

Prologue

Honestly, it was hard not to stop at the spectacle on Freedom Plaza in downtown Washington, where several thousand Americans had gathered to celebrate their anger on a perfect spring day. There was Representative Michele Bachmann, conservative darling and all Minnesota nice, cheerfully raging against “gangster government.” “Two years from now, Barack Obama is a *one-term president!*” she taunted, the words echoing off the surrounding walls. There was the rapper performing a Tea Party anthem, the former *Saturday Night Live* star singing a song called “A Communist in the White House.” It was easy just to scan the now-familiar signs—BARACK HUSSEIN HITLER, GO BACK TO KENYA—and conclude that you had seen all you needed to know.

But to truly understand the Tea Party, to understand how these protesters with goofy hats and “Don’t Tread on Me” flags had become a political force powerful enough to confound a new administration and unhinge the Republican Party, you had to cross Pennsylvania Avenue and head down a steep escalator

to a small auditorium inside the Ronald Reagan Building. Watch a crowd of a few hundred, dressed mostly in the sneakers-and-Dockers uniform of the typical older tourist, sitting rapt as a panel of conservative activists in their twenties explained how to take over the country. It was Tax Day 2010, and these Tea Partiers young and old were marking it with a seminar that blended modern managerial advice and leftist organizing tactics.

At the podium stood Brendan Steinhauser, a twenty-eight-year-old college football-loving Texan who had voted for Ron Paul in 2008 and could quote from the classics of Austrian economic theory but included among his heroes Bayard Rustin, the gay black civil rights leader who conceived the 1963 March on Washington most remembered for Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The Tea Party movement had started out small, Steinhauser told the crowd, in the hundreds, but now, some polls showed that 25 percent of Americans supported it—remarkable growth in just one year. That percentage could reach fifty-one, he said, but he needed the help of the people in this room. "It's got to be a prime focus of what you do," he urged. "If you have twenty-five people there on your first monthly meeting, you should shoot for fifty, ask everyone to bring a friend. Try to set goals for yourself, set out where you want to be at the next meeting. Only if we focus on our numbers, check ourselves against other groups, are we going to get there."

There were two books every person in the room should read, Steinhauser said, repeating the titles twice, because most everyone was taking avid notes: *Dedication and Leadership* by Douglas Hyde and *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. The first, he explained, outlined how the Communist Party recruited in Great Britain, the second would help them under-

stand the marketing of social phenomena—sneakers, but also ideas. “If you read those two books and apply the lessons and tactics learned in those,” Steinhauser said, “I think you’re really going to help yourself and really become a true community organizer.”

“Uh-oh,” someone said loudly. Others groaned.

“Don’t reject that label! Embrace that label!” Steinhauser insisted. “True community organizers are what this movement is all made of. We don’t like that term because now we have a Community Organizer-in-Chief who got his lessons from Saul Alinsky. I say, let’s read Saul Alinsky, let’s read *Rules for Radicals*, and let’s use it against them!”

The crowd was his again. “Yeah!” people cheered, sustaining their applause.

“Do we need to do better to reach into new communities? Absolutely,” Steinhauser continued, looking out at the sea of faces, almost all of them white. “I encourage all of you: recruit in the cities, the inner cities, in the suburbs, in the rural areas, in the barrios. It doesn’t matter, wherever you live, wherever your neighbors are, get them involved and then go to some other part of town and get people involved who maybe you don’t know. Maybe they’re not in your social circle, they don’t go to your church. You need to go and get to know these people and let them know that this is the kind of movement that welcomes everyone, that encourages everyone to participate. Only if we do that can we reach our goals.” As the crowd cheered, he pressed on: don’t give up on the apathetic, the people who voted for the Democrats. “Maybe they voted for Nancy Pelosi the first time, maybe they’ve had a little buyer’s remorse,” he said. “But don’t write them off. Go out there, recruit people, bring new blood, new faces into the movement. Focus on that.

There is nothing more powerful that we can do for this movement than to go out there and recruit our friends and families and strangers to become a part of it.”

The contrast was striking: the panelists on stage were baby-faced despite their suits and stylized stubble, while the people in the audience were “seasoned,” as one young panelist gently put it—twice their age or more. When one young speaker mentioned the importance of using social media like YouTube, an older woman with a drugstore disposable camera and a flag brooch wrote down carefully “U2.”

But this was how the movement had grown, this mashup of young and old, abhorring the left but learning from it. It was what made it so contradictory, and so combustible.

Loosely assembled and suspicious of anyone claiming to be its leader, the Tea Party had allowed the rallies and the signs to serve as the public face of the movement. But to stop at what you saw there was to miss what the Tea Party was, and how it had swiftly burrowed its way into American life and wiped out the promise of a postpartisan politics that had accompanied the election of President Obama in 2008.

Its critics dismissed the Tea Party as “Astroturf,” looking like a grassroots movement but actually fake and manufactured by big interest groups. Puppets of the Republican Party, they said. Cranky old conservatives hung up on abortion and gay marriage, now upset that a black man they didn’t think was a citizen was living in the White House. Who could take seriously people who wore tricornered hats and inveighed against the Communist threat twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall? It was all a media creation. Just ignore them; they’ll go away.

Certainly the Tea Party had been fertilized by well-connected Washington groups like FreedomWorks, where Steinhauser worked, and also by Glenn Beck, the newest star at the Fox News

Channel, who created his own brand of Tea Party by calling for his fans to join “9/12 groups,” which were to return the country to the unity of purpose it felt in the days after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. But even aside from these well-connected supporters, the Tea Party was an authentic popular movement, brought on by anger over the economy and distrust of government—at all levels, and in both parties.

It certainly had its fringe elements: the birthers insisting that President Obama was a Kenyan-born Muslim infiltrator, the people carrying posters of Obama as a witch doctor, those who insisted the federal government was going to sequester its citizens in reeducation camps. As some Tea Partiers clamored for states’ rights, it was impossible to ignore the echo of the southern segregationists from the 1950s and 1960s—little surprise that the movement had failed to attract nonwhites in proportion to their numbers in the country at large. Still, this fringe did not define the Tea Party.

Nor could you explain it as simple partisan politics. While most Tea Partiers were Republicans, they were fighting hand-to-hand with the party establishment in places like Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Colorado, and Arizona, by mounting primary challenges to establishment candidates once considered sure to win, and seeking to take over the Republican Party in much the way that Barack Obama’s presidential campaign had won the 2008 Democratic primaries, by sending supporters out to become captains of their local voting precincts. By the spring of 2010, many of the most active Tea Party organizers regarded the rallies the way casual Protestants do church on Christmas and Easter—the perfunctory appearances. They were too busy operating as a kind of shadow party, hosting candidate forums and meeting with officials—Democrats as well as Republicans—who solicited their opinions and sought their blessing. They

were planning not just for the midterm elections that fall, but for the long term. And this wasn't just in off-the-grid Idaho or the Deep South. The Tea Party was everywhere—along the Eastern Seaboard, which Barry Goldwater said in the early 1960s he would have sawed off because there were no votes for conservatives there, and in swing districts where elections that determined control of Congress were often decided by a thousand or so votes and where presidential candidates fought every four years for the fickle middle ground.

To dismiss the grassroots popularity of the Tea Party movement was to discount the panic set off by the Great Recession, the growing anger about the staggering debt and the bailouts of carmakers, insurance companies, and the banks that had made it possible for people to buy houses they could not afford. It was to ignore the widespread and growing distrust not just of government, but of all the establishments Americans once trusted unquestioningly: doctors, banks, schools, the media. And it was to forget the opposition that had greeted attempts to overhaul the nation's health care system—or really, any ambitious progressive agenda since the 1930s—and the cycling of conservative insurgencies within the Republican Party. The Tea Party was not going away; in one form or another, it had been with us for a long time.

How big was it? In April 2010, fourteen months after the first Tea Party rallies, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that 18 percent of Americans defined themselves as “supporters” of the movement. Other polls put the proportion at 30 percent. Who were they? Almost uniformly white, they were disproportionately older than the general public, more likely to have a college or advanced degree, and more likely to describe themselves as fairly or very well off. This didn't make them affluent by many standards, but they were more prosperous

than the other Americans in the survey—less likely to have annual family incomes under \$50,000, and more likely to make over \$100,000. The Tea Party supporters were almost unanimously disapproving of the president and Congress, and they were pessimistic about the economy and the direction of the country by margins rarely if ever seen in previous polls. Given a choice to describe themselves as “dissatisfied but not angry,” 53 percent opted for “angry”—angry about health care, about government spending, about government “not representing the people.”

What did they want? While they took conservative positions on social issues like abortion and gay marriage, they did not want to talk about them; they were more likely than ordinary Republicans to say that they wanted to focus on economic issues.

Within the 18 percent who identified themselves as Tea Party supporters was a smaller group, just 4 percent of the American public, who attended the rallies and gave money to Tea Party organizations. The demographic profile of these “Tea Party activists” was almost identical to that of the larger group of supporters. But they were distinctly angrier—three-quarters of them defined themselves that way—more pessimistic about the country’s future, and more convinced that the bailouts and the \$787 billion economic stimulus package that Congress had passed to stave off economic collapse had hurt rather than helped.

Yet there were other dynamics no polls could reliably capture, things you had to observe up close, by watching the Tea Partiers at their candidate forums, at the meetings where they organized or the classes where they absorbed their view of the Constitution, in their work as citizen lobbyists and fledgling politicians.

While many observers emphasized the age of the Tea Partiers—a mere 3 percent of those who went to the rallies were younger than thirty, and only 17 percent were under the age of forty-five—the movement had been created and continued to be organized largely by young people like those on stage at the Reagan Building on Tax Day. These young Turks were well versed in the new social media that was changing political campaigns. And they provided the movement with an ideology, largely libertarian and marked by a purist and “originalist” view of the Constitution. Older people like those in the audience responded to the patriotism inherent in the talk of “liberty” and the pledge to be more faithful to the intentions of the Founding Fathers, and they grabbed onto the Constitution as the clear narrative to solve the country’s complex problems. And it was they who formed the numbers that could swell street protests like the ones that first arrived in Washington in September 2009. Together, young and old alike, they became an impassioned community. Many described their Tea Party work—recruiting more people into the movement, teaching others about the Constitution—with near religious zeal. Some even quit their jobs to engage in it more fully.

In truth, the Tea Party had stepped into a void after the 2008 elections, when the right seemed to lack direction. Mainstream Republicans were licking their wounds after the loss to Barack Obama, and ideological conservatives were still stewing because the party had nominated Senator John McCain of Arizona, with his long history of compromises with liberals, as its standard-bearer. And as much as Obama had warned his supporters that he could not do alone what they had elected him to do, the grassroots that had worked so hard for his campaign never showed up when he needed their help pushing health care reform through Congress or rallying for the stim-

ulus. They were too tired after a two-year campaign. They assumed his election was enough; their work was done.

But for all the Tea Party movement's energy and devotion, its shared sense of purpose, its May-to-September marriage of convenience might also weaken it. It depended on the blurring of ideological differences—a little like an older man ignoring that he had no music or cultural references in common with his young trophy wife. While the libertarians, typically younger, genuinely wanted to get rid of big government, and to phase out programs like Medicare and Social Security, the great majority of Tea Partiers believed those enormous government programs were worth the cost. Half benefited from them or lived with someone who did.

“That’s a conundrum, isn’t it?” said Jodine White, a sixty-two-year-old Tea Party supporter who lived in Rocklin, California, when she was asked in an interview after her participation in the *Times* poll how she reconciled wanting smaller government with being on Social Security, the biggest of the big government benefits. “I guess I want smaller government and my Social Security,” she said. She had heart trouble, and was on her county health program. She would eventually need Medicare. “I guess I misspoke,” she said. “I didn’t look at it from the perspective from losing things I need. I think I’ve changed my mind.”

She was hardly alone in her conflict. The contradictions of the movement reflected the confusion of a country that was more dependent than ever on government but at the same time more distrustful of it. Among the general public in the *Times* poll, only 20 percent said they could trust government most or all of the time. Similar numbers were reported by the Pew Research Center, which also found a rise in the number of Americans saying that government had a negative effect on their day-to-day life: in October 1997, 31 percent had agreed;

in March 2010, 43 percent did. Overwhelmingly, people saw elected officials as self-centered, irresponsible, and out of touch. Government wasn't helping average Americans, they believed; it was helping special interest groups at their expense. And this distrust wasn't just about government. It extended to banks, corporations, the news media, labor unions, the medical establishment.

Tea Partiers tended to believe that they had done all the right things in life: they had gotten married and had children, they went to church once a month or more, they paid their taxes (and most said they thought what they paid was fair, according to the *Times* poll). They had earned their place in the middle class, and they were out to protect what they saw as theirs. They distrusted people they regarded as elites, most notably the Obama administration, which they believed was embracing policies that favored the poor. They believed that too much had been made of the problems facing blacks. And above all, they had a visceral belief that government had taken control of their lives—and they wanted it back. Like many Americans, they had a strong faith in the autonomous individual. In the Pew survey, the public expressed its highest regard for small businesses and technology companies, the realm of the independent entrepreneur.

That explained why even though Tea Partiers told the *Times* poll that they were devoted watchers of Fox News, they also said that the information they trusted most of all came from others in the movement, not from the mainstream media. It also explained how they could be impervious to reports from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the closest thing the government has to a neutral arbiter, that the federal stimulus had cut taxes and created millions of jobs and that the health care legislation passed in 2010 would reduce the federal deficit.

Tom Grimes, a jovial sixty-five-year-old former stockbroker from South Bend, Indiana, had been laid off from his job and now called himself the “bus czar” for marshalling Tea Partiers to protests in Washington. He told how he had been communicating on Facebook with “some very progressive friends” who were arguing points made by Organizing for America, the grassroots organization that had grown out of the network of volunteers that had helped elect President Obama in 2008. “They sent out a letter, ‘Five Things That the Other Side Is Saying That Are Totally Untrue,’” Grimes recalled. “I said, ‘I don’t care if they’re untrue. It doesn’t make any difference. The problem is, you guys are trying to sell this on facts. You can have all the facts, but if you don’t trust the mind-set or the value system of the people involved, you can’t even look at the facts any more.’”

Like the rally at Freedom Plaza, the Tea Party movement could be purely emotional. But then there were the people across the street in the Ronald Reagan Building making coolly rational arguments. Every time you thought you could put the movement in a box, you encountered something that didn’t fit. The truth was, you had to understand all the parts to understand the whole. You had to understand the poll numbers and the larger trends, but you also had to see the varieties of Tea Party experience. You had to watch as people argued their case, not just on national television or with a homemade sign, but in the smaller encounters where they engaged with the movement.

It was easy, in some ways, to see how the Tea Party movement had burst out as the country grappled with the recession. The role of government was larger than ever, yet a bright future seemed anything but certain. But this was not some aberration of these difficult times. The Tea Party movement

went to the heart of conflicts that had bedeviled Americans for more than two hundred years and reflected anxieties that Americans had been expressing for generations. If you opposed it, you could not just wish it gone. If you supported it, you had to consider its contradictions. You could not simply look away.