thanked by fans—Ingraham struggled to get out of the event through requests for photos and cries of “I love you, Laura!”

“It’s going to be a fight,” said Kevin Rooney, a Maryland man carrying a sign that read “Stand Idle While Some Kenyan Destroys America? WAP! I Don’t Think So! Homey Don’t Play Dat!” Rooney shook off the ashes on a Dominican cigar and promised that the people standing in Lafayette Park were going to oust the members of Congress who were enabling President Obama’s agenda. “These people that you see standing in the rain here are gonna save this goddamn country.”

Photo galleries of the Tea Party protest are available [here](#) and [here](#).