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The GOP's On-Going Civil War

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 9, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This morning, Anne Applebaum in the Washington Post [1]points to the principle conundrum facing the Republican Party in its effort to reduce federal spending. People like federal dollars when those dollars come their way. Think of the poster at the Tea Party rally the day of the final vote on health care that read: ?No Govt Health Care: Hands Off My Medicare!?

Applebaum takes the case of Alaska where, for all their protestations about rugged individualism and living the life of frontiersmen and blah-blah anti-Washingtonisms, the state is actually the largest per capita recipient of federal dollars in the Union. And when given the chance of choosing a principled fiscal conservative like Tea Party darling Joe Miller or old-style pork-barrel spender Lisa Murkowski, the voters chose Murkowski. Of course, Miller?s case for reduced federal spending was hampered when it was revealed that his wife had been the recipient of unemployment benefits her hubby considered unconstitutional, he had himself received farm subsidies (which are mentioned where in the Constitution?) and that the family had received state health benefits. That would be, government-run health care, yes?

So, Miller was exposed as a hypocrite, as were all those who voted against Obama?s much-maligned stimulus and denounced its profligacy at every chance, but never missed a ribbon-cutting in their home districts paid for by the same bill. The question is: What do they do now? They have promised to cut federal spending which, incidentally, is tilted to red states to begin with. If they do not cut federal spending, the Tea Party has pledged they will abandon the GOP ship. But, if they cut that spending too quickly or too severely, it will cost jobs back in members? districts. What is a party to do?

My home district, CT-2, is home to the Groton Submarine base. Down the river is the Electric Boat plant where subs are still built and repaired, though not as many now that the Cold War is over. The submarine was a vital (literally!) deterrent in the Cold War: Because it could not be detected, and could roam at will beneath the surfaces of the oceans, there was no way for either side in the Cold War to launch a first-strike that would entirely disable the opponents nuclear forces. You might be able to take out their land-based missiles. You might knock out the planes on the ground. But, somewhere out there, the Soviet or US Navy had a submarine with enough material on board to launch a counter-strike. Alas, submarines are not so useful in attacking Al-Qaeda. Mountainous terrain is not their thing. But, whether the congressman in CT-2 is a Democrat or a Republican, his or her first job is to keep that sub base open. A lot of good paying jobs, both government jobs at the base and union jobs at the EB plant would be lost if the government does what it should do, cut back on building submarines.

There is a further irony in the Tea Party?s situation. The Founders whom they venerate as demi-gods were very suspicious of ideology and they tried to craft a system that would entail shifting, competitive interests. In short, the Founders wanted the Lisa Murkowskis of the world to put a check on the Joe Millers of the world. The Founders, who had a low estimation of human nature, believed that it was better for long-term political stability and individual freedom if politics involved competing self-interested parties battling over interests not ideas, over cash not principles. The Tea Party fetish for the Constitution, however, never quite extends this far. To

them, the Constitution means what they want it to mean. They are as little interested in constitutional development as Antonin Scalia, and less interested in constitutional history than Scalia, so while they may occasionally trumpet the same sounds, what is for Scalia a fairly thoughtful (if ultimately wrong) theory is reduced to a bumper sticker rant.

They key thing in all this, as Applebaum acknowledges, is that the midterm elections did not end the civil war that continues within the Republican ranks. During the election campaign, more traditional Republicans, many of whom participated in the George W. Bush spending spree, could mouth the words about learning their lessons and swear on a stack of Bibles that they would cut spending in Washington. Making it happen will be far more difficult. Republican leaders like Boehner refused to try and rein in the tiger that is the Tea Party and now Boehner and Co. must ride the tiger. But, when you ride a tiger, you go where the tiger wants to go, and that is a place that congressmen of both parties have been avoiding for decades.

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