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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Tea Parties Forever

By [PAUL KRUGMAN](#)

This is a column about Republicans — and I'm not sure I should even be writing it.

Today's G.O.P. is, after all, very much a minority party. It retains some limited ability to obstruct the Democrats, but has no ability to make or even significantly shape policy.

Beyond that, Republicans have become embarrassing to watch. And it doesn't feel right to make fun of crazy people. Better, perhaps, to focus on the real policy debates, which are all among Democrats.

But here's the thing: the G.O.P. looked as crazy 10 or 15 years ago as it does now. That didn't stop Republicans from taking control of both Congress and the White House. And they could return to power if the Democrats stumble. So it behooves us to look closely at the state of what is, after all, one of our nation's two great political parties.

One way to get a good sense of the current state of the G.O.P., and also to see how little has really changed, is to look at the "tea parties" that have been held in a number of places already, and will be held across the country on Wednesday. These parties — antitaxation demonstrations that are supposed to evoke the memory of the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution — have been the subject of considerable mockery, and rightly so.

But everything that critics mock about these parties has long been standard practice within the Republican Party.

Thus, President Obama is being called a "socialist" who seeks to destroy capitalism. Why? Because he wants to raise the tax rate on the highest-income Americans back to, um, about 10 percentage points less than it was for most of the Reagan administration. Bizarre.

But the charge of socialism is being thrown around only because "liberal" doesn't seem to carry the punch it used to. And if you go back just a few years, you find top Republican figures making equally bizarre claims about what liberals were up to. Remember when Karl Rove declared that liberals wanted to offer "therapy and understanding" to the 9/11 terrorists?

Then there are the claims made at some recent tea-party events that Mr. Obama wasn't born in America, which follow on earlier claims that he is a secret Muslim. Crazy stuff — but nowhere near as crazy as the claims, during the last Democratic administration, that the Clintons were murderers, claims that were supported by a campaign of innuendo on the part of big-league conservative media outlets and figures, especially Rush Limbaugh.

Speaking of Mr. Limbaugh: the most impressive thing about his role right now is the fealty he is able to demand from the rest of the right. The abject apologies he has extracted from Republican politicians who briefly dared to criticize him have been right out of Stalinist show trials. But while it's new to have a talk-radio host in that role, ferocious party discipline has been the norm since the 1990s, when Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, became known as "The Hammer" in part because of the way he took political retribution on opponents.

Going back to those tea parties, Mr. DeLay, a fierce opponent of the theory of evolution — he famously suggested that the teaching of evolution led to the Columbine school massacre — also foreshadowed the denunciations of evolution that have emerged at some of the parties.

Last but not least: it turns out that the tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment. They're AstroTurf (fake grass roots) events, manufactured by the usual suspects. In particular, a key role is being played by FreedomWorks, an organization run by Richard Armey, the former House majority leader, and supported by the usual group of right-wing billionaires. And the parties are, of course, being promoted heavily by Fox News.

But that's nothing new, and AstroTurf has worked well for Republicans in the past. The most notable example was the "spontaneous" riot back in 2000 — actually orchestrated by G.O.P. strategists — that shut down the presidential vote recount in Florida's Miami-Dade County.

So what's the implication of the fact that Republicans are refusing to grow up, the fact that they are still behaving the same way they did when history seemed to be on their side? I'd say that it's good for Democrats, at least in the short run — but it's bad for the country.

For now, the Obama administration gains a substantial advantage from the fact that it has no credible opposition, especially on economic policy, where the Republicans seem particularly clueless.

But as I said, the G.O.P. remains one of America's great parties, and events could still put that party back in power. We can only hope that Republicans have moved on by the time that happens.

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