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Berkowitz vs. Dionne on Tea Party

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 27, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

When you find two of your friends in the midst of an argument, it makes sense to walk in the other direction. But the issue of the Tea Party?s significance, currently being debated by E. J. Dionne and Peter Berkowitz is so central to our understanding of this election, that the debate between the two warrants a closer look and I can?t resist the temptation to jump in.

In case you have not been following the back and forth, Berkowitz, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institute and all-around great guy, wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal [1] in which he explained why liberals ?don?t get? the Tea Party. Amongst other culprits, Berkowitz cited the current higher educational system which is, he contends, light on the Federalist Papers and heavy on liberal ?big government? approaches. Berkowitz argued that a commitment to limited government has a noble tradition, as indeed it does, and that the Tea Party is essentially the latest iteration of this limited government tradition.

E.J. Dionne, senior fellow at Brookings and all-around great guy, responded with an article in the Washington Post [2], sticking to his claim that the Tea Party?s influence has been over-estimated and that the movement is essentially an extension of a less noble tradition, American right-wing extremism. And, E.J. defended his college profs from Berkowitz?s charge that they insufficiently trained him and other liberals in the wisdom of the federalist papers.

Berkowitz has now responded to E.J.?s response [3].

I declare the contest a tie.

Berkowitz is right to point out that there is much to be said for limited government, and that the central debate in American political life is not between socialists and libertarians but between liberals and conservatives over the fairly narrow issue of where we draw the line on issues of federal, state, local and individual responsibility and authority. I agree that most colleges and universities need to spend more time on classics like the Federalist papers. The hyper-specialization of the academy rewards historical or sociological analysis of small Midwestern towns in 1815, or polling irregularities in the 2006 midterms, rather than encouraging dissertations entitled ?On Justice.? But, plenty of influential conservatives went to Ivy League schools and did not come away quite so ignorant of the Founding as Berkowitz suggests.

But, Berkowitz needs to be less sloppy. He is clearly over-stepping the evidence when he writes that Obama?s polices were responsible for ?unleashing uncontrolled spending, unaccountable bureaucracy, ballooning deficits, and nearly double-digit unemployment.? I stipulate that Obama?s policies increased government spending ? actually that was the point. I quibble with the term ?unaccountable bureaucracy? and am sure Berkowitz has sat in on a congressional oversight committee. As for the deficit, yes it is ballooning although neither party has actually demonstrated fiscal discipline in recent memory. And, Berkowitz must admit that there is not an economist in the world that believes Obama?s policies have contributed to the high unemployment rate. Also, Scott Brown won his seat in Massachusetts without any real help from the Tea Party, at least according to him when he is having drinks at the Monocle. Finally, Berkowitz avoids the issue of extremism within the Tea Party

ranks. It is there. It is palpable.

Dionne is undoubtedly correct when he calls attention to Sean Wilentz?s brilliant essay in the New Republic, pointing to the radical, John Birch Society roots of many of the goofball ideas being peddled by Tea Party darling Glenn Beck. He is right to point out that many of their members ? and their candidates ? hold views that are far outside the mainstream of American political thought. And, he is right to point out that it remains unclear just how influential the Tea Party is going to be. Obviously, Senators Bennett in Utah and Murkowski in Alaska and Congressman Mike Castle in Delaware can attest to the fact that the Tea Party has already been consequential, but we are talking about low turnout primaries not a general election. In the final week of the election, whenever anyone talks about the GOP prospects of winning the Senate, think of how different that conversation would sound if Ms. Christine O?Donnell had not won the GOP primary in Delaware.

But, Dionne is wrong to suggest that no one within the conservative movement is questioning some of the Tea Party?s more extreme views. Not enough, to be sure, and it would be nice to see some elected officials and GOP Pooh-bahs do so. (Cf., Karl Rove?s backtracking from his criticism of O?Donnell!) But, I seem to recall a Tea Party spokesman being fired after he made some outrageously racist remarks. And, while a lot rides on your definition of the adjective ?essential,? I think EJ is fudging when he writes these sentences: ?Berkowitz's piece is an effort to defend the idea that limited government is an essential American principle. No liberal I know has a problem with that. It is a principle upheld by contemporary liberals in their staunch defense of civil rights and civil liberties.? The civil rights movement was not about limited government. And, I know liberals, even if Dionne does not, for whom a concern for limited government is not ?essential? in any meaningful way.

Both Berkowitz and Dionne cite conflicting polls to indicate the size of the Tea Party movement. I think the important thing to recall in this regard is that a lot of polling data depends on how you pose the question and that many people belong to overlapping groups. There are plenty of religiously motivated social conservatives in the Tea Party despite its libertarian rhetoric, just as there are some libertines who vote for the Dems. There is no data suggesting that a substantial portion of those who identify with the Tea Party are racist, although I am guessing that the homeowner whose lawn sported a Tea Party ?November is Coming? sign right next to the flagpole flying the Confederate Battle flag probably does hold views on race that are different from my own. I also spoke once with a man at a Unitarian Church in Chicago who identified himself as a Marxist and defended Stalin, and I am betting he votes blue. Each side has its crazies, the crazies overlap with the more mainstream elements, and almost every man or woman I have ever met holds many and complicated sentiments within the recesses of their heart.

So, I score this debate a tie. Both men make great points. Both men overstep and undervalue information they know is important. And, both men remain civil while throwing their barbs. Would that all of our political debates this year were so engaging.

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