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A Tea Party Manifesto

The movement is not seeking a junior partnership with the Republican Party. It is aiming for a hostile takeover.

By DICK ARMEY AND MATT KIBBE

On Feb. 9, 2009, Mary Rakovich, a recently laid-off automotive engineer, set out for a convention center in Fort Myers, Fla. with protest signs, a cooler of water and the courage of her convictions. She felt compelled to act, having grown increasingly alarmed at the explosion of earmarks, bailouts and government spending in the waning years of the Bush administration. President Barack Obama, joined by then-Republican Gov. Charlie Crist, was in town promoting his plan to spend a trillion dollars in borrowed money to "stimulate" the economy.

Mary didn't know it, but she was on the front lines of a grass-roots revolution that was brewing across the nation. More than 3,000 miles away, Keli Carender, a young Seattle school teacher and a member of a local comedy improv troupe, was feeling equally frustrated. She started to organize like-minded citizens. "Our nation's fiscal path is just not sustainable," she said. "You can't continue to spend money you don't have indefinitely."



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Associated Press

People hold signs and wave flags during the "Uni-Tea" Tea Party rally.

Today the ranks of this citizen rebellion can be counted in the millions. The rebellion's name derives from the glorious rant of CNBC commentator Rick Santelli, who in February 2009 called for a new "tea party" from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. By doing so he reminded all of us that America was founded on the revolutionary principle of citizen participation, citizen activism and the primacy of the individual over the government. That's the tea party ethos.

The tea party movement has blossomed into a powerful social phenomenon because it is leaderless—not directed by any one mind, political party or parochial agenda.

The criteria for membership are straightforward: Stay true to principle even when it proves inconvenient, be assertive but respectful, add value and don't taking credit for other people's work. Our community is built on the Trader Principle: We associate by mutual consent, to further shared goals of restoring fiscal responsibility and constitutionally limited government. These were the principles that enabled the Sept. 12, 2009 taxpayer march on Washington to be one of the largest political protests in the history of our nation's capital.

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The many branches of the tea party movement have created a virtual marketplace for new ideas, effective innovations and creative tactics. Best practices come from the ground up, around kitchen tables, from Facebook friends, at weekly book

Myths

clubs, or on Twitter feeds. This is beautiful chaos—or, as the Nobel Prize-winning economist F.A. Hayek put it, "spontaneous order."

Decentralization, not top-down hierarchy, is the best way to maximize the contributions of people and their personal knowledge. Let the leaders be the activists who have the best knowledge of local personalities and issues. In the real world, this is common sense. In Washington, D.C., this is considered radical.

The big-government crowd is drawn to the compulsory nature of centralized authority. They can't imagine an undirected social order. Someone needs to be in charge—someone who knows better. Big government is audacious and conceited.

By definition, government is the means by which citizens are forced to do that which they would not do voluntarily. Like pay high taxes. Or redistribute tax dollars to bail out the broken, bloated pension systems of state government employees. Or purchase, by federal mandate, a government-defined health-insurance plan that is unaffordable, unnecessary or unwanted.

For the left, and for today's Democratic Party, every solution to every perceived problem involves more government—top-down dictates from bureaucrats presumed to know better what you need. Tea partiers reject this nanny state philosophy of redistribution and control because it is bankrupting our country.

While the tea party is not a formal political party, local networks across the nation have moved beyond protests and turned to more practical matters of political accountability. Already, particularly in Republican primaries, fed-up Americans are turning out at the polls to vote out the big spenders. They are supporting candidates who have signed the Contract From America, a statement of policy principles generated online by hundreds of thousands of grass-roots activists.

Published in April, the Contract amounts to a tea party "seal of approval." It demands fiscal policies that limit government, restrain spending, promote market reforms in health care—and oppose ObamaCare, tax hikes and cap-and-trade restrictions that will kill job creation and stunt economic growth. Candidates who have signed the Contract—including Marco Rubio in Florida, Mike Lee in Utah and Tim Scott in South Carolina—have defeated Republican big spenders in primary elections all across the nation.

These young legislative entrepreneurs will shift the balance in the next Congress, bringing with them a more serious, adult commitment to responsible, restrained government.

But let us be clear about one thing: The tea party movement is not seeking a junior partnership with the Republican Party, but a hostile takeover of it.

The American values of individual freedom, fiscal responsibility and limited government bind the ranks of our movement. That makes the tea party better than a political party. It is a growing community that can sustain itself after November, ensuring a better means of holding a new generation of elected officials accountable.

Mr. Armev, a former House Republican majority leader, is chairman of Freedomworks. Mr. Kibbe is president and CEO of Freedomworks. They are the authors of "Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto," out today from HarperCollins.

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