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THE GOP IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

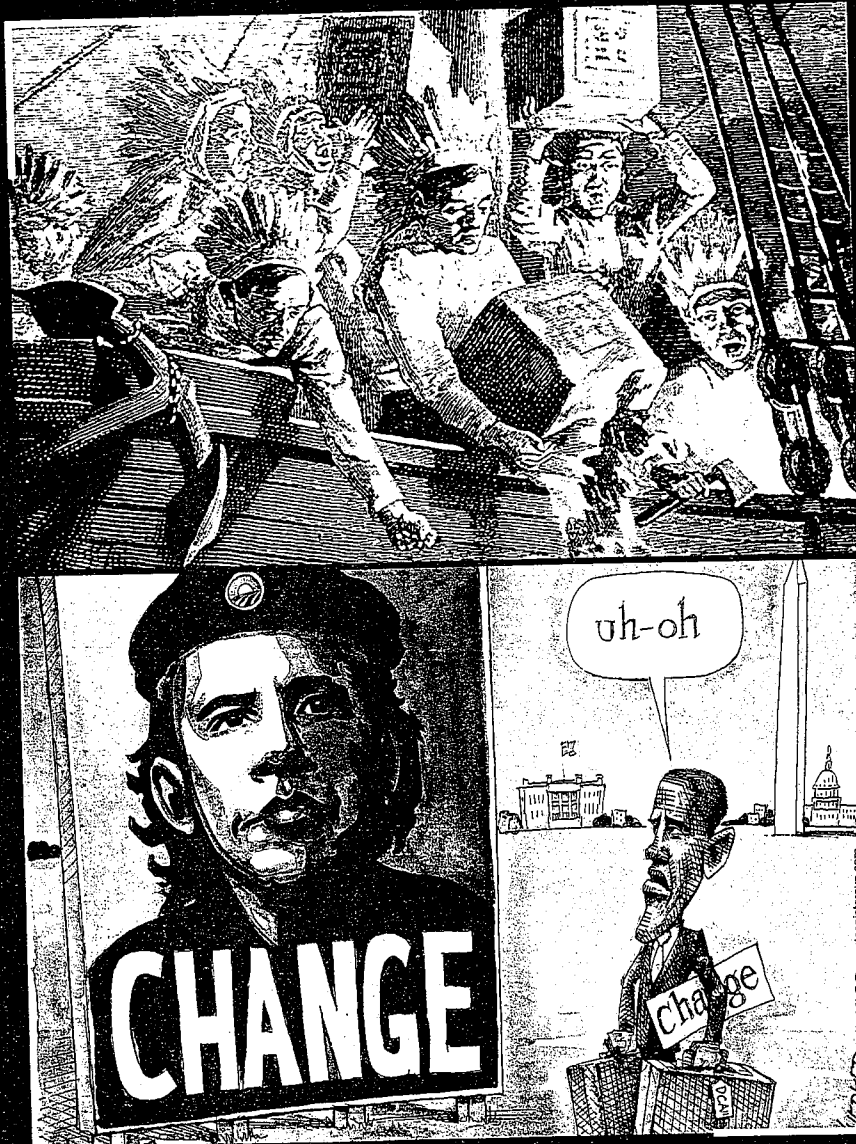
Will the Tea Party and Republican Establishment Unite or Fight?

A DISPIRITED LOT OF REPUBLICAN SENATORS GATHERED AT THE LIBRARY OF Congress in early January 2009 to size up their situation as a confident and purposive President-elect Barack Obama prepared to assume office. These Republicans had reason to be in a dark mood, having seen their party suffer, in November 2008, one of its worst electoral defeats in modern American history.¹

Obama had won a larger percentage of the popular vote (almost 53 percent) than any Democratic candidate for the presidency in more than fifty years. The Democrats had gained twenty-one seats in the House to give them a sizable majority (257 to 178), and their fifty-seven seats in the Senate had put them within reach of that all-important, filibuster-proof supermajority of sixty (a status they would gain in early 2009). Political opportunity had not looked this good for the Democrats—and this bad for the Republicans—since Lyndon Baines Johnson's 1964 landslide victory against Barry Goldwater.

The Republicans seemingly had little going for them. Their president and party had presided over one of the worst financial crashes in American history. Even before the crash, George-W. Bush had become a reviled figure as Americans began to view W's war of choice in Iraq as a form of adventurism for which America was paying too steep a price. Americans began questioning, too, the core Republican approach to the economy—a commitment to freeing capitalist markets from government “meddling”—as it became apparent that this was what had given Wall Street the license to behave like a Las Vegas casino.

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Boston Tea Party image: courtesy of Archiving Early America
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For all these reasons, independent voters had abandoned the Republican Party in droves, rendering it a small, and besieged, institution.

The Tea Party insurgency has rocked American politics and thrown all kinds of obstacles in the Democrats' path.

It is hard now to recall that early 2009 moment of Democratic hope and Republican dejection. The first two years of the Obama presidency have gone worse for the Democrats and better for the Republicans than most had imagined they would. A large part of the Obama administration's failure to deliver on its early promise was due to the damage that the financial crash caused the economy, and to the sheer difficulty of figuring out ways to repair it. Had the Democrats been able to reduce unemployment to 6 or 7 percent, they would be heading into the November 2010 elections with a great deal of confidence and expectation.

But two other factors contributed to Democratic stumbling: first, the ability of Republicans in Congress, and especially in the Senate, to deploy a clever strategy of delay and obstruction against Democratic initiatives; and second, conservatives' success in capturing the populist insurgency that began to rumble across the land in 2009. The key Republican was minority leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a lifer in the Senate and a wily master of its complex rules and moods. While he paid lip service to bipartisanship, McConnell was, in fact, determined to saddle the Democrats with legislative defeats—and thus show the

country that they were unable or unfit to govern. The populist insurgency has no single figure like McConnell; to the contrary, part of its character is that it obeys no single master or commander. But in its various manifestations—the Tea Party, the town hall meetings about health care, the Tenters and the Birthers, Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, and Ron and Rand Paul—this insurgency has rocked American politics and thrown all kinds of obstacles in the Democrats' path. Both the McConnell-led Senate Republicans and the various groups of right-wing populists have legitimated their opposition in terms of being true to the first principles of conservatism: small government, low taxes, and fiscal solvency. How well the Republican Party establishment and the populist insurgency can get along, and whether their joint embrace of conservative orthodoxy will succeed in returning the GOP to power, is not yet clear. But there is no doubt that the Republicans have done far better these past two years than almost anyone in November 2008 expected they would.

HOLDING THE LINE

MCCONNELL'S GREATEST achievement as Senate minority leader from 2008 until now is the unity he has maintained in his caucus. Beginning with the vote on the stimulus package in February 2009, McConnell has yet to lose more than three of his forty-one (and, for a time, forty) Republicans to the Democrats on a major piece of domestic legislation; and in what he made the most important test of party loyalty—the health care bill—he didn't lose anyone at all. He forged this hard and unified line in the midst of a national economic crisis, when “the best interests” of the nation, one would have thought, would have prompted a significant number of Republicans to cross the aisle, especially given Obama's desire to draft bipartisan, red state-blue state, legislation.² And he maintained unity even

as he urged Republicans to reassert hard-line conservative positions.

Republicans understood this reassertion of orthodoxy as an appropriate reaction to what they regarded as the apostasy of George W. Bush. They blamed the November 2008 debacle on W., and they located the roots of his unpopularity in his abandonment of conservative principles. While they conceded that Bush had been true to conservatism in his support of large tax cuts in 2001, they argued that his subsequent initiatives were all liberal. They regarded Bush's signature education policy, “No Child Left Behind,” as an illegitimate federal intrusion into an area of policy properly left to state and local governments. They denounced Bush's Medicare prescription-drug-benefit plan as the largest single expansion of welfare entitlement since the days of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. And they assailed the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) that Bush pushed through Congress in October 2008 as a massive federal bailout for and takeover of the banks that violated the rules by which free markets operated. As the conservative writer Deroy Murdock put it in November 2010: “Comrade George W. Bush has spearheaded the most aggressive federal expansion since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As a delivery system for socialism, he has been the most effective Trojan horse since that pine steed rolled into Troy.”³

Of course, Republicans were disingenuous in their criticism of Bush, given how many of them had lined up behind him during the years when he was America's most popular Republican. Yet, despite its evident problems, this new conservative narrative of the Bush years had a coherence and power to it. As Senator Tom Coburn noted shortly after the election: “The more Republicans abandoned conservatism, the more voters abandoned Republicanism.”⁴ This was the story that McConnell embraced. It allowed him to tell his fellow Republicans in the Senate that the GOP finally had an opportunity to put its house

in order. And, if it did, it would draw America back to its cause.

McConnell's goals were modest: hold the line against Obama, frustrate him, and tempt him into missteps. The Obama administration was slow to grasp McConnell's strategy. Indeed, the Obama administration's decision to tamp down on the Democratic Party's own progressive wing in the interests of reaching across the aisle played right into McConnell's hands.

The Republicans have done far better these past two years than almost anyone in November 2008 expected they would.

That the Republicans had gained a strategic step on the Democrats became clear in Obama's first month in office, as congressional Republicans turned the debate on the president's stimulus bill into a referendum on government pork. By early February, support for the stimulus plans among the public at large had already fallen from 45 to 37 percent.⁵ Buoyed by these polling numbers, the Senate GOP set its face against the stimulus package. Obama and the Democrats emerged with a victory, but not before the GOP had sown doubts about the legitimacy and efficacy of what they were doing. Rick Santelli, a CNBC correspondent reporting from the Chicago Board of Trade, delivered his now-famous call for a “Chicago Tea Party” to protest the stimulus package. Santelli's rant would soon become the rallying cry for a new populist movement.⁶

Confident that the polls were moving in the GOP's direction, McConnell now called

on Republicans to show a similar unity in opposing the Democrats' health care initiatives. In a technical sense, McConnell's task had become more difficult as, by June, the Democrats' majority in the Senate had risen from fifty-seven to fifty-nine: Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania had switched parties, and Al Franken had finally been declared the winner of the 2008 Senate race in Minnesota. Because socialist Bernie Sanders of Vermont

The Obama administration's decision to tamp down on the Democratic Party's own progressive wing in the interests of reaching across the aisle played right into [Senate Minority Leader] McConnell's hands.

was prepared to provide the Democrats with the all-important sixtieth vote on domestic legislation, the Republicans no longer had a cloture-proof minority. What the Republicans had gained in spring 2009, however, was a new partner: a populist insurgency.

THE POPULIST SURGE

POPULISM IS A RECURRING POLITICAL tendency in American history, usually appearing at times of economic stress and cultural dislocation. It almost always features groups who portray themselves as "ordinary Americans," and often as the "true Americans," who have suffered at the hands of powerful elites who control the economy and/or government. Populists take it upon themselves to oust the elites from power and to reclaim America for its people. Populism has, on the one hand, supplied a language for articulating and protesting disparities in wealth and power in American life; on the other hand, this movement has been prone to conspiratorial views of politics and to excluding immigrants, racial minorities, and other outsiders from its vision of a restored American republic.

In the first half of the twentieth century, populism had largely allied itself with the Left. But amidst the racial upheavals of the 1960s, it veered right. Populists at this time became preoccupied with the "undeserving poor," a group whom they saw as largely black and whose access to welfare and other government handouts had allegedly allowed them (the black poor) to maintain a cozy style of life that they had not earned. Populists still drew on anti-elite discourses, blaming privileged groups of university-educated liberals—who had become Great Society administrators—for promoting this "perversion" of American life. The mission of "true Americans," therefore, became to roll back the liberals' government expansion and impart moral education rather than handouts to the poor.⁷

Conservative thought dominated populist discourse through the rest of the twentieth century, and it has shaped the populist surge of 2009–2010. Those involved in this surge have been angry, of course, about Wall Street

chicanery, and about the bailouts to the very financial institutions that caused the crash. But the dramatic expansion in the scope of government power is what set their smoldering political resentment ablaze. The Constitution itself became the populists' battering ram. Government elites, they argued, were treating the country's most sacred document with contempt. The "Tenthers" proclaimed their fealty to the Constitution's Tenth Amendment, which sharply limited the scope of central government power; the "Birthers," who did so much to sow doubt about Obama's right to occupy the presidency, likewise found their authority in the Constitution, specifically Article II, Section One, which stipulates that only a "natural born citizen" can be president of the United States. Populists deployed the Constitution to argue for a central government that is small and limited in its powers.

Populists have always posed as defenders of the true principles of the Republic, but their constitutional turn represents something new. And it has legitimated as deep and as sustained an attack on the legitimacy of the central state as anyone has mounted in the last fifty years. TV and radio populist rock star Glenn Beck repeatedly invokes the Constitution in his campaign to roll back the federal government to the small institution it was in 1900. He loathes not simply the Great Society and the New Deal but Progressivism, too, even though its earliest national leader, Theodore Roosevelt, was himself a Republican. Beck has called for dismantling virtually every major government program from Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson's time forward, including the Federal Reserve and the federal income tax. Beck disparages Obama as the heir to this "unconstitutional" tradition, and he stigmatizes the Obama-led growth in government as a "cancer" that must be eradicated.⁸

For Beck, Tea Partiers, and others in this populist phalanx, proposals for national health insurance exemplified this "cancerous"

growth of government power. The populist surge gained force as the health care debate climaxed. Conservative populists packed the four-hundred-plus town hall meetings that members of Congress held in August 2009 for their constituents. They repeated endlessly Sarah Palin's charge that the House health care bill was going to set up "death panels" to "kill Grandma." They portrayed Obama as Hitler, and the Democrats as Nazis. They shouted down pro-health care Senators and Representatives and, in some cases, hung them or tarred and feathered them in effigy.

Glenn Beck followed up these guns of August with a September 2009 March on Washington. Estimates of the march's size varied widely, from a low of seventy thousand to a high of 1.5 million. Even skeptical observers conceded, however, that the march was big. The mood of the protesters was festive, with many outfitted in tri-cornered hats, carrying "Don't Tread on Me" flags, and holding aloft humorous signs such as "Billionaires for Wealth Care." But there was a darker side to the protests, too, as evidenced in the Obama-Hitler look-a-like posters and in the words of a protester who told a reporter that he had come to Washington to stop the "Deliberate Destruction of America."⁹

The Obama administration and the Democratic Party underestimated the power of this march and the broader populist insurgency of which it was part. They had been surprised by the numbers that showed up at the town hall meetings and by the vehemence of their protests. And they were shocked when, in January 2010, Republican Scott Brown defeated the Democrat Martha Coakley in a special Massachusetts election to replace the deceased Ted Kennedy in the Senate. Running a populist campaign with strong Tea Party support ("I'm Scott Brown, I'm from Wrentham, I drive a truck..."), and pledging to use his critical forty-first vote to filibuster health care legislation to death, Brown won a Senate seat that had

been Democratic for more than fifty years. Brown would never get the opportunity to filibuster health care. Each house of Congress had passed its own comprehensive health care bill before the Brown election. Democratic Party strategists, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, devised a way of reconciling the Senate bill with the House bill without having to reopen debate in the Senate. On March 21, 2010, the Affordable Care Act became law.¹⁰

That [the recent health care legislation] so suffused with Republican principles and ideas could be stigmatized by the Republican Party today as socialistic is a measure of how far to the right the GOP has moved political debate.

Despite its defeat, the Republican Party, critically aided by the populist surge, had put up a remarkable fight. While the bill's passage stopped Obama's slide in the polls, it has not, as of this writing, given him much of a boost. The bill itself makes enormous concessions to the market principles that the Republicans have historically championed. That a bill so suffused with Republican principles and ideas could be stigmatized by the Republican Party today as socialistic is a measure of how far to the right

the GOP has succeeded in moving political debate in America across the last generation.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

THAT POPULIST POLITICS HAVE remained so resolutely conservative at a time of extensive malfeasance by centers of economic power provides further evidence of what we might call a continuing era of Republican ideological hegemony. Obama may have missed an opportunity to reclaim populism for the Democrats when he entered office. What if he had sought, in winter and spring 2008, to unleash rather than contain the political passions that had thrust him into office? What if he had himself embraced a populist position, taking on (or taking over) the banks rather than playing by their rules? Might he have been able to reconnect populism with its left-wing roots? Perhaps. But we should not underestimate how hard a task this would have been to accomplish, given that it would have required reinvigorating a tradition that has been dormant in American politics for sixty to seventy years.

If the most important question for the Democrats is whether a left populism can find its voice, the most pressing issue for the GOP is whether party leaders can continue to ride the conservative populist wave. The social base of conservative populism, which ranges from the white working class to the white upper middle class, lies a significant distance away from the corporate interests that form another key Republican constituency. While conservative populists are unlikely to turn against capitalism, some have attacked the partnership that has grown up between the highest levels of government and business, which they see as responsible for the bank bailouts and the government's huge debt, both of which they loathe. Tea Party militants at the state convention of the Utah GOP yelled "TARP! TARP! TARP!" as they were ending

Robert Bennett's bid to be renominated in May 2010 to run for another term in the Senate.¹¹ Bennett had voted for TARP; so had most of the rest of the Republican leadership, including McConnell who, when not busy aligning Senate Republicans with the populist insurgency, spent a great deal of his time accommodating the wishes of the corporate lobbyists who regularly parked themselves outside his open Senate door. These corporate clients want a free hand to run their enterprises as they see fit but have little interest in eliminating all government regulation or in returning American capitalism to its anarchic nineteenth-century roots, as populists like Beck say they want to do. Given this divide between the corporations and the populists, will McConnell, and the Republican Party leadership more generally, be able to continue balancing their commitments to both?

What if Obama had sought to unleash, rather than contain, the political passions that had thrust him into office?

The results of a Republican Senate primary in Kentucky in May 2010 actually suggest that they will. The Tea Party candidate, Rand Paul (son of Ron Paul), defeated the Republican Party establishment candidate (and McConnell favorite), Charles "Trey" Grayson, by a staggering 24 percent margin (fifty-nine to thirty-five).¹² Paul is a libertarian who shares Beck's hatred for that other symbol of elite government-business partnership, the Federal Reserve, and who believes that the federal government as a whole ought to be returned

to the limited entity it was a hundred years ago. Paul made multiple appearances in high-profile media outlets in the days after his election, but ran into trouble when he told Rachel Maddow of MSNBC that he had serious reservations about the constitutionality of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. A few days later, Paul had not only retracted these views but withdrew his earlier acceptance to appear on NBC's "Meet the Press." At the behest of national GOP insiders, he was muzzling himself until he could more successfully align himself with the party line. McConnell told CNN that Paul had "said quite enough for the time being in terms of national press coverage."¹³

We don't have access to the behind-the-scenes negotiations that persuaded Paul he had "said quite enough," but one suspects that threats to withhold financing for the fall election had something to do with it. Across the last twenty years, the costs of elections have continued to soar; over the same period, the Republican Party has centralized control of fundraising, concentrating an ever greater portion of party money in the hands of a progressively smaller number of power brokers. These power brokers include both elected leaders such as McConnell (and Tom DeLay in the House, before his ouster) and non-elected leaders such as Grover Norquist, head of Americans for Tax Reform, whose skill at networking has brought them substantial influence in GOP affairs. These power brokers' control of the flow of campaign finances gives them a great deal of leverage over candidates and suggests that they will find ways to keep Rand Paul and most other Tea Party candidates sufficiently in check to serve party purposes.¹⁴

Another key question is whether the populist insurgency, even if successfully domesticated, can turn out enough voters to return the GOP to national power. The Tea Party movement is overwhelmingly white, as are its various populist allies. Can such a

movement become the cornerstone of a GOP campaign to gain majorities in both houses of Congress and win the presidency at a time when America is becoming ever more colored? The last Republican to win the presidency and preside over a Republican Senate and House of Representatives thought not. George W. Bush believed GOP success required the support of large numbers of immigrants and their children, and he ardently and successfully pursued Latino votes.¹⁵ As conservatives have recoiled from Bush, they have disparaged his "Big Tent" strategy. A snickering Glenn Beck declared to Republican conservatives in February 2010: "All they're [Bush and his advisors] talking about is, we need a big tent.... Can we get a bigger tent? How can we get a big tent? What is this, the circus? America is not a clown show. America is not a circus."¹⁶

This thinly veiled equation of a GOP open to Latino immigrants with a circus full of clowns and freaks expresses a deep anxiety among conservative populists that the days of America as a majority-white republic are numbered. These same sentiments have informed the steady intensification of anti-immigrant sentiment these last several years. On questions of immigration, one liberal Republican after another—Mitt Romney, Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, and George W. Bush himself—has fallen silent. To find another time when the GOP so resolutely set its face against the New America, one has to go back to the 1920s, when Republican majorities in Congress closed America's immigrant gates to most of the world; then the foreigners identified as threats to America were not Mexicans but Eastern and Southern Europeans. If the Republicans of

that era got their way in the short term, they hurt themselves in the long term: Millions of immigrants became citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, determined to vote nativist Republicans out of office. The New Deal rose to power on the backs of these new Americans and their children, costing the Republican Party its hold on national power for forty years.¹⁷

With Republicans across the country today clamoring to compete with Arizona for the distinction of having the toughest anti-illegal alien laws in the country, the GOP once again is driving immigrants and their children into the Democratic Party. Even Latino groups with long Republican pedigrees, such as Cuban-Americans in Florida and long-settled Mexican-Americans in Texas and Arizona, are having second thoughts about the GOP. Without at least a significant fraction of Latino votes, the GOP might not be able to win a presidential election in 2012 or 2016, given the pivotal importance of Florida, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, and other swing states with large Latino populations. GOP leaders, including McConnell himself, have tried to draw the party toward a centrist position on immigration. Maybe they will succeed in doing so by 2012. But thus far they have failed. On immigration, the populist tail is wagging the GOP dog. It may not hurt the Republicans in November; historically, off-year elections tend to be decided much more by the party's success in turning out its base than by reaching out to the general electorate. But by 2012 the GOP's nativism may impose on the party a set of electoral obstacles that it cannot surmount. The populist insurgency that has so animated the GOP has not yet carried the day.

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