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Executive Summary

Following the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008, the Tea Party movement has burst onto the political scene with a force seldom seen in American politics. Despite initial accusations of “astroturfing,” the Tea Party movement remains a potent political force which attracts a significant constituency. However, it remains to be seen what and how much impact the Tea Party movement will really have on American politics and policy. This paper aims to examine some of the ways in which the Tea Party movement has changed the American political landscape. Using first-hand participant observation of Los Angeles-area Tea Party groups along with journalistic and scholarly accounts of the nation-wide Tea Party movement, this paper investigates the ways the Tea Party movement has impacted mainstream political debate. Additionally, it uses media scholarship to determine the ways in which changes in the media landscape have enabled the rise of the Tea Party movement and gave the movement a set of tools to affect mainstream political debates. The paper finds that despite limited electoral success, the Tea Party movement has substantively shifted political debates, both by shifting the acceptable positions to takes and by introducing new ideas into the discussion. As the Tea Party movement moves forward and perhaps institutionalizes, this can give an indication the continuing effects of the movement and the according impacts on what policies government will be able to enact.

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 Chapter I: Welcome to the Monkey House¹

When Barack Obama gained the presidency of the United States in the fall of 2008, he did not just win a victory for himself. Rather, the Democratic party also profited greatly from the election, gaining majorities in both the House of Representatives and a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate along with the presidency. Because of the size of the Democratic victory and the nadir of Republican unpopularity reached during the late Bush era, many experts and pundits predicted a permanent progressive political realignment, altering the American political landscape for years to come.² Indeed, the two years following that momentous election did see the entrance of a vital new movement – one described by *the Economist* as “America’s most vibrant political force at the moment,”³ and which in some polls found more popular than either the Democratic or Republican parties.⁴ This movement would indeed go on to have a profound effect on American politics.

However, this movement hardly represented the progressive legacy of Organizing for America, née Organizing for Obama, but rather a decidedly more conservative movement, calling itself the Tea Party Movement. This name – recalling the Boston Tea Party of 1773, one of the events marking the beginning of the American Revolution – implicitly claimed the legacy both of that event and more broadly of the founding of the nation, showing their claim that they represented the bedrock of the

¹ With sincerest apologies to Mr. Vonnegut. Also Mr. Kubrik, while we're at it.
² Will Bunch, *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, Hi-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 3
³ “Big Government: Stop – The size and power of the state is growing, and discontent is on the rise,” *The Economist*, 21 January 2010
⁴ Susan Davies, “WSJ/NBC News Poll: Tea Party Tops Democrats and Republicans,” <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2009/12>

United States. The Tea Party name appeals to the supposed moral authority of United States history.⁵ Although to some observers, the emergence of the Tea Party movement may have seemed to come out of thin air, no movement develops in a vacuum, and accordingly the Tea Party movement draws from deep-running currents in conservatism and deep-seated tensions in American society. In a celebrated 1956 essay, the respected historian Richard Hofstadter described similar radical right movements in his day and age (in fact, Hofstadter's essay was reprinted in a collection by sociologist Daniel Bell which coined the term "radical right") with motivations and even rhetoric eerily echoed in today's Tea Party Movement.⁶ He includes, for example, the anecdote of one woman who walked out of the hotel lobby where she and her party had been watching the election results, in absolute disgust over "four more years of the rule of socialism" - upon hearing of the reelection of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower as president.⁷ Groups such as the John Birch Society and the Share Our Wealth Society have provided perpetual temptations and torments to various politicians throughout U.S. history.

There seems to be something fundamentally different between the Tea Party and these far right precursors. With a few exceptions (such as the Know-Nothing Party of the 1840s and 1850s or the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s (organizationally distinct from both the original KKK of the Reconstruction era and the next revival of the KKK following World War II)), these groups seldom had much of an effect on mainstream American politics – they did not successfully promulgate their programs, nor

⁵ Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 14-15

⁶ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 12-14

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965)

substantially change the terms of political debate. The Tea Party, on the other hand, seems to have elected officials competing to gain their favor by adopting their tone and style.⁸ While one cannot properly dub the Tea Party as part of the radical right, their tone and rhetoric smacks of the histrionic “manning the barricades of civilization” which Hofstadter discusses in *The Paranoid Style*.⁹ Furthermore, the Tea Party blurs the distinctions between mainstream and radical right.¹⁰ The presence of this vital movement has changed the tone of debate around issues such as immigration and gun control, and have brought more widespread discussion to ideas long familiar to those on the fringe of the right into a wider audience. It has pushed its own competing narrative of American history, and even popularized a version of President Obama largely at odds with the reality of the person – painting him as a dedicated Marxist who at best is uncomfortable with the idea of the United States, much the way that the John Birch Society (JBS) viewed President Eisenhower.¹¹ In addition to introducing new ideas into mainstream debate, the Tea Party movement has successfully shifted the terms of political debate closer to the radical right, and has re-framed popular perception of ideas and modes of thought from the paranoid fringe.

This paper will explore the different ways in which the Tea Party movement has shifted debate around issues such as immigration and gun control, as well as the spread of ideas formerly exclusive to the radical right, such as the idea of “sovereign citizenship.” It will also evaluate the tactics and techniques localized Tea Parties use to change their communities, using groups local to the Los Angeles area as a case study.

⁸ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 295-297

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 12

¹⁰ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 224

¹¹ Robert Welch, *The Politician* (Belmont, MA: Robert Welch, 1963).

The aim of this paper is not to criticize or attack this movement, but rather simply to evaluate and understand the effect it is having and will in all likelihood continue to have on American politics and therefore the policy enacted on federal, state, and local levels.

The success of the Tea Party movement reveals some of the vast, far-reaching changes in American media and politics over the past couple decades. Many of the mechanisms which once restrained Hofstadter's paranoid style to the fringe have broken down. The advent of cable news and talk radio, not to mention the Internet, have led to a fragmentation of news sources. This, in turn, leads to a breakdown of the media's ability to act as a gatekeeper. For example, during Barry Goldwater's 1964 run for president, the conservative activist William F. Buckley restrained the John Birch Society's influence over the conservative movement and the Republican Party by using his position as editor of the *National Review* magazine.¹² In an era where groups such as the JBS are no longer constrained to the people they can reach through billboards and mimeographed pamphlets, but rather can instantaneously reach millions of followers with little start-up cost,¹³ figures such as Buckley, even if they existed, could not exercise this restraining influence. Alongside these changes in media, the political landscape predating the rise of the Tea Party movement had grown hyper-partisan, and made any inter-party cooperation improbable. These changes, especially the new ways in which media operate, allowed the Tea Party its access to the mainstream.

Defining our terms – mainstream v. fringe

Before we can launch into any serious discussion of what the Tea Party

¹² Sean Willentz, "Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party's Cold War Roots," *New Yorker*, 18 October 2010, p. 37

¹³ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 73

movement has moved into the mainstream, we must first define what exactly the mainstream consists of, a surprisingly difficult task, largely due to the fragmentation and multiplication of media outlets over recent years. One of the consistent tenants grassroots conservatism going back to the rise of Rush Limbaugh on talk radio in the 1990s has been a disdain for the mainstream media, often termed the “lame-stream” media, loosely understood as the “Big Three” network news outlets NBC, CBS, and ABC, along with the cable news network CNN and major nation-wide newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.¹⁴ Despite the media fragmentation described, according to Nielson ratings the Big Three networks still enjoy the largest viewership of any television news outlet,¹⁵ and thus retain a large influence over how people perceive political events and other happenings. However, their audience and therefore influence has steadily shrunk as a myriad of other media outlets have emerged.¹⁶

The steady retreat of the Big Three's popularity has also seen the steady growth of what Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella term the “conservative media establishment,” consisting of the Fox News Channel (FNC), the Wall Street Journal editorial pages, Rush Limbaugh and other conservative talk radio hosts, and conservative Internet news outlets and aggregators, such as the Drudge Report.¹⁷ While the FNC's audience still does not nearly approach that of the Big Three, it attracts the largest audience of all the cable news networks (1.5% of U.S. households in the

¹⁴ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4

¹⁵ “Broadcast News Network Ratings Trend,” TVB, http://www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB_Measurement_National_News_Analysis.pdf. Accessed 20 April 2011.

¹⁶ “Broadcast News Network Rating Trend.”

¹⁷ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. 4

fourth quarter of 2010, compared to 0.6% for its nearest competitor, MSNBC and 3.9% for the least popular network news outlet, CBS).¹⁸ FNC's share of the television audience has been steadily rising over the past few years, from 1.1% of U.S. households in the first quarter of 2007 to 1.5% in the last quarter of 2010, just as the network news outlets have steadily been losing audience share – ABC, for example, dropping from 6.3% to 5.1% in the same time period, and the other networks exhibit similar drops.¹⁹ FNC has also been the only cable news channel to gain audience share over that time period, with the exception of MSNBC, which still attracts an audience only about a third the size of FNC's. In the print realm, the *Wall Street Journal* claims 2.06 million subscribers, compared to the *New York Times*' 876,638.²⁰ While the *WSJ* clearly reaches a much larger audience, there remains no way to determine what percentage of readers actually consume the editorial pages.²¹

Despite the Fox New Channel's small share of the television news audience relative to the Big Three, the way it operates inside the conservative media establishment allows it to exercise an outsized influence, a process which Jamieson and Capella label the “echo chamber,” although amplification chamber might present a more accurate appellation. The separate organs of the conservative media establishment all use similar frames to the stories they cover, emphasizing aspects beneficial to conservatives and downplaying those which show liberal points in a positive light.²² Conservative media positions itself in relation to mainstream media in order to maximize

¹⁸ “Broadcast New Network Rating Trend.”

¹⁹ “Broadcast New Network Rating Trend.”

²⁰ “Newspaper Circulation Falls Broadly,” *New York Times*, last modified 25 October 2010, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/25/newspaper-circulation-falls-broadly-but-at-slower-pace/>

²¹ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, pp. 52-55

²² Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. 6

its own authority. By constantly making accusations of and building the case for liberal bias in mainstream news outlets, conservative media has the double effect of inoculating the listeners against any competing narratives in the news and encouraging self-censorship of anything which one might perceive as liberal in the mainstream sources. Counter-intuitively, this also allows conservative news figures such as Rush Limbaugh to further build their own credibility with articles from mainstream sources, as, given the liberal bias, anything which supports Limbaugh's views must constitute an admission against interest and therefore has added credibility.²³ The way in which the conservative media establishment interacts between themselves allows for otherwise obscure ideas or stories to get amplified and catapulted into the mainstream. What first appears as an obscure, anonymous upload on a Web log or a video on YouTube can receive a feature from a talk radio host, which will both draw more viewers to the Internet site and draw the attention of mainstream news outlets, which may then replay the content on air, bringing the story to the attention of millions more people. Thus, the conservative media establishment has proven their ability to affect mainstream status, no matter how much their host may like to assume underdog status. Furthermore, the conservative media establishment has grown so that it can influence a large segment of the population while bypassing the more traditional mainstream media.²⁴ Therefore, we must take their coverage in account when looking at the mainstream debate over the Tea Party's issues.

Aside from the media, one other important factor in determining mainstream acceptance rests in our elected officials. While elected officials of course reflect the

²³ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, pp. 146-147

²⁴ Jamieson, *Echo Chamber*, p. 4

views of the public (hence the elections), they also act as a temper on public opinion, as James Madison laid out in *the Federalist Papers*.²⁵ When an elected official, representative both to and of the federal government, talks in the tones and timbre of the paranoid fringe, it should be self-evident that he or she gives it a different level of credibility than when, say, a talk radio host or pseudonymous Internet poster does so. Though their control is far from perfect, our elected representatives have the power to validate different political expressions, offering a certificate of legitimacy to the movements they favor, as the representatives themselves have the legitimacy of democratic elections behind them.²⁶ The statements and actions of elected officials have the powerful potential to introduce and include ideas into the mainstream. Even if they do not bring most or even many Americans around to their view, the official sends the strong signal that this presents an acceptable limit of the debate.

Lastly, we must also consider broader public opinion. For an idea to have truly reached the mainstream, it must achieve a favorable impression with at least a sizable minority of the American body politic. Similarly, to show change in how the mainstream views a particular issue, a sizable minority must have shifted their views on that issue to a more or less extreme position, perhaps changing the majority view on that issue. One can determine these shifts of opinion by looking at public opinion surveys, while keeping in mind how the wording of these surveys can affect people's responses.

In order to determine what the mainstream views of the American body politic consist of, one must examine both media treatment, treatment by political figures and especially elected ones, and the broader public opinion surrounding the issue. One can

²⁵ "The Federalist #10," James Madison, <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>. Accessed 20 April 2011

²⁶ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 176-177

use both quantitative (e.g., amount of coverage given to a particular subject) and qualitative methods (e.g., the type of frames used on a story) to determine media coverage. The statements of politicians can be evaluated using the same methods, but here qualitative evaluation becomes more important, as one must examine *how* they talk about it, what tone they use, and so on. Lastly, one has to take into account the broader public opinion, which can be accomplished very simply by looking at polling data. Now, the definition of “fringe” intertwines intimately with that of “mainstream” - to define one is to define the other. What does not lie within the mainstream must logically lie within the fringe.

Defining our terms – conservatism

“Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself
(I am large, I contain multitudes)
-Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Scholars have faced numerous difficulties in defining these terms, as conservatives can hold multiple and even incompatible beliefs simultaneously. As the prominent historian of the right Alan Brinkley put it, “Conservatism is not, in short, an ‘ideology,’ with a secure and consistent internal structure. It is a cluster of related (and sometime unrelated) ideas from which those who call themselves conservatives draw different elements at different times.”²⁷ However, as readers of Walt Whitman may predict, and as Brinkley acknowledges, this does not necessarily distinguish conservatism from liberal, progressive, socialist, or other types of movements. Brinkley essentially posits a tautological definition of conservatism – conservatives are people

²⁷ Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99:2 (April 1994): 414

who believe what conservatives believe, and conservative ideas are the ideas that conservatives accept.

However, other scholars have attempted to find a more unifying definition of the right. The sociologist Jerome Himmelstein sets as his “provisional definition” that the right shares the “central political assumption ... that the main problem facing America, and indeed all of humanity, is collectivism, the tendency for the state to organize and control all social life.”²⁸ Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center also points this out as the underlying motivation of the right, dating back at least to the League of Nations immediately following World War I.²⁹ This definition place the right in relation to its opposition to any form of increasing organization and especially state organization. However, this ignores the role that right-wing groups have had in supporting the state in at least some of its actions. Another sociologist who has studied the right, Sara Diamond, adds further nuance in her definition, writing, “[Right-wing movements] are partially *oppositional* and partially what I call *system supportive* [italics in original].”³⁰ These movements support government whenever it acts to reinforce the existing social order or to maintain 'tradition,' but will oppose any government attempts to remake that order.³¹ Diamond also identifies some of the unifying principles of conservatives as support for the free market and classical (or neoclassical) economics, a desire to maintain the U.S.'s military dominance over the rest of the world, and the preservation

²⁸ Jerome L. Himmelstein, *The The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p. 6

²⁹ “Right Wing Extremism Move Mainstream,” NPR News, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=124906766>. Accessed 20 April 2011

³⁰ Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wind Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), p. 6

³¹ Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, p. 6

of traditional societal roles and norms.³² These unifying traits relate to a common sense of patriotism – that the United States possess a greatness only held back by outside forces – and a suspicion of state power. Of the definitions discussed above, Diamond's is the most nuanced and seems the most useful for examining the right. For example, it explains the vision laid out by Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina in his book entitled *Saving Freedom*; of a federal government absent from the realm of economic and individual liberties, but with strong support morality and more specifically Christian morality.³³

As the difficulty in reaching a definition suggests, the right contains many distinct yet interrelated strains. Diamond identifies four subdivisions in conservative movements: 1) “The conservative movement,” which she identifies with the anticommunist movement, 2) the racist/segregationist movement, 3) conservative Christianity, and 4) the neoconservative movement.³⁴ While these different strains focus on different issues at different times and mobilize in response to different stimuli, they cross-pollinate freely, even before the advent of the Internet or the conservative media establishment. Additionally, they are held together by the unifying factors described above. Diamond, although she does not name it specifically, also indicates a larger division in the right – that between conservatism as an intellectual movement and as a grassroots mass movement. Understanding conservatism and thus the Tea Party movement requires an understanding of what makes up and motivates all these separate yet interwoven strands.

³² Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, p. 6

³³ Jim DeMint, *Saving Freedom: We Can Stop America's Slide into Socialism* (Nashville, TN: Fidelis Books, 2009).

³⁴ Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, pp. 9-10

Chapter II: The John Birch Society: The Tea Party of the 1960s?

In a celebrated 1963 essay and subsequent 1965 book entitled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Richard Hofstadter examines the motivations and causes of the radical right-wing movements he observed swirling in the American political atmosphere around him – particularly McCarthyism and the subsequent rise of the John Birch Society. He along with several other colleagues noticed that these movements represented “deeper-running social currents,” and aimed to examine what those could be.³⁵ Hofstadter reminds his readers that similar movements had virtually always comprised part of American politics, but never presented a serious challenge to liberal ‘progress.’ In the end, Hofstadter identifies “status anxiety” as the primary motivation of what he terms “pseudo-conservatism.”³⁶ Rather than representing a substantive challenge to liberalism, the right simply drew upon people reacting to their changing status, rather than any true philosophical or ideological differences – hence, they are only “pseudo-conservatives.” While his account remains in many ways flawed, Hofstadter does point out a number of important insights which one should not ignore, particularly in drawing attention to importance of non-rational bases to political motivations and actions.³⁷ As will be explored later, the Tea Party movement fits well within the paradigm of Hofstadter's paranoid style. Examining the group which inspired Hofstadter's essay can lead to insight into their modern successor.

In 1958, a wealthy candy manufacturer (designer of Sugar Daddies and Junior Mints, among other treats) and former board member of the National Association of

³⁵ Daniel Bell, quoted in Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, p. 40

³⁶ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, pp. 51-54

³⁷ Ribuffo, “Why is There So Much Conservatism...”, p. 440

Manufacturers named Robert W. Welch gathered with a group of his influential friends in Indianapolis to form the John Birch Society.³⁸ He named the group after a missionary-turned-soldier who died at the hands of the Chinese Communists a scant two weeks after the end of World War II, claiming that John Birch represented the first casualty of the Cold War.³⁹ The JBS dedicated itself to fighting Communism where ever it could be found, and proceeded to find it almost everywhere – even, as Bob Dylan once wryly noted, under the toilet seat.⁴⁰ Whereas other saw Communism's potential threat coming mainly from abroad, the JBS saw the Communism's biggest threat as coming from domestic subversion. Thus, the most dangerous center of Communism did not come from Moscow, or even Beijing, but rather Washington, D.C. Welch alleged that Communists already dominated the top levels of the U.S. government, especially the State Department.⁴¹ Perhaps most famously, in a private letter to friends, which a journalist made public in 1960 and Welch to decided to publish as *The Politician*, Welch alleged that President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the World War II hero and leading figure in the Cold War, was in fact “a dedicated and conscious communist agent.”⁴² In one of the group's bulletins from 1960, Welch refers to the United States “with far more sadness than humor – as the most important Soviet satellite.”⁴³

The John Birch Society subscribed to a conspiratorial view of the world. They

³⁸ Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1961), p. 1, 181

³⁹ James P. Walsh, “The Death of John Birch: Documented,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58:3 (Spring, 1975): 209-218

⁴⁰ Bob Dylan, “Talkin’ John Birch Society Blues,” accessed 22 March 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyIFqdxRMwE>.

⁴¹ Robert Welch, “Bulletin for September,” in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1962* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1962), pp. 9-10

⁴² Robert Welch, *The Politician* (Belmont MA: Robert Welch, 1963). Welch removed the phrase from later drafts due to the controversy following the public awareness of the work. Quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 10, among numerous other sources.

⁴³ Robert Welch, “Bulletin For October,” in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1960* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1960), p. 17

viewed Communism not as a legitimate ideology, but rather as a vast criminal conspiracy which only succeeded through coercion.⁴⁴ As described by a contemporary academic observer, the JBS viewed the world in entirely Manichean terms – anything associated with the United States had to be unalterably good, while anything associated with the USSR was equally and oppositely bad. Thus, anything which might seem to recommend the USSR or, more broadly, socialism must constitute part of a plot to dominate the free world. Similarly, any perceived deficiency of the United States could only result from Communist deception.⁴⁵ To the Bircher, any blemish on the U.S. – such as, say, a history of institutionalized slavery and racial discrimination – were simply Communist exaggerations.

In the Birch narrative of American history, the central drama comes from those who sought to bring the United States into collectivism, starting with Woodrow Wilson's election. When the American people elected Woodrow Wilson as their president in the fall of 1912, little did they realize they had elected a dangerous socialist who would start the United States on a path which had only one ending – totalitarianism. Wilson hailed from the progressive movement, motivated by the same collectivist impulses as socialists or Communists. He oversaw the institution of the Federal Reserve Board, which gave the federal government unprecedented and dangerous levels of involvement and control over the U.S. economy. Wilson simply did not like the idea of the United States, and worked to change it into something else. Whether intentionally or not, Wilson irrevocably weakened the United States' position against the insidious

⁴⁴ Robert Welch, "Bulletin For December," in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1960* (Belmont, MA: John Birch Society, 1960), pp. 2-3

⁴⁵ Paul Friedman, "The Metaphysics of the John Birch Society," *North American Review* 253:1 (January 1968): 34; Frank Furedi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future: History and Society in an Anxious Age* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1992) p. 34

international Communist conspiracy.⁴⁶ At least, this is the narrative of Wilson presented by the JBS.

The JBS waged a number of major campaigns in its heyday during the 1960s. The organization vigorously opposed the civil rights movement, but not on segregationist grounds. Rather, Welch argued that the civil rights movement represented part and parcel of a Communist plot. In a postcard meant for one of the society's mailing campaigns, Welch identifies the founder of the civil rights movement not as Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Phillip Randolph, or any other figure Americans might popularly associate with the movement, but rather a Hungarian Communist who went under various names: Joseph Pogany, John Schwartz, Joseph Lang, and John Pepper. The card claimed Pogany-Schwartz-Lang-Pepper laid down the Communist line on building a Negro Revolutionary movement in a pamphlet entitled *American Negro Problems*.⁴⁷ The true purpose of the movement was to create a "free and independent" "Negro Soviet Republic" in the former American South.⁴⁸ This supposed drive, in turn, would only create "a transition stage between an enlightened Western European 'colonialism' and the infinitely brutal Soviet colonialism."⁴⁹ The JBS did not directly seek to deny black people rights or to perpetuate Jim Crow segregation, but they feared that the civil rights movement existed primarily to expand federal control over the states, which, in turn, would make the U.S. easier to integrate into the U.S.S.R.⁵⁰ The true

⁴⁶ Sean Willentz, "Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party's Cold War Roots," *New Yorker*, 18 October 2010, p.34. See also, interview with Willentz on NPR's Fresh Air With Terry Gross, "Glenn Beck: Drawing on 1950s Extremism?" <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130534982>. Accessed 20 April 2011,

⁴⁷ Benjamin R. Epstein and Arnold Forster, *Report on the John Birch Society 1966* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 10

⁴⁸ Welch, "Two Revolutions at Once," p. 8

⁴⁹ Welch, "Two Revolutions at Once," p. 3

⁵⁰ Robert Welch, "Bulletin for September," in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1963*

danger of civil rights lay in increasing the power of the federal government.

The JBS mounted a related effort against Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose decisions, Welch alleged, consistently advanced the aims of the Communists.⁵¹ By “Communists,” Welch means men such as “[Franklin] Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower,” who “alike followed the course charted for them by the growing socialist oligarchy in Washington... But the man who has done the most specific direct damage to our Constitution, and to our whole system of safeguards which a constitutional republic offers against the power of demagogues to manipulate majorities, is Chief Justice Earl Warren.”⁵² Warren's decisions, according to Welch, threatened to undermine the foundations of a republic handed down by our Founding Fathers. Welch paints Warren as representing a century-long trend toward the imposition of federal control over the several sovereign states, now being taken advantage of by Communist influences in order to weaken the U.S.⁵³ Welch proposes as a solution the impeachment of Earl Warren to “put the fear of God in the whole pro-Communist hierarchy that already controls our government.”⁵⁴ By waging a successful campaign against Warren, Welch hoped to shift American politics toward what he saw as a positive direction. To this end, the JBS put up numerous billboards reading along the lines of “Be A Super Patriot – Impeach Earl Warren,” including one member who wrote the message on a 130' by 130' plot outside Phoenix, AZ, for the benefit of air travelers.⁵⁵

⁵¹ (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1963)
⁵¹ Robert Welch, “Bulletin for September,” in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1963*

(Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1963), p. 31

⁵² Robert Welch, “Bulletin for January,” in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1961* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1961), p. 6

⁵³ Welch, “Bulletin for January, 1961,” pp. 9-10

⁵⁴ Welch, “Bulletin for January, 1961,” pp. 10-11

⁵⁵ Robert Welch, “Bulletin for September,” in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1964* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1964), pp. 7-8

The Society's third major focus lay on the United Nations, which they saw as an organization created by Communists in order to use as a base for spying operations in the United States and to serve as the framework for the One World Socialist Government.⁵⁶ In this campaign as well the JBS displays a fear and loathing of concentrated power, fearing that the U.S. would be forced to hand over its arms and police power to an international force sponsored by the U.N., and dominated by Communists.

* * * * *

The modern Tea Party movement does not represent a straightforward revival of the John Birch Society. The two movements differ organizational and rhetorically in many ways. Most significantly, the JBS maintained a strictly hierarchical organization. Welch demanded that the chapters do nothing without his explicit approval⁵⁷ and that they report to him a tally of their letters, postcards, and phone calls in their "Member's Monthly Memos," or "MMMs."⁵⁸ The Tea Party, in contrast, retains a famously loose organization. Most Tea Parties remain strictly local organizations. While at least three different groups claim to represent the movement nationally, none of them does so uncontroversially.⁵⁹ Welch also refused to yield his personal leadership of the JBS despite criticism for this seeming dictatorship, citing, of course, Communist conspiracy to destroy the society.⁶⁰ Although associated with figures such as Michelle Bachmann, Sarah Palin, and, until recently, Glenn Beck, both the national figures and the local Tea

⁵⁶ Robert Welch, "Bulletin for September," in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1963* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1963), p. 45

⁵⁷ Robert Welch, "Bulletin for May," in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1961* (Belmont, MA: The John Birch Society, 1961), pp. 25-26

⁵⁸ *Diamond, Roads to Dominion*, p. 54

⁵⁹ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 207-231

⁶⁰ Robert Welch, "Bulletin for March," in *The White Book of the John Birch Society for 1962* (Belmont, MA: John Birch Society, 1962), pp. 1-8

Party supporters have been reluctant to claim/bestow the mantle of leadership. As a supporter at one meeting put it, while Sarah Palin is not their leader, she is their mascot.

Despite these enormous difference, the John Birch Society of the 1960s does share many important things in common with the present Tea Party movement. The Tea Party, for example, has revived the JBS's fear of socialist subversion in Washington, as seen especially in the rhetoric surrounding the debate over health-care reform.⁶¹

Representative Devin Nunes set the rhetorical tone for many of his Republican colleagues when he called the Obama proposal “the ghost of Communist dictators.”⁶² One of Nunes' fellow congressmen, Zack Wamp called the bill “literally a fast march toward socialism.”⁶³ Despite these charges, when pressed, these representatives could not connect their claims to anything actually in the bill.⁶⁴ In the end, their criticism rested on a vague sense that the bill would led down a path toward socialism – much as the JBS's criticism of Eisenhower. Both the JBS and this anti-socialist sector of the Tea Party rely on radical rhetoric about the socialist slant of Washington with little grounding in reality.

Perhaps more importantly, the 1960s JBS and the present Tea Party share a conspiratorial view of history. Take, for example, the idea that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had built a string of concentration camps to detain true patriots on the order of the president. The theory originated with the rise of the militia movement during the Clinton administration, and persisted through the Bush years on the other side of the political spectrum. Following Obama's election, the idea resurfaced

⁶¹ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 295-8

⁶² Devin Nunes, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 295

⁶³ Zach Wamp, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 295

⁶⁴ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 295

among radical right groups. In March 2009, Glenn Beck, the erstwhile popular Fox News host, devoted three episodes of his show to speculating on whether the theory could be true or not. In the fourth show, he officially “debunks” the notion, but he still spent three shows promoting the idea.⁶⁵ Additionally, when promoting the story line on the morning show “Fox and Friends,” Beck claimed that he could not debunk the theory. While this theory has not an ounce of substantiation, Beck gave his viewers ammo to promote the idea anyway, “saying in effect, in the words made famous by sportscaster Jack Buck, ‘Go crazy, folks! Go crazy!’”⁶⁶ These, along with other conspiracies such as the “birther” controversy, promote the idea that Obama has a “socialist” agenda, that he in truth represents a conspiracy fundamentally opposed to the United States and American values. The 2010 CBS/*New York Times* poll found that 92% of Tea Party supporters believe that Obama is moving the country toward “socialism.”

Compare this to a JBS pamphlet from 1973 containing an article reprinted from the organization's official magazine entitled “Big Brother,” by Alex Strang. The article alleges that executive orders have been used in order to create a *de facto* dictatorship in Washington. Strang traces the misappropriation of executive orders to the passage of the Emergency Banking Act on 9 May 1933 under the “manufactured crisis” of the Great Depression. A group of mysterious “Insiders” were able to create the Great Depression by manipulating the currency through the Federal Reserve Board, and the end result was that “our President became a king – with the power to rule by royal

⁶⁵ Mark Potok, quoted in “When Right-Wing Extremism Moves Mainstream,” *NPR News*, 25 March 2010. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124906766>. Accessed 20 April 2011.

⁶⁶ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 265

decree." These "Insiders" laid the groundwork for this plot starting with the Wilson administration, during which the Federal Reserve legislation first came into effect.⁶⁷ Of course, it should be uncontroversial to the modern observer that the Franklin Roosevelt administration did not, in fact, result in an authoritarian dictatorship. Nevertheless, despite the almost complete lack of substantiating evidence, Strang alleges that the then-popular Democratic administration in control of the country in fact represented a group of undefined "Insiders" and a conspiracy fundamentally opposed to the United States and American values. At this point, this rhetoric should sound familiar.

The rise of the Tea Party movement has also revived the narrative of Woodrow Wilson described above. Beck similarly points to Wilson as the start of a progressive conspiracy to undermine the United States. "Wilson," Beck says, "simply could not stand what the United States stood for."⁶⁸ To prove this conspiracy, he points to historical minutia, such as the *fasces* design which appears on the back of the dime, and which, Beck reminds us, was introduced under the Wilson administration. Never mind that Benito Mussolini would not adopt the design as the symbol of Italian Fascism until some ten years after the dime came out, or that the original intention of the designer was to symbolize American military preparedness, the fact that this design appears on the dime "proves" Wilson's fascist intent. On his then-popular FNC show, Glenn Beck started pushing the books of W. Cleon Skousen, a fellow Mormon and controversial chief of the Salt Lake City police department from 1956-1960 who

⁶⁷ Alan Strang, "Big Brother," Hoover Institution, Radical Right Collection, Box 34, Folder: Unlabeled

⁶⁸ Beck, quoted in Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 34

passed away in 2006. While Skousen himself never joined the JBS, he did work with the Society's American Opinion Speakers' Bureau and wrote articles defending the JBS against "Communist attack."⁶⁹ While his works were widely rejected when originally written, once on Beck's required reading list, the books shot up bestseller lists and formed the basis of Tea Party reading groups around the country.⁷⁰ While Skousen and the JBS did not represent the variety of right-wing movements during the 1960s, just as Beck does not represent every nuance of the variegated Tea Party movement, but both symbolize broader trends within those movements.⁷¹

In fact, though long dormant, the JBS has seen a return to the limelight since the emergence of the Tea Party movement, in some ways more successful than its organizing during the 1960s. While the Birchers have long been excluded from the mainstream of the conservative movement,⁷² in 2011 the JBS attended the Conservative Political Action Conference as an affiliate,⁷³ showing the acceptance the JBS has gained among the broader conservative movement. The renewed and popularized JBS has lavished its praise on Beck, saying that he gets "progressively (sorry for the poor word choice) closer to presenting American history the way that The John Birch Society has been doing it for 50 years."⁷⁴ Even with Beck's decreasing popularity,⁷⁵ the JBS's

⁶⁹ Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 35

⁷⁰ Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 36

⁷¹ Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 37

⁷² Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 38

⁷³ Bill Hahn, "The John Birch Society to Attend CPAC as Affiliate," last modified 12 November 2010, <http://www.jbs.org/press-room/6544-the-john-birch-society-to-attend-cpac-2011-as-affiliate>.

⁷⁴ JBS website, quoted in Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 37

⁷⁵ Sean O'Neil, "Glenn Beck quitting his Fox News show," The A.V. Club, last modified 6 April 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/glenn-beck-quitting-his-fox-news-show,54194/>

ideological history has seen a revival and has made inroads into the American mainstream.

The Tea Party movement and the John Birch Society also share a similar attitude toward the mainstream – specifically, both groups claim or claimed to represent the true majority, the bedrock of American society. The JBS claimed it only lay on the radical right because the mainstream had drifted so far to the left.⁷⁶ In a much-cited CBS/*New York Times* poll, 84% of Tea Party supporters claimed the the movement represented the views of most Americans, compared to only 24% of Americans as a whole.⁷⁷ The two groups share a conviction that they represent the true majority of Americans against an outside conspiracy which only gained power through fraud and deception.

However, so far the Tea Party has shown much more success in actually breaking into the mainstream. During the 1960s, conservative activists such as William F. Buckley labored to keep the JBS outside the conservative movement.⁷⁸ Buckley used his platform as editor of the *National Review* to editorialize against the JBS, urging Republicans to reject membership in an organization so far removed from common sense. Buckley's criticism was twofold – first, he saw the Birchers as a strategic liability to the conservative movement, as their extremist views would alienate most voters. Secondly, he viewed an organization unable to make the necessary and proper differentiation between liberalism and Communism as intellectually bankrupt

⁷⁶ Friedman, "The Metaphysics of the JBS," p. 34

⁷⁷ Kate Zernike, *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* (New York: Times Books, 2010), p.

⁷⁸ Willentz, "Confounding Fathers," p. 38

and not worth dealing with.⁷⁹ The JBS had very limited success attracting elected officials, finding barely a handful who publicly supported them. They found their most notable elected supporter in John Roussetot, a Republican representing the area around San Marino, CA, who went on to become public relations director for the JBS following his electoral defeat in 1963.⁸⁰ In contrast, 44 of the new Republicans elected to the Congress in 2010 identified themselves as Tea Party candidates, and many leading Republicans, most notably Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, already in the Congress sought to court the Tea Party constituency.⁸¹ Michael Steele, chairman of the Republican National Committee from 2009-2011, echoed Tea Party rhetoric in his public appearances.⁸² The paranoid, conspiratorial views that the Republican Party had firmly rejected in the 1960s were now making their way into the highest levels of the party.

Chapter III: Media Matters

The Tea Party movement's mainstream success is rooted in a number of changes in American politics and media. Though conservatism has always been a powerful force in American politics, it has become much more mainstream since the 1960s. Conservatism modern iteration grew out of the

⁷⁹ Sean Willentz, interviewed on NPR's *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, "Glenn Beck: Drawing on 1950s Extremism?" last modified 13 October 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130534982>.

⁸⁰ "Roussetot, John Harbin (1927-2003)," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed 13 April 2011, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000469>

⁸¹ "How the Tea Party Fared," *The New York Times*, 4 November 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/04/us/politics/tea-party-results.html>; Kate Zernike, "Tea Party Kingmaker Becomes Power Unto Himself," *The New York Times*, 30 October 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/us/politics/31demint.html>

⁸² Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 295

backlash to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program, which enabled conservative activists the successfully maneuver and dominate the Republican party, banishing the more liberal northeastern wing, represented by Nelson Rockefeller.⁸³ However, as Barry Goldwater's electoral rout in the 1964 presidential election shows, conservatism still did not appeal to most Americans. Subsequent events, especially the political realignment and Republican rise to ascendancy in the South, catapulted conservative ideas into the mainstream and threw liberalism into disarray. While liberalism remained a strong ideological opponent, by the time of Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, historian Julian Zelizer writes, “[t]he pulse of conservatism was mainstream America, not those on the fringes.”⁸⁴ While both the Tea Party and the JBS may represent the fringes of conservatism, when the Tea Party arose, the conservative movement itself was much more mainstream.

More importantly, the media landscape in the United States has changed vastly since the 1960s. While Welch often boasted of *American Opinion's* mainstream success, in truth, the JBS had few tools to reach out to people. Aside from the magazine, the Society relied on pamphlets and billboards in order to reach their prospective audience (see figure at right). To reach a broader audience, they either had to print their own material and hope, or try to attract the attention of established media outlets. As journalist Will Bunch writes, the 1960s radical right “fringe was restrained by a world of three channels and trusted anchors like Walter Cronkite, where TV convey

⁸³ Julian Zelizer, “Reflections: Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38:2 (June 2010), p. 368, accessed 24 March 2011, doi:10.1353/rah.0.0217

⁸⁴ Zelizer, *Reflections*, p. 371

anonymous authority.”⁸⁵ Figures associated with the Tea Party movement such as Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, in contrast, have access to “a megaphone, via Fox News, that’s a million times bigger than Welch or Skousen could have imagined.”⁸⁶ Because of the way the media landscape has developed, Tea Party ideas find a much easier time reaching a wide audience.

As described above, the past few decades have seen the decline in audience share of most mainstream news outlets. As political scientist Susan Herbst writes, this fragmentation of the media landscape has resulted in a rejection of the idea of “public opinion:” “ academics use the term freely, yet the very citizens who make up the public do not believe reports of their opinions to be accurate, genuine, or meaningful.”⁸⁷ Herbst made this conclusion in 1996, and media has only grown more fragmented since then, especially with the explosion of Internet news sources following the revelation of the Monica Lewinsky scandal on the conservative news aggregator The Drudge Report.⁸⁸ While the mainstream news outlets persist in reaching a wide audience, they no longer have the opinion setting power they once did. They also no longer have the power to serve as gatekeepers over political debate.

Into this media void has grown a conservative media establishment, as described above, represented by FNC, conservative talk radio shows, the

⁸⁵ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 13

⁸⁶ Sean Willentz, interviewed on NPR’s *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, “Glenn Beck: Drawing on 1950s Extremism?” last modified 13 October 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130534982>.

⁸⁷ Susan Herbst, “Public Expression Outside the Mainstream,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546 (July 1996): p. 128

⁸⁸ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 7

opinion pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Internet news sources.⁸⁹ As Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella argue in their book *Echo Chamber*, these media interact in such a way to amplify their messages based in Reagan conservatism.⁹⁰ Consumers of conservative media show markedly different characteristics from their peers who turn to mainstream or liberal news sources. For example, followers of the conservative media establishment show higher degrees of polarization and distortion (e.g., believing charges against a political candidate which are not actually true) than any other group.⁹¹ The conservative media establishment create what the authors term a “balkanization of knowledge and interpretation,” promoting world-views tailored to their conservative followers.⁹² The complex also insulates its followers against competing coverage from either mainstream or liberal news sources:

Within the conservative media, its audience finds a safe haven from the message of those the hosts vilify as liberals, including the mainstream media. Listeners, viewers, and readers absorb a cogent, coherent view of the political world as well. This cognitive structure has the capacity to anchor the attitudes of these audience members at the same time that it prepares them to vigorously defend their point of view with sometimes legitimate and sometimes problematic means.⁹³

The rise of the conservative media establishment created a new venue for forming and supporting opinions. The building of this echo chamber also allowed new ways for stories and theories to reach wider areas of thinking.

The conservative echo chamber which Jamieson and Capella describe

⁸⁹ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. 3

⁹⁰ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. xii

⁹¹ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, pp. 218-236

⁹² Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. 191

⁹³ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, p. 237

also acts as a sort of amplification chamber, catapulting conservative narratives into the public consciousness. For example, in 2004, a group calling itself Swift Boat Veterans for Truth aired an commercial attacking then-presidential candidate John Kerry's Vietnam War record. By the time mainstream media outlets weighed in with evidence refuting the group's charges, the ad had received ample discussion on networks such as FNC, MSNBC, and CNN, giving the ad more exposure without contesting the basic claims it made. Consumers of conservative media, such as Rush Limbaugh and FNC, were more likely to say the ad's charges were accurate. As Jamieson and Capella write, this indicates that “these two outlets magnified their audience's exposure to the attack on Kerry and at the same time insulated that audience from corrective information advanced in the mainstream media.”⁹⁴ The conservative media provide a power tool for advancing like-minded narratives, both bringing them to a larger audience and insulating them from counterattack.

The Tea Party has benefited from a similar process in making some of its narratives more widespread. Take, for example, the popularization of the “Birther” idea – the theory that Barack Obama is not in fact a natural U.S. citizen, but rather was born in Kenya. The idea was rooted in the accusation of two Christian missionaries living in Kenya, Celeste and Loren Davis, that Obama was secretly a Muslim who wanted to start a race war. From their widely circulated e-mail, the idea gained enough steam to be debunked by Politifact.com, although the article still noted that Obama had still not publicly

⁹⁴ Jamieson and Capella, *Echo Chamber*, pp. 211-212

produced his birth certificate. A *National Review* writer, Jim Geraghty, commented on the theory to note the extreme unlikelihood of the theory, as it “would require everyone in [Obama's] family to lie about the in every interview and discussion with those outside the family since young Obama appeared on the scene.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless, these accounts still drew attention to the theory, and a certain degree of legitimacy that such attention bestows. Two adherents of the “Birther” theory, Philip Berg and Andy Martin (the latter of whom ran for congress as a member of “the Anthony R. Martin-Trigona Congressional Campaign to Exterminate Jew Power in America.”) were able to get time on cable news networks, including CNN. Another supporter of the theory and self-appointed leader of the “Birther movement,” Orly Taitz, claimed to have discovered Obama's Kenyan birth certificate from 1961 – despite the fact Kenya did not exist as independent nation in 1961, and that the city which supposedly issued the document, Mombasa, was actually part of Zanzibar at that time, and that the certificate was actually an altered version of an Australian birth certificate from 1959 available on the Internet. This flimsy evidence did not prevent the theory from making inroads into the mainstream. Not only did it receive discussion in reputable news sources, but it received attention from Republican legislators, with Senator Richard Shelby announcing his doubts about Obama's citizenship and Representative Bill Posey gathered 10 Republicans to co-sponsor legislation requiring presidential candidates to produce a birth certificate and corroborating documentation in a thinly-veiled

⁹⁵ Jim Geraghty, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 17

attack on Obama for not doing so.⁹⁶

During the summer of 2009, with the debate over health reform ongoing, many congresspeople returned to their districts to hold “town hall meetings.” In Delaware, the Republican Representative Mike Castle found himself confronting one of his constituents, a woman brandishing her birth certificate and asking why President Obama found it so difficult to produce his, to cheers from the assembled crowd. Eleven days later, a user under the pseudonym of “WilliamDawesinDE” uploaded a short clip of the event to YouTube. The clip started to draw attention when it received a link from the Drudge Report, which led the video-maker to give a phone-in interview on a nationwide conspiracy-minded talk radio show. The news of the clip percolated up through the conservative talk radio circuit, making the big time when Rush Limbaugh approvingly played the audio from the clip on his show. The clip then went on to make appearances on FNC and MSNBC, and finally made it to network news as part of the *NBC Nightly News* broadcast on 22 July 2009.⁹⁷ Whereas a Bircher making claims like this during the 1960s would have been a tree falling in the political wilderness with no one around to hear it, there now exists the media mechanisms to make that sound reverberate throughout the political landscape. Charges that would seem the absurd ramblings of far-right radicals are today echoed widely in popular media sources.⁹⁸ The ascent of this clip through the various media comprising the modern media complex provides an illustration of this mechanism in action.

⁹⁶ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 15-18

⁹⁷ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 7-8

⁹⁸ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 13-14

In this new media landscape, ideas are able to filter into public consciousness while bypassing mainstream media entirely, such as with the theory that Barack Obama, whether born in the U.S. or not, is the Antichrist. This originates in a video posted on the website WorldNetDaily – the publisher of which, Joseph Farah, incidentally lectured the Tea Party Convention in Nashville on the topic of Obama's birth certificate – which took various quotes from scripture about Satan, and used Hebrew translations, producing something sounding similar to the president's name. Using the video's methodology, one could easily “prove” that anyone from popular children's entertainer Fred Rogers to mild-mannered *Daily Planet* reporter Clark Kent was the Antichrist. Others picked up on the theory, posting videos comparing Obama to the Antichrist. As of 13 April 2011, a Google search for “Obama is the Antichrist” returns 499,000 hits, including a debunking from the popular website Snopes.com.⁹⁹ The discussion reached the point that Tim LaHaye, a conservative Christian activist and author of that best-selling series of post-Apocalyptic fiction, *Left Behind*, had to publicly deny that Obama was the Antichrist, and even seemed to influence John McCain's campaign in an ad which referred to Obama cryptically as “the One.”¹⁰⁰

Chapter IV: Tea Party Strategies: A Case Study

The following discussion is based on participant observation in two different Tea Party groups in the Los Angeles area, the South Bay Tea Party

⁹⁹ Barbara and David P. Mikkelson, “Is Barack Obama the Anti-Christ?” snopes.com, last modified 3 August 2009, <http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/antichrist.asp>

¹⁰⁰ Bunch, *The Backlash*, pp. 223-224

(SBTP) and the Pasadena Patriots, aka TEAPAC, along with an interview with one of the leaders of TEAPAC, Eric Chan. This sample has nothing approaching statistical significance or rigor, and therefore can only prove that these Tea Party groups do use this kind of rhetoric and strategies.

Additionally, these groups represent relatively well-off areas of the fairly liberal Los Angeles county. The views they express do not necessarily represent Tea Partiers around the country. Nevertheless, as Tip O'Neil famously said, "all politics is local," and this remains especially true for the very locally rooted Tea Party movement. In order to comprehend the movement as a nation-wide phenomenon, one must first understand the local expression and growth of Tea Party groups.

The groups I examined used a number of strategies to advance their political aims. Both pursue an electoral strategy, either running candidates they approve for local offices, including party offices, or trying to ensure that candidates outside the group adhere to their principles. For example, the TEAPAC member I interviewed, Eric Chan, himself ran and won a spot on the Republican party council for his assembly district. The SBTP appointed members to attend city council meetings in their respective cities in order to keep watch if the council-members perform any objectionable actions. Tea Partiers across the nation have engaged in similar activism, filling Republican party offices which often go unfilled in order to shift the party more towards their direction.¹⁰¹

Alongside identifying candidates they can help run for office, these

¹⁰¹ Zernike, "In Power Push," *New York Times*

groups also ran a sort of “purity campaign,” attempting to ensure that existing candidates in office held to Tea Party principles. At meetings I attended with both groups, I heard rhetoric concerning RINOs – the acronym for Republicans In Name Only, the signifier for politicians who appear to contradict conservative values – as in, what can the group do about these RINOs who want to put a bond issue on the ballot. Chan describes the process as keeping politicians reputable, and describes some success, such as the election of as California State Assemblyman Tim Donnelly. Through this activism, Tea Party groups make their ideology heard and held among elected officials, with the threat of action against those who do not pay attention. However, Chan does not see the Tea Party becoming a formal political party, but rather simply maintaining pressure on both parties to adhere to Tea Party principles.

As an example of this process in action, when the Democratic representative Jane Harmon vacated her congressional seat, the SBTP eagerly looked forward fielding conservative candidates to replace Harmon. At one SBTP meeting, a number of potential candidates came to briefly address the group, including Michael Webb, currently the city attorney for Redondo Beach. At the meeting, one activist took Webb to task for his perceived insufficient support for gun rights – as city attorney, Webb had disallowed firearms from the city’s public pier, under a state law banning guns from park space. The activist thought Webb should have fought the restriction, leaving Webb to defend his absolute support for gun rights, repeatedly reminding his audience that he had retained the National Rifle Association’s lawyer as his adviser. This

demonstrates one of the ways in which Tea Party groups influence candidates outside the Tea Party, getting them to take more extreme positions against gun control.

TEAPAC has recently been attempting to build a network with Tea Party groups all over the Los Angeles region, with some degrees of success. In doing so, they hope to share their new-found political experience, acting as an “educational resource” for other Tea Party groups. These inter-group relationships also create the potential for alliances and resource-sharing in future campaigns. In this way, the TEAPAC hopes to spread the Tea Party movement as a more unified phenomenon in the Los Angeles area, without necessarily concentrating or centralizing it. According to Chan, the group is now entering the institutionalization phase, attempting to build a sustainable donor base and organizational network in order to move forward and continue and spread its activities.

Another important organizational aspect of these groups lies in their openness. Meetings with both organizations were open to all comers, and leadership positions were filled by volunteers from the attendees. Neither of the groups collected dues from their members. As Chan sees it, the Tea Party movement is organized around a few core principles, namely, fiscal conservatism and limited government. The views on other issues which people may bring with them to the Tea Party does not matter so much as long as they adhere to these core principles. While in theory a bipartisan movement, TEAPAC tends overwhelmingly to attract Republicans, or at least conservative-

leaning members. As long as members agree with the core tenants of the Tea Party movement, they are free to bring whatever other views on social issues they hold.

Chapter V: Evaluating Tea Party Impacts

The Tea Party movement has effected two distinct but interrelated effects on American politics. They have introduced a number of new ideas to the mainstream consciousness, but, more importantly, they have shifted the terms of debate over a variety of issues, such as immigration, gun control, and the environment. There is a concept in political theory called the “Overton window,” which Glenn Beck likes to talk about – so much so, in fact, that he used it as a title to a novel he wrote (or at least lent his name to).¹⁰² The Overton window describes the range of acceptable public opinions one can give regarding an idea without seeming too extreme. Under this paradigm, the Tea Party movement has successfully moved this window so that more right-wing reactions fall into the acceptable range. While calling the president a socialist was far outside the mainstream when Welch made that accusation of Eisenhower, today it seems strange if a day goes by without somebody calling Obama the same term.¹⁰³

To see how the Tea Party has shifted the debate around immigration, one need only look as far as Obama's presidential challenger, Senator John McCain. In 2006, McCain supported then-President Bush's plan to create a “path to citizenship” for undocumented immigrants. By the 2008 campaign, he

¹⁰² Glenn Beck, *The Overton Window* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010)

¹⁰³ Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 186

had renounced that position, but still kept supportive rhetoric for immigrants, saying, “they are also God's children, and we have to do it [immigration law reform] in a humane and compassionate fashion.”¹⁰⁴ However, in 2010, with his seat in the senate under threat from a more right-wing candidate, J. D. Hayworth, McCain's views on immigration moved to the right, losing this compassionate edge. Rather than condemning Arizona's S.B. 1070, which allowed local police officers to conduct immigration checks when stopping people for other infractions if they suspected an immigration violation, McCain offered his support, along with the claim that undocumented immigrants were “intentionally causing accidents on the freeway.”¹⁰⁵ As Bunch writes, McCain's “reelection platform consisted of begging the Obama administration to send troops to the border to forcibly prevent any more of 'God's children' from surging north.”¹⁰⁶ McCain was not the only politician to follow this trajectory on the immigration debate.¹⁰⁷

The Tea Party movement has also added to the immigration debate the idea that the 14th Amendment, which extends citizenship to everyone born in the United States, should be repealed or modified. The Tea Party-endorsed Rand Paul brought up the issue during his campaign for Kentucky's senate seat, and it has gained a little traction, with bills introduced in seven states which would repeal the citizenship-by-birth section of the 14th Amendment,

¹⁰⁴ John McCain, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 147

¹⁰⁵ John McCain, quoted in Bunch, *The Backlash*, p. 147

¹⁰⁶ Bunch, *the Backlash*, p. 147

¹⁰⁷ Bunch, *the Backlash*, pp. 147-148

though none of these have passed.¹⁰⁸ This idea has its roots in the racist movement of the 1980s, according to Mike Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which argued that there were two types of citizens in the U.S. One type consisted of “sovereign citizens,” who were the people descended from the original white settlers and had the true right to the U.S. The other type was the so-called “14th Amendment citizens,” those people made citizens only by that amendment, and therefore were not legitimate citizens.¹⁰⁹ Under the Tea Party movement, this idea has seen resurrection, albeit in a more muted form and without much success. Nevertheless, the idea has moved out of “unthinkable” territory.

On the issue of gun rights, the Tea Party has also moved the frame of debate further to the right than even under the Bush presidency. Despite the fact that to date Obama has been even laxer on gun control laws than his predecessor, the perception that the Obama administration has plans to confiscate guns from all Americans is widespread among Tea Party supporters – in two Harris polls conducted on 24 and 31 March 2010, 70% of Tea Party supporters and 61% of Republicans believe that Obama “wants to take away Americans' right to own guns,” despite the fact that, if this is true, Obama has given no indication of it. While Bush showed some limited support for gun control, today absolute support for gun rights has become a shibboleth for the

¹⁰⁸ Elyse Seigel, “Rand Paul: ‘I Don’t Think the 14th Amendment Was Meant to Apply to Illegal Aliens,’” The Huffington Post, last modified 24 August 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/24/rand-paul-i-dont-think-th_n_624191.html; Richard Cohen, “Campaign to Rewrite 14th Amendment Is About Politics, Not Facts,” Southern Poverty Law Center, last modified 28 March 2011, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/campaign-to-rewrite-14th-amendment-is-about-politics-not-facts>

¹⁰⁹ Mike Potok, interviewed on NPR's *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, “When Right-Wing Extremism Moves Mainstream,” *NPR News*, 25 March 2010. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124906766>. Accessed 13 April 2011.

Republican party.¹¹⁰ During the debates for the new RNC chair, the moderator asked the various candidates how many guns they owned.¹¹¹ The rise of the Tea Party movement has correlated closely with a shift in tone on control within the Republican party, closely enough to suggest causation.¹¹²

The Tea Party movement also shifted the debate surrounding environmentalism in the government. For the better part of modern American history, the two major parties have at least agreed that preserving the environment, reducing pollution, and developing clean energy sources were laudable goals. Where they disagreed came with how to achieve those goals, with Democrats tending to favor “command-and-control” approaches and Republicans supporting market-based policies. One might expect that as market-based solutions have been more and more widely accepted as the most effective solutions, Republicans would reach consensus with their Democratic colleagues on this issue as well. However, the new Republican-controlled 112th Congress, heavily influenced by Tea Party campaigns during the election, retreated even from the previously established consensus, contesting the very grounds for an affirmative environmental agenda. The cap-and-trade bill this Republicans argued so vehemently against represented the very form of environmental regulation that previous congressional Republicans had championed. Instead, Republicans in the house voted to disallow the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating greenhouse gases and have

¹¹⁰ “George W. Bush on Gun Control,” On the Issues, accessed 13 April 2011, http://www.issues2000.org/celeb/George_W_Bush_Gun_Control.htm; Bunch, *the Backlash*, p. 90

¹¹¹ “The RNC Chairman's Debate,” accessed 13 April 2011, <http://rncdebate.org/>

¹¹² Bunch, *the Backlash*, p. 101

proposed cutting funding to the EPA.¹¹³ Because of the Tea Party fear and loathing of any form of government control, even environmental regulation in accordance with conservative principles comes under attack. Market-based environmental solutions, once the province of the right, have now be exiled to the other side of the aisle.

Some studies have shown a divide between the ideology of grassroots Tea Party participants and their elite enablers. The former tend to have, as Diamond describes, views which are partly system-supportive and partly oppositional. In general, they support federal programs that they feel that they benefit from, such as Social Security and Medicare, but oppose those they see as benefiting undeserving individuals, such as welfare programs.¹¹⁴ In short, to paraphrase Phil Ochs' description of the Liberal, Tea Party supporters are generally ten degrees to the right of center in good times, and ten degrees to the left of center when it affects them personally. This does not hold true for all Tea Party members; younger members tend to hold more purely libertarian views.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Tea Party's elite enablers, such as former representative Dick Armey and the Koch brothers, tend to be more libertarian on issues than the Tea Party's grassroots, opposing even Social Security and Medicare. This divide means the Tea Party elites can advocate policies in the name of the Tea Party which do not necessarily jibe with the way most Tea

¹¹³ Jason Scorse, "Republicans for Environmental Progress: An Endangered Species," *Environmental Economics*, <http://www.env-econ.net/2011/03/republicans-for-environmental-progress-an-endangered-species.html>

¹¹⁴ Venessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," *Perspectives on Politics* 9:1 (2011): p. 26, accessed 20 April 2011, doi:10.1017/S153759271000407X

¹¹⁵ Zernike, *Boiling Mad*

Partiers think, such as with a recent incident where a Tea Party group, the Institute for Liberty, set up a campaign in favor of an Indonesian paper company.¹¹⁶

The shift in debate surrounding all of these issues show the ways in which the Tea Party movement has impacted American politics. Even though Tea Party supporters still represent a relatively small section of the Republican congressional delegation, they have been able to exercise influence disproportionate to their size, as their Republican colleagues by and large follow them in their rhetoric.¹¹⁷ The movement's elite enablers have been able to capitalize on the movement's grassroots energy in order to move their sometimes conflicting agendas further into the mainstream. Coupled with a savvy navigation of the changed media landscape, the Tea Party movement has been able to affect profound changes in the way mainstream figures debate issues in American politics.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Many things remain unknown about the Tea Party movement – no one can predict how successful the movement will be in the long term or what effects it will ultimately have on American politics. For most of its existence, it has been a movement out of power, and even following the election of many Tea Party congresspeople in 2010 it does not represent a dominant force in American government. However, as the movement gains a degree of control

¹¹⁶ Mike McIntire, "Odd Alliance: Business Lobby and Tea Party," *The New York Times*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/us/politics/31liberty.html>

¹¹⁷ Bunch, *the Backlash*, pp. 178, 258, 295-297

and input over policymaking, it will have face new challenges, and undoubtedly the public's perception of the movement will change. The movement will also have to grow into a more institutionalized form in order to continue its impact, and the myriad constituent groups will have to make some decisions – both individually and collectively – about how this will take place. The movement has heretofore retained a loose, decentralized organization, which has both advantages and disadvantages, and it will have to reach a conclusion on whether the former outweigh the latter.

One of the disadvantages of this decentralization lies in the lack of control over what ideas enter the movement. The Tea Party has no William F. Buckley, no central figure to set acceptable limits on the terms of debate. While many if not most Tea Partiers express legitimate philosophical and ideological concerns, the movement undeniably attracts some members of the paranoid fringe, those convinced of the conspiratorial intent of the federal government and determined to stop it by any means necessary. The loose organization around only the core principles allows these elements to integrate freely into the broader, socially and politically acceptable Tea Party movement. In determining their organization going forward, Tea Partiers need to consider whether they want to allow this to continue, and think about what unintended consequences their movement might have on the American political landscape for years to come.

In writing this paper, I did not set out to do a “hatchet job” on the Tea Party. To be perfectly clear, I do not mean this as a condemnation of this

movement, to the undoubted disappointment some of my liberal readers. The Tea Party members with whom I spoke were almost without exception kind and intelligent people, and I encountered nothing by openness and support for my project. Many members expressed a desire to leave this country better off for their children as a motivation for joining the movement. I believe that participants and supporters of the Tea Party movement have legitimate claims to make about American politics, and I support the expression of those views, even if I do not personally support those views. One cannot simply dismiss the issues the Tea Party raises with a simple accusation of racism or paranoia; those who would do so at their own peril. The Tea Party movement needs to be taken seriously, and its concerns deserve to be addressed.

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