

# Tea & Little Sympathy

Led by Faux News and mentally unstable “gurus,” the rabid right treads beyond the pale.

By Hal Crowther  
Photos by Walter Coker



In recent weeks, we've lost too many of the warriors whose courage and spirit sustained the Civil Rights Movement in America. Grown old with the knowledge that the fight is never over, they seem to be departing as a group — a whole flock of worthy souls flying off, we hope, to the reward they all deserve. The deaths of two tireless movement mainstays, Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women and Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP, came close together and reminded me of all their friends and allies who've departed since the first of the year: Sen. Charles Mathias of Maryland, last stalwart of the now-extinct liberal Republicans, who maneuvered the 1964 Civil Rights Act through the Senate before his party went careening off to the right; the Alabama-born photographer Charles Moore, whose images of Civil Rights demonstrations and their brutal suppression were credited with propelling that same landmark legislation; historian Howard Zinn, who labored to color in the tired white history of the United States; and poet Carolyn Rogers of Chicago's Black Arts Movement, who articulated the experience of African-American women as their lives began to change in the '60s and '70s.

In my home of Chapel Hill, N.C., hundreds of friends and admirers attended a memorial service for the eminent Constitutional scholar and civil libertarian Dan Pollitt, whose eulogists stressed that no individual deserved more credit for integrating the University of North Carolina or the community. One eulogist who recalled those turbulent '60s in North Carolina was Pollitt's prize law student and former NCCU chancellor Julius Chambers, who reminded us that his car was blown up, his house bombed and his law office burned by homegrown terrorists of the racist Right. This was not so long ago. I was in college, more or less safe and out of it in New England. The 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King was a shock wave even there. But to my shame, I'd almost forgotten that six years later, Dr. King's 70-year-old mother was murdered while she was playing the organ in church.

From somewhere a cold wind seems to blow when we remember those times. My grandmother was a church organist, too. But the reassuring feeling at Dan Pollitt's service was that all the good people were gathered there, and that they amounted to a very substantial caucus. (Though one North Carolina newspaper obituary described

him as “a Chapel Hill radical.”) Musicians played a couple of old protest songs, like my favorite, “Joe Hill,” and I allowed myself to think, “Surely this is the side of the angels, and who could possibly wish to be on the other side?”

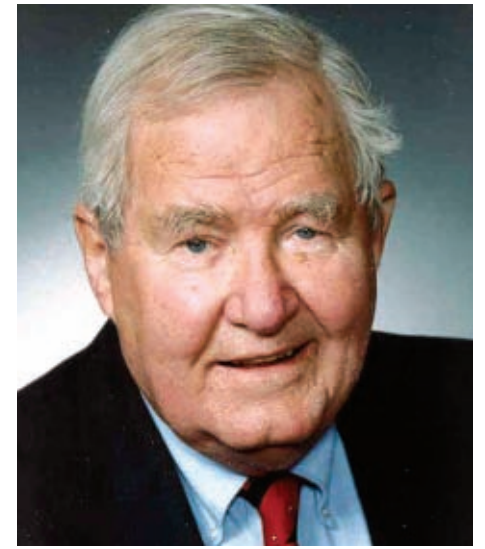
A rare and fleeting moment of optimism, I suppose. Within rifle range of those eulogists there was probably someone who was not sorry about Dr. Chambers’ automobile, and surely someone who would’ve sneered at “Joe Hill” and “Solidarity Forever.” There’s no national conscience and damn little national memory, but there’s a furious national movement they call the “Tea Party,” which rapidly backtracking historians describe as the first right-wing street-protest movement in the modern history of the United States. Just when you thought the Republican Party had camped as far to the right as the laws of physics allow, here was a voice, a howling from way beyond its right perimeter — and were those gunshots?

The Tea Party is depressing, embarrassing, most of all mystifying. It’s also considerably smaller than the media might lead you to believe. Of the roughly one-fifth of Americans who claim to support Tea Party principles, only one-fifth, or 4 percent of the general public, have ever sent money or attended a party event. And only half of those, it seems, think party poster girl Sarah Palin is fit to be president.

The Party is small but unaccountably rabid, in the fullest sense of the illness known as “rabies” and the violent, irrational behavior of its victims. Though 98 percent of Tea Party supporters are white, though 92 percent identify Pres. Obama as a socialist (a harder core also identifies him as a closet Muslim or as the Antichrist, and a Tea Party website calls him “the reincarnation of Pol Pot” [What?]) and a third subscribe to the wishful-thinking myth that he was not born in the United States — I won’t take the wide, easy road and dismiss the whole movement as a racist renaissance provoked by a nonwhite president.

This may prove to be too generous; we’ve already seen cringe-making, flagrantly racist anti-Obama signs at Tea Party rallies. Xenophobia is an obvious factor, and demographics are disturbing. Old white men (like me) are dramatically over-represented among Party zealots. Their movement bears a strong resemblance to the far-right parties that poison the political well in European countries like France and Germany, where immigrants and guest workers are reweaving the cultural fabric so rapidly, native conservatives have panicked. That’s not so different from the current situation in Arizona, where the white majority is so threatened by a fast-growing Hispanic minority, it has just passed America’s most reactionary legislation against illegal immigrants — along with a bill requiring Pres. Obama to present a valid birth certificate before he can appear again on Arizona ballots.

It smells funny for sure, and if I were black or Hispanic, I guess I’d be groaning, “Here we go again.” But for the sake of argument, and civil engagement, set bigotry to one side and take a close look at the way this bitter tea is brewed. Begin with the merely puzzling, the rage against health care reform. The cause that sent the Tea Party into the streets, and has kept it in the headlines, is thoroughly bogus. The anger seems real, yet the provocation is nonexistent. There isn’t a single intelligent, well-informed individual in the United States who honestly believes that the health care legislation passed by Congress and endorsed by Pres. Obama is a dangerous



**Late UNC law professor Dan Pollitt is one of too many recently fallen Civil Rights warriors.**

step on the road toward socialism. Among reasonable people, many believe it’s over-compromised and inadequate, some think it might create ruinous deficits, some quarrel with many or all of its provisions and predict that it will fail. Not one sees the shadow of Karl Marx. We’ve been running the most overpriced and wasteful health care system in the civilized world, one so riddled with inconsistencies, injustices and plain outrages that you must be very young, healthy or lucky, or all three, if you’ve never had to deal with one yourself. It was satisfactory only to the health insurance and pharmaceutical corporations who erected it, and perhaps to the carelessly rich.

Any half-responsible president would have tried to reform it. Presented with the facts that the radical Richard Nixon supported a more sweeping reform, and that Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney installed a more “socialized” system as governor of Massachusetts — and asked if they are also prepared to give up other “big government” benefits like Medicare and Social Security — many Tea Party protesters become defensive and confused. At least one changed her mind on “Obamacare” while a reporter was interviewing her.

These are frustrating times for many Americans, but there is no rational link between the burning passion, in this case, and its designated target. So who is it that we have to thank for putting them together? One of the great blind spots of the befuddled Right is that no one seems to have taught them the first principle a baby journalist learns at his editor’s knee: Follow the money.

Wherever there’s anger and ignorance, there’s a great opportunity for the grasping and unscrupulous, which unfortunately describes many of the drug and insurance companies that flourished under the world’s most expensive health care system. Rather than cutting exorbitant prices or disputing fewer claims, they found it more profitable to spend billions on advertising, campaign contributions and lobbying legislators to maintain the status quo. In recent years, cynical corporations developed a cheaper, more efficient vehicle for delivering their message and manipulating public opinion. We charitably call them media, but right-wing talk radio and its TV offspring FOX News are primarily a messageboard for what economist Paul Krugman calls “free-market fundamentalism.” Rush Limbaugh likes to describe himself as “a capitalist tool.” “News”

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was never his business. A rough mix of propaganda, provocation and raw attitude, right-wing broadcasting sells corporate evangelism crudely disguised as grassroots populism, where big government is everyone's enemy and Goldman Sachs and the Tea Party fight for liberty side by side.

In this Fantasyland, it means nothing when 80 percent of Americans say they distrust their government. At least 80 percent have no idea what it is. The most mendacious, insidious bill of goods the Apostles of Profit ever sold to the gullible public was this nonsense about a sinister government encroaching on our personal freedoms — as if the U.S. government was at any time in living memory an independent entity, or anything more than what the corporate will and the corporate treasure chest allows it to be.

“Government” is the straw man, the red herring, the ventriloquist's dummy. When corporate-sponsored right-wing ideologues castigate “big government,” it's like Edgar Bergen settling the blame on Charlie McCarthy. Among politicians, Republicans never and Democrats rarely interfere with the smooth progress of the best democracy money can buy. It's only when a greed-fueled catastrophe like the Wall Street collapse of 2008 upsets its apple cart, or a presumptuous new president tries to kill a Golden Goose like health care, that the ruling plutocracy feels the need to bare its teeth. This Tea Party, animated and informed by the cheerleaders of right-wing broadcasting, seems to be its new set of incisors. Rallies, protest marches, Confederate nostalgia, menacing slogans, open threats. Old white men in the streets with guns. What will they think of next?

“Big government” means nothing to Big Greed except temporary interference with its cash flow. If you ever doubted that official Washington and Wall Street boardrooms were an organic unit, one and inseparable, check the list of lobbyists who stepped forward — in the heat of the Goldman Sachs scandal — to defend the financial industry from the Obama administration's historic effort to regulate it. At least 70 former members of Congress are

currently on the Wall Street payroll, including former Senate majority leader and presidential nominee Robert Dole, former Senate majority leader Trent Lott, former House majority leaders Dick Armey and Dick Gephardt and former House speaker Dennis Hastert. Scandal? Routine career path. A law forbidding ex-legislators from cashing in on Wall Street will pass when hell freezes over.

This depressing information is readily available to American citizens, even to the sad ones who march with the Tea Party. Yet it's critical information they'll never receive. Thanks to media fragmentation and polarization, Americans may now avoid any facts or opinions that might surprise or displease them. “Many people live in information cocoons in which

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they talk only to members of their own party and read blogs of their own sect,” writes New York Times columnist David Brooks. “They come away with perceptions fundamentally at odds with reality.” Michael Tomasky, profiling the Tea Party in the New York Review of Books, adds that right-wing outlets “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.”

A Times/CBS poll of Tea Party supporters confirmed what we all suspected — two-thirds of them admit to getting all or most of their “news” from FOX News. These are true “people of the bubble” who are genuinely surprised if we laugh at them for believing that our president was born in Kenya. Inside their bubble, it's a

twilight world of distemper, paranoia and rumor upon which the warm light of reason (or even the dim light of neutrality) will never fall. Where did the Tea Party get the dizzy notion that health care reform was some kind of communist plot? FOX personality Glenn Beck, that unstable caveman now routinely described as “the guru of the new right wing,” was monitored by the Politico website for his use of inflammatory buzzwords while America debated health care. Its log showed Beck saying “Marxist” 127 times, “Communist” 330 times and “socialist” 404 times. This kind of demagoguery leaves nothing to chance. Herding the uncomprehending for the enrichment of the cynical won't win you a place in heaven, but it's highly lucrative. In his first year tracking Communists for FOX, Beck

increased his audience by more than 50 percent and became the hottest property on cable TV, with an eight-figure salary.

Still, Beck is a special head case. Testing his limits, he's pressing boldly into unmapped territory on the Outer Right, out where few public figures have ventured since Joe McCarthy's Red Scare or Father Coughlin's pro-Nazi broadcasts of the '30s. (Though Father Coughlin, no whore to Wall Street, called capitalism and Communism the two horns of Satan, which is still worth considering.) In a recent outburst, Beck warned his radio audience to boycott any church that preaches social justice — code words for Communism and Nazism, he declared — and was quickly repudiated by his own Mormon Church. Last week, he denounced Bruce Springsteen's “Born in the U.S.A.” and Woody Guthrie's “This Land is Your Land” as subversive, un-American music. If Beck had stumbled into Dan Pollitt's memorial service in Chapel Hill, he would've called the FBI. Even his on-camera colleagues at FOX, solemn purveyors of audience-tested right-wing bombast, have been eyeing Beck uneasily. Just as the Republican Party grows increasingly wary of the Tea Party — what kind of woolly-wild candidate might it take to win their votes, how far right is there to go before you fall off the edge of the American mind? — smug corporate reactionaries are beginning to suspect that Glenn Beck really means it and that he may be inconveniently deranged.

Meanwhile, his audience increases, and his prestige with Tea Party militants is unchallenged. What sort of person would buy a used stone axe, far less an ideology, from such a transparently delusional buffoon? This is the question several polls tried to answer. The discovery that the average Party soldier has more education than the average American is misleading. Since they're all white and considerably older, they reflect a long history of unequal educational opportunities in America. They're not the poorest white people, either. They're from that mean segment of the middle class — themselves just one major illness or downsizing from disaster — that offers little help or sympathy to

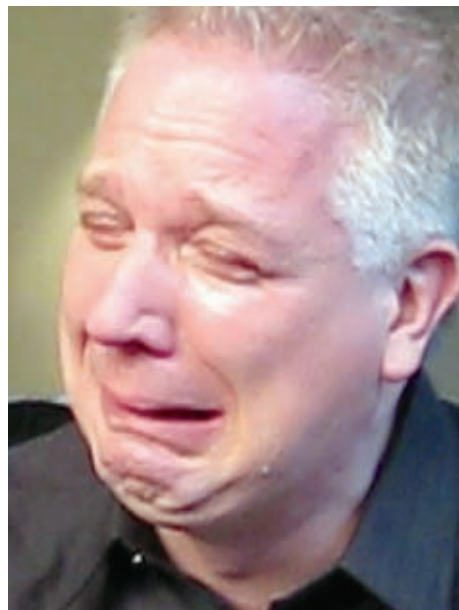


**Joe The Plumber shakes hands with supporters during a May appearance at St. Augustine's Tea Party.**

anyone less fortunate, and begrudges every tax dollar spent on a social safety net. At a time when 50 million Americans are classified as inadequately nourished, that attitude is damned mean indeed.

But Tea Party patriots aren't good at making connections. In all honesty, though elitists like me are hesitant to say so, they're not the cream of the crop, not the sharpest tools in Uncle Sam's toolbox. When the 2-million-year-old skull of a new hominid, *Australopithecus sediba*, was pictured in The New York Times and *sediba* was described as a creature with "a human-like face but a tiny brain," I thought "homo teaparticus" and was ashamed of myself — until I saw the head shots of *sediba's* lineal descendants, eight "Hutaree" militiamen from Michigan recently arrested for plotting to kill policemen. Unfortunately, the Hutaree conspirators appear to be precisely the kind of knuckle-dragging, genetically challenged primates-in-pants that the average elitist imagines at the right end of the political spectrum. And no Tea Party leader rushed forward to distance his movement from these primitive "Christian warriors."

The poor in perception, like the poor in spirit, will always be with us. Unlike his nemeses Barack Obama and Bill Clinton — or Julius Chambers, who graduated first in his class at UNC law school — a tea-bagger never ranked in the top percentile and never trusted those who did. What seems to set the 21st century extremist apart is that he's so proud of his ignorance and admires it so much in others. The high priests of his cult — Beck, Limbaugh, Sean Hannity — are semi-literate, steroidal ex-disk jockeys without a semester of higher education among them. When Sarah Palin is ridiculed for stupidity or voluntarily makes an ass of herself,



Glenn Beck is a special head case, boldly going where few have ventured since Joe McCarthy.

Mr. Tea Party just loves her all the more. The conservative David Brooks, whose opinions are creeping leftward as the Right becomes more irrational, noted that "every single idea associated with the educated class has grown more unpopular over the past year." Instead of health care reform, what grassroots America ought to be protesting in the streets are the projected layoffs, due to budget shortfalls, of several hundred thousand public school teachers this June. But good schools don't work to the advantage of groups selling bad ideas.

Once you devalue intellect and education, you clear the way for every kind of charlatan. A

politicized rabble of TV weathercasters, with no research or academic credentials to back them up, now defies all climate science by denying global warming, and of course the Tea Party laps it up. Whatever it doesn't understand, it rejects. One researcher asked a right-wing sample group if the Bush tax cuts had reduced the deficit. Predictably, most thought they had. Presented with incontrovertible evidence that they were wrong, they were polled a second time. They held to their original error by an even larger margin. What seems to animate this movement even more than xenophobia, the raw material of racism, is "epistemophobia" — fear of knowledge — the raw material of superstition and barbarism. You may not be living in the Dark Ages, but you can always make your own. Rather than a tea cup, the symbol of this Party ought to be the ostrich, with its head buried in the sand. In 1825, the year before he died, a discouraged Thomas Jefferson wrote that he felt lost in a nation contaminated by business, banking, religious revivalism, "monkish ignorance" and anti-intellectualism. If Tom could see us now.

An ignorant army that abhors instruction and draws all its rhetorical water from deliberately poisoned wells. It's not clear where this is going. But it's clear where it can't go, where in fact it has already gone too far. Here in North Carolina, a former statehouse

lobbyist, Paul Wilms, wrote a letter to The Raleigh News and Observer that contained an open threat: If conservatives can't prevail at the ballot box, he warned, they may have to resort to firearms to preserve their liberties. "I hope that Americans will have the wisdom to vote in November such that armed conflict is avoided," he actually wrote, "but if force ultimately becomes necessary, I pray that Americans will have the courage, faith and determination of our Founding Fathers." It's possible that Mr. Wilms had been hit in the head recently, or suffered side effects from Cialis. But his outrageous rhetoric would cause no stir in Oklahoma, where Tea Party leaders and legislators are proposing a volunteer militia to protect patriots Sooners from the federal government.

You'd better stop right there, my friends. There's a word for this kind of threat, and the word is sedition. I don't expect the Tea Party to know any history except what they hear on FOX News, but there's also a federal law still on the books — ironically, drafted by the Right to prosecute Communists and Trotskyites — that's known as the Smith Act of 1940. It states very clearly that if you advocate the overthrow of the legitimately elected government by force of arms, the FBI will come to take you away. If you advocate armed insurrection, it's sedition — "seditious conspiracy" (plotting to wage war

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against the USA) was one of the charges filed against the Hutaree militiamen — and if you make one threatening move to act on it, it's treason. Even in this media jungle of misused buzzwords, those two ought to ring loud and clear.

Gunpoint is the point where our ignorant armies trade Matthew Arnold for Benedict Arnold. We do not and we will not live in a country where the armed can ignore the law and bully the unarmed with threats of violence. You cannot say to us, "You may have the votes and the Constitution, but we have the guns." When Sarah Palin chants, "Don't retreat; instead — reload!," she's already way over the line. If anyone on the Left talked this way, they'd be called terrorists, not patriots, and fall afoul of Homeland Security.

We've heard enough. Bill Clinton judiciously chose the 15th anniversary of the mass murders committed by Timothy McVeigh, a kind of spiritual ancestor of the Tea Party, to speak out forcefully against the armies of the night. "We do not have the right to resort to violence — or the threat of violence — when we don't get our way," he wrote in a Times op-ed piece. "Our founders constructed a system of government so that reason could prevail over fear. Oklahoma City proved once again that without the law, there is no freedom."

It's unfortunate that Oklahomans have such a hopeless learning curve. It's unfortunate that so many Americans who have a race problem and a logic problem also have a gun problem. Thanks to the intimidation of gutless legislators by the NRA, every madman and subnormal Hutaree hominid in the republic is now armed to the teeth. The trademark pathology of our native Right is this impulse to take up arms. Does "Do it our way or we'll shoot you" strike you as infantile, as well as sociopathic? When Republicans stole the presidential election in 2000, and lied their way into another ruinous, tragic war in 2003, didn't liberals and Democrats have a stronger case for insurrection than opponents of Obama's health care reforms? But neither I nor anyone I know considered armed resistance to the government. Does that make us losers ... or citizens?

The Hard Right is wisdom-proof and lethally repetitious. More history: Violent thugs who cloaked themselves in patriotism were Stage One of *authentic* fascism in Germany and Italy. A professor of history, David McComb, tried to sum up Tea Party machismo with a trace of humor: "The ground is moving under them, and they don't want to recognize that and don't know what to do about it. So they join a tea-party group and strap on a six-gun and strut around."

I understand the plight of aging white men. Like old Thomas Jefferson at sunset, I often complain that the world I know is disappearing. But I never threaten to turn back the clock at gunpoint. This is the moment to take these people on. Free speech is free speech. They can call the president names, spread malicious rumors about him; even, thanks to pathetic gun laws, strap on assault rifles and attend rallies that vilify him. But they can't threaten to remove him by force, or resist the law of the land with firearms. If they're bluffing, it's time to call their bluff. If they're serious, it's time to arrest them. Will we have to see how the Tea Party arsenal stacks up against the United States Army? □