NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# A 2011 Political Prediction

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 30, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I am not a fan of the ?top ten? lists that come around this time of year. Do we really need to recall the top celebrity break-ups? As for looking into the future, if you think that is such a simple task, remember the commentary shortly after the 2008 election about the Republican Party being dead. There is one story from last year, however, that is on-going and which both dominated last year?s political news and will continue to dominate the news this coming year ? the Tea Party ? that warrants some attention because the way the story plays out is about to change.

Last year, the Tea Party proved it could both articulate a populist message and organize itself sufficiently to dramatically affect the Republican primary season. Incumbent Republicans like Sen. Bob Bennett and Rep. Mike Castle went down in flames. When a moderate GOP candidate like Nevada?s Sue Lowden, who should be entering the U.S. Senate next week, lost to a verifiable simpleton whose racist attitudes could not be kept under wraps, well you see how powerful the Tea Party is. And, in some cases, Tea Party candidates won the general election: Rand Paul in Kentucky, Marco Rubio in Florida, and Mike Lee from Utah are all going to be in the Senate chamber next week. On the House side, many new members claim Tea Party credentials and, even if they do not, the Tea Party will claim that their support was crucial to the newcomers? elections, a claim with more than a little merit.

It will be curious to see how these newbys work out. Yesterday, I pointed out that even while the Washington Post was trying to fit Representative-elect Mike Kelly into something resembling a Jimmy Stewart/Mr. Smith storyline, Kelly?s limitations shone through loud and clear. The problem with throwing a small businessman with no government experience into an important government post is akin to the dangers inherent in going to a pediatrician to fix a broken plumbing fixture. Amateur hours are for TV. Now, mind you, Marco Rubio is no Mike Kelly. Rubio was Speaker of the Florida House, an accomplished politician, no matter that he ran as an outsider and Tea Party darling. So, I am aware that when painting with a broad brush, there will be exceptions.

Still, there is this quirky thing about the Tea Party folk that seems to my eyes a lot like a potential Achilles? heel for them. They may be right that the country is on the wrong track, that government is part of the problem not part of the solution, that we have strayed from the vision of the Founding Fathers, that we must get back to severely limited government, that we are headed for a fiscal train wreck, etc. But, their solutions to these problems, if problems they be, are all of the bumper sticker variety, simplistic in the extreme, predicated on an interpretation of contemporary Washington politics that resembles nothing so much as an old-style western with good guys and bad guys. And, some of those solutions are not just amateurish but quirky.

Next week, the House of Representatives will adopt a rule that all legislation must include a citation to the part of the Constitution that gives Congress the authority to do whatever it is the legislation intends to do. It is unclear to me how that new rule will change anything. After all, if there were no debate about what the Constitution does and does not permit, the Supreme Court would not have very much to do, would it? Put differently, we can look forward to a series of congressional debates next year not only on the merits of the Constitution but on the history and meaning of the Constitution. Now, I love the Constitution as much as the

next guy and, as a journalist, I know that my profession is a far more dangerous profession in countries that do not have our First Amendment protections. Of course, this idolatry of the Constitution is too close to the fetishization of democratic-capitalism that we find in the writings of conservative Catholics like George Weigel and Michael Novak, who have made careers reducing Christianity to a prop for Americanism, and to the triumphalism of Francis Fukyama who thought history was over in the early 1990s, and to the myopic, ahistorical understanding of human nature and cultures that led George W. Bush to think that we could bring Jeffersonian democracy to the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris as easily as we could fly in the 101st Airborne. There is hubris on the right these days the likes of which I have never seen and which, on the left, we try to confine to the Academy!

But, it may not be the hubris that most challenges the Tea Party patriots coming to Washington. It is that their mindless, simplistic, conspiracy-laden worldview gets very tiresome very quickly. I suspect John Boehner and Mitch McConnell will grow weary of hearing lectures about the Constitution. And, if the President is politically smart enough to engage the Tea Party crowd as he did the GOP caucus last year, his more profound knowledge and understanding of the Constitution will leave them in the dust.

Washington can deal with disagreement. Washington can deal with populism of the left or the right. Washington can deal with a large class of newcomers. But, no one likes a bore and my hunch is that the Tea Party in power will become very boring. If you haven?t drunk their Kool-Aid, listening to them is like watching a movie in a foreign language you do not understand ? without subtitles. It makes no sense. The division that will emerge in 2011 is not that between the Democrats and the Republicans but between long-standing public servants within the GOP and the incoming Tea Party congressmen. The problem is not that they breathe fire but that they breathe foolishness. One day, McConnell or Boehner or Cong. Paul Ryan will be trying to actually address something, and one of these newbys will start in on a Constitutional sermonette that will cause these long-standing servants to make an off-hand, and condescending, remark about the Tea Party. It will be like pulling the curtain back from the Wizard of Oz. The Tea Party members out on the hustings will wonder why so little has been accomplished now that the Constitutional citations are at the top of every piece of legislation. The leaders will get caught snickering at them and a sense of betrayal will set in. When problems and solutions are simple, the only reason for not fixing the problems must be bad faith, right?

So, that is my prediction for 2011. The Tea Party will cause divisions within the GOP, there will be a sense of betrayal by year?s end, and President Obama will look more sane, more centrist and more grown-up every week just by reason of the comparison. The GOP leadership rode this Tea Party tiger to power but when you ride a tiger, you ride where the tiger wants to go. The recriminations between the GOP leadership and the Tea Party will start by Easter!

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**Source URL (retrieved on *05/03/2015 - 22:00*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/2011-political-prediction