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Tea Party Frauds

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 22, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

If there was any doubt that the Tea Party was fraudulent or so terribly addled as to appear fraudulent, this week put such doubts to rest. And, not just standard-fare political fraudulence of the kind that exists casually, as when a politician who hates your guts says how happy he is to see you. No, the Tea Party?s fraud is deeper, going to the heart of their own claims about what ails America and what it will take to restore her to greatness.

Of course, if you have been to a Tea Party rally, you will know that they talk a lot about the Constitution and the founders and their fidelity thereto. They often get things terribly wrong about that history, to be sure. In her book ?The Whites of Their Eyes,? Jill Lepore examined the many ways to Tea Party distorts history. In one of her most searing observations, she writes, ?There were very few black people in the Tea Party, but there were no black people at all in the Tea Party?s eighteenth century. Nor, for that matter, were there any women, aside from Abigail Adams, and no slavery, poverty, ignorance, insanity, sickness, or misery.? Ouch. (And three cheers for Abigail!)

LePore is obviously correct. Dressing up like George Washington or carrying a ?Live Free or Die!? flag does not make one an expert in history. But, while citizens need not be experts, they do need to be informed and it is a measure of how badly the public schools performed that such gross distortions of our founding documents are so easily made by such large numbers of people. Of course, Fox News has something to do with that. Mr. Glenn Beck once observed that George Washington was opposed to socialism, which is a little like saying Napoleon was opposed to BMWs, or Pope Pius IX was opposed to Microsoft.

In the debate about the debt ceiling, the Tea Party has made its position clear. No new taxes. Cut spending, no matter what programs get gored. Don?t worry about a government default ? it won?t be that bad. When pressed to compromise, they insist that they were sent to Washington to shrink the federal government, end of story. In addition to the core believers, there are other GOP congressmen who worry that failure to toe the Tea Party line will guarantee them a primary challenger.

There is always a great danger in simplistically comparing our own political issues with those of 200 years prior. But, there are some things we do know quite clearly. One of the main reasons the Articles of Confederation were found insufficient and the new Constitution was drafted and adopted had to do with strengthening the financial system by having the federal government assume the debt of the several states. Additionally, in the wake of the Civil War, the country adopted the 14th Amendment which states: ?The validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law, including debts incurred for payment of pensions and bounties for services in suppressing insurrection or rebellion, shall not be questioned.? Of course, we should be careful about pointing this text out to Tea Partyers because if they keep reading, the very next sentence could be just the thing needed to spark a new conspiracy theory. ?But neither the United States nor any State shall assume or pay any debt or obligation incurred in aid of insurrection or rebellion against the United States?? There it is: The founders foretold Obama?s secret insurrection against the U.S. Ah ? hah!

Another thing the Founders clearly did was separate powers. Tea Partyers like to invoke this in regard to federalism, but the concept also undergirds the distinction between the executive, legislative and judicial

functions of the government and the different make-up of the two houses of Congress. So, while it is undoubtedly the case that the Tea Partyers in Congress can say they were sent to rein in spending, it is also the case that President Obama and the members of the Senate were sent to Washington with a very different mandate. The founders knew what they were doing by insisting that only one-third of the Senate stand for election every two years: It is a brake against swings of opinion. And, the whole point of separating power is to keep any one faction, interest or ideology from dominating the whole. Madison?s entire aim was to force compromise and, therefore, moderation, on the different interests and factions.

I guess the Tea Partyers never got around to reading Madison?s masterpiece, Federalist #10. The opening sentence articulates the fear of faction: ?Among the numerous advantages promised by a well constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction.? And, anticipating the Tea Party response that they are not a faction, just the average American tax payer who has had enough of big government, Madison usefully defines what he means by faction: ?By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.?

So, the Tea Partyers in the House can say that they don?t think a government default is a big deal. They can say that cutting spending is always a good idea and that raising taxes is always a bad one. They can say that the President ?doesn?t get it.? What they can?t say is that they venerate the Constitution and the founders and then refuse to compromise with the Senate and the President. This is why they are frauds. And their fraudulence may drive America into an otherwise entirely avoidable catastrophe.

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