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Tea Party Problems

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 19, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, at Q & A, [1]we heard from Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox who discussed the role of social conservatives in the Tea Party. They pointed out that there is a great deal of actual overlap between the two groups, despite the obvious conceptual differences between them. The Tea Party presents itself as an anti-government, libertarian movement and social conservatives are far from libertarian. I do not think that essential tension can survive the long, thorough scrutiny of a presidential nominating process, when candidates can?t avoid debates and when individual candidates must develop a coherent, reasonably consistent public philosophy. But, in a midterm, when voters only focus at the end of a campaign and are unlikely to notice any inconsistencies except those on the surface, the tension between the ?Don?t Tread on Me? ethos and the comprehensive moral compass of the social conservative movement may not prevent some Tea Party candidates from keeping them united through November 2.

Last week, in the New Yorker [2], one of America?s most distinguished political historians, Sean Wilentz, wrote about how many of the Tea Party tropes, have their roots in the kooky political conspiracy theories of the John Birch Society, especially those theories expounded by television personality Glenn Beck. If you have not read Wilentz?s article, stop what you are doing and read it right now. The Birch Society made a name for itself when it accused President Dwight Eisenhower of being ?a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy.? The rest of their political program had a similar lack of connection with reality. Like contemporary Tea Party activists, the Birchers had a fixation with the Federal Reserve, with the Progressive Era and with Woodrow Wilson. It is frightening to think of how the 60s might have turned out if Fox News had been around: As it was, they ended with Nixon in the White House!

The Tea Party is the #1 political story of the year, hands down. They have already knocked off several establishment Republicans, winning GOP primaries or nominating caucuses in the Delaware, Colorado, Kentucky, Florida, Alaska, Utah, and Nevada Senate races, to say nothing of a slew of House victories. These candidates have tended to downplay the social issues because, with unemployment lingering at 9.6 percent, anytime they are talking about something other than jobs, they are talking about the wrong thing from a strategic point of view. It may be enough to be an anti-establishment candidate in this midterm election, as it was enough in the primaries. It is frankly shocking that a candidate like Sharron Angle is running even with or ahead of an admittedly charisma-starved incumbent: Her views on both social and economic issues qualify are wacky. And, don?t you just love it when people from Nevada and Arizona extol the rugged individualism, anti-government posture, as if Las Vegas or Phoenix could even exist without federal water projects!

It is tempting to hope that some of these Tea Partyers win. It would make the life of the GOP leadership in Congress an absolute nightmare. Do they really want to be pushing for repeal of the Seventeenth Amendment? Do they really want a discussion on the unconstitutionality of the Fed? Do they really want to debate eliminating the minimum wage? Of course not. But, if the Tea Party candidates win, they will owe the establishment nothing and the GOP establishment will have to figure out how to deal with them. Needless to say, the GOP Senators up for re-election in 2012 are already looking over their shoulder at the prospect of a Tea Party primary challenge: They will be very tempted to cast at least a few token votes in favor of some of the

kookier Tea Party ideas.

But, the temptation must be resisted because the anti-government Tea Party credo is profoundly at odds with Catholic social teaching. The radical anti-government posture is unknown in papal social encyclicals. The invocations of Ayn Rand ring hollow in Catholic ears (except for college sophomores who, unsurprisingly, like the idea that selfishness is a good thing). Rugged individualism has no Latin equivalent.

The temptation must also be resisted because the Tea Party frequently displays unAmerican tendencies. We all now know that GOP Senate candidate Joe Miller?s goons saw fit to ?arrest? a reporter who wanted to ask the candidate a question. We know that Sharron Angle and Rand Paul treat reporters like a rabid dog, refusing to engage the press and answer questions voters have a right to have asked and answered. I admit my bias, but it seems to me that the press has always played a vital role in the functioning of American democracy and those who avoid the press are, in fact, amputating a key part of our small ?d? democratic culture. The Tea Party members may have drunk the Sarah Palin Kool-Aid that sees the press as part of a conspiracy to get her, ever since she could not tell Katie Kouric what magaines or newspapers she reads. But, I suspect some Independent voters who have not drunk the Kool-Aid, even those Independent voters who have an anti-government bias, are turned off at the picture of a reporter being hauled away in handcuffs by provate security guards in the emply of a candidate. If not, they will get the government deserve.

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