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Tea Party Troubles

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 28, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Bad week ? actually bad month ? for the Tea Party. Not so long ago, their members were standing triumphant, having brought down conservatives Senators who were not conservative enough, like Sen. Bob Bennett of Utah, and moderates like Rep. Mike Castle. In Kentucky, Florida, Wisconsin, and Utah, their Senate candidates won the general elections, although in Florida the movement had to split the GOP to do it. They were storming Capitol Hill, intent on shaking things up.

Then came the shooting in Tucson. It was not that the violent rhetoric or imagery had incited the gunman to his acts, as I argued at the time. But, the tragedy showed the nation precisely what a ?second amendment remedy? looks like. Sharon Angle did not incite or invite the Tucson killing, but her original statement was crazy on its face, and should have precluded her from serious consideration as a candidate, because violence in politics is ugly, profoundly ugly and the Tucson shooting reminded us all of just how ugly it is. The discussion that followed Tucson left the Tea Party?s favorite Sarah Palin with a black eye as well.

Then, Rep. Michelle Bachmann announced that she would be giving a response to the State of the Union speech on behalf of the Tea Party Express. Now, most members of Congress respond to the President?s speech in some way, appearing on cable television or arranging an interview with the leading newspapers back in their districts. But, Bachmann?s response was billed in such a way that it took away from the official response planned by the GOP and delivered, and delivered well, by Congressman Paul Ryan. Alas, Ryan?s performance was completely overshadowed by Bachmann, and not because of anything she said but because of the fact that she was looking into the wrong camera. Those kinds of things do happen in politics and they make a difference: Think of Nixon?s decision not to use make-up during his debates with Jack Kennedy! Think of George H. W. Bush looking at his watch during one of his debates with Bill Clinton. In the television age, an image communicates more easily and powerfully than an idea and, so, Ryan?s ideas got trumped by Bachmann?s staring into space.

Now, we learn that three of the Senators who really owe their victories to the Tea Party ? Senators Marco Rubio, Ronald Johnson and Patrick Toomey ? have declined to join the Tea Party caucus in the U.S. Senate. Johnson told the Washington Post that joining the caucus might be divisive. Huh? Chanting that we are going to ?take our country back,? which implies that someone has improperly taken our country in the first place, that is not divisive? Evidently, now that these men have six year terms and desks on the Senate floor, the comity of their new colleagues trumps the rancor back home.

One of the things that a true conservative understands is that human habits and traditions should be treated with respect. So, for instance, the ways of Washington, some of them enshrined in the Constitution and others developed over time to flesh out the Constitution, those ways are usually designed to frustrate new political action, to impede change, to require compromise. The Founding Fathers, you will recall, created a system designed to keep any one interest from taking over the power of the federal government.

But, of course, the Tea Party Brigades are always a little fast and loose with history. In fact, their very name suggests that fastness and looseness. The original Tea Party protested taxation without representation, and it is a little hard to see how that concern applies to President Obama, who won election with 365 electoral votes to

John McCain 173 and took 53 percent of the popular vote. Even if you set aside the ?Christian nation? wing of the Tea Party, and the Second Amendment wing of the Tea Party, and the Birther wing of the Tea Party, it is still impossible not to look at the entire movement as a whole and see a certain cavalier attitude to their expropriation of the Founding for their own purposes.

So, now, even their heroes are running away from them. Has the Tea Party?s influence peaked? Has the tide gone back out to shore? Not at all, but it has been confined ? appropriately enough ? by something the Founders dictated. In 2012, every member of the House must run for re-election but President Obama will be running too, which means turnout will be higher, which means the newly elected members of Congress may need more than a large turnout from their base to win. They will need moderates and centrists. And, of course, Senators cannot be sure what the political landscape will look like in six years, but they surely know what the landscape within the Senate looks like now, and if they wish to be effective, they will go along to get along. But, the rank-and-file members of the Tea Party do not have desks on the Senate floor. They do not rub elbows with Sen. Mitch McConnell or get invited to the White House to meet the President and First Lady. In 2012, the rank-and-file will be frustrated that so little has been accomplished of what they see ? so clearly ? the country needs. They will either get angry and divide the GOP further, or they will get discouraged and go home. Either way, the GOP has a problem on its hand: They have decided to ride the tiger, but now they must ride where the tiger wants to go or risk his wrath.

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