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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Axis of the Obsessed and Deranged

By [FRANK RICH](#)

No one knows what history will make of the present — least of all journalists, who can at best write history's sloppy first draft. But if I were to place an incautious bet on which political event will prove the most significant of February 2010, I wouldn't choose the [kabuki health care summit](#) that generated all the ink and 24/7 cable chatter in Washington. I'd put my money instead on [the murder-suicide of Andrew Joseph Stack III](#), the tax protester who flew a plane into an office building housing Internal Revenue Service employees in Austin, Tex., on Feb. 18. It was a flare with the dark afterlife of an omen.

What made that kamikaze mission eventful was less the deranged act itself than the curious reaction of politicians on the right who gave it a pass — or, worse, flirted with condoning it. Stack was a lone madman, and it would be both glib and inaccurate to call him a card-carrying Tea Partier or a "Tea Party terrorist." But he did [leave behind a manifesto](#) whose frothing anti-government, anti-tax rage overlaps with some of those marching under the Tea Party banner. That rant inspired like-minded Americans [to create instant Facebook shrines to his martyrdom](#). Soon enough, some cowed politicians, [including the newly minted Tea Party hero Scott Brown](#), were publicly empathizing with Stack's credo — rather than risk crossing the most unforgiving brigade in their base.

Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, even [rationalized Stack's crime](#). "It's sad the incident in Texas happened," he said, "but by the same token, it's an agency that is unnecessary. And when the day comes when that is over and we abolish the I.R.S., it's going to be a happy day for America." No one in King's caucus condemned these remarks. Then again, what King euphemized as "the incident" took out just 1 of the 200 workers in the Austin building: [Vernon Hunter](#), a 68-year-old Vietnam veteran nearing his I.R.S. retirement. Had Stack the devastating weaponry and timing to match the death toll of 168 [inflicted by Timothy McVeigh on a federal building in Oklahoma in 1995](#), maybe a few of the congressman's peers would have cried foul.

It is not glib or inaccurate to invoke Oklahoma City in this context, because the acrid stench of 1995 is back in the air. Two days before Stack's suicide mission, [The Times published David Barstow's chilling, months-long investigation](#) of the Tea Party movement. Anyone who was cognizant during the McVeigh firestorm would recognize the old warning signs re-emerging from the mists of history. The Patriot movement. "The New World Order," with its shadowy conspiracies hatched by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. Sandpoint, Idaho. White supremacists. Militias.

Barstow confirmed [what the Southern Poverty Law Center had found](#) in its report last year: the unhinged and sometimes armed anti-government right that was thought to have vaporized after its Oklahoma apotheosis is making a comeback. And now it is finding common cause with some elements of the diverse, far-flung and still inchoate Tea Party movement. All it takes is a few self-styled "patriots" to sow havoc.

Equally significant is Barstow's finding that most Tea Party groups have no affiliation with the G.O.P. despite the party's ham-handed efforts to co-opt them. The more we learn about the Tea Partiers, the more we can see why. They loathe John McCain and the free-spending, TARP-tainted presidency of George W. Bush. They really do hate all of Washington, and if they hate Obama more than the Republican establishment, it's only by a hair or two. (Were Obama not earning

extra demerits in some circles for his race, it might be a dead heat.) The Tea Partiers want to eliminate most government agencies, starting with the Fed and the I.R.S., and end spending on entitlement programs. They are not to be confused with the Party of No holding forth in Washington — a party that, after all, is now positioning itself as a defender of Medicare spending. What we are talking about here is the Party of No Government at All.

The distinction between the Tea Party movement and the official G.O.P. is real, and we ignore it at our peril. While Washington is fixated on the natterings of Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, Michael Steele and the presumed 2012 Republican presidential front-runner, Mitt Romney, these and the other leaders of the Party of No are anathema or irrelevant to most Tea Partiers. Indeed, McConnell, Romney and company may prove largely irrelevant to the overall political dynamic taking hold in America right now. The old G.O.P. guard has no discernible national constituency beyond the scattered, often impotent remnants of aging country club Republicanism. The passion on the right has migrated almost entirely to the Tea Party's counterconservatism.

The leaders embraced by the new grass roots right are a different slate entirely: Glenn Beck, Ron Paul and Sarah Palin. Simple math dictates that none of this trio can be elected president. As [George F. Will recently pointed out](#), Palin will not even be the G.O.P. nominee “unless the party wants to lose at least 44 states” (as it did in Barry Goldwater's 1964 Waterloo). But these leaders do have a consistent ideology, and that ideology plays to the lock-and-load nutcases out there, not just to the peaceable (if riled up) populist conservatives also attracted to Tea Partyism. This ideology is far more troubling than the boilerplate corporate conservatism and knee-jerk obstructionism of the anti-Obama G.O.P. Congressional minority.

In the days after Stack's Austin attack, the gradually coalescing Tea Party dogma [had its Washington coming out party](#) at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), across town from Capitol Hill. The most [rapturously received speaker was Beck](#), who likened the G.O.P. to an alcoholic in need of a 12-step program to recover from its “progressive-lite” collusion with federal government. [Beck vilified](#) an unnamed Republican whose favorite president was the progressive Theodore Roosevelt — [that would be McCain](#) — and ominously labeled progressivism a cancer that “must be cut out of the system.”

A [co-sponsor of CPAC was the John Birch Society](#), another far-right organization that has re-emerged after years of hibernation. Its views, which William F. Buckley Jr. [decried](#) in the 1960s as an “idiotic” and “irrational” threat to true conservatism, [remain unchanged](#). At the conference's conclusion, a presidential straw poll was [won by Congressman Paul](#), ending a three-year Romney winning streak. No less an establishment conservative observer than the Wall Street Journal editorialist [Dorothy Rabinowitz describes Paul's followers](#) as “conspiracy theorists, anti-government zealots, 9/11 truthers, and assorted other cadres of the obsessed and deranged.”

William Kristol [dismissed the straw poll results](#) as the youthful folly of Paul's jejune college fans. [William Bennett gingerly pooh-poohed](#) Beck's anti-G.O.P. diatribe. But in truth, most of the CPAC speakers, including presidential aspirants, were so eager to ingratiate themselves with this claque that they endorsed the Beck-Paul vision rather than, say, defend Bush, McCain or the party's Congressional leadership. (It surely didn't help Romney's straw poll showing that he was [the rare Bush defender](#).) And so — just one day after Stack crashed his plane into the Austin I.R.S. office — the heretofore milquetoast Minnesota governor, Tim Pawlenty, [told the audience](#) to emulate Tiger Woods's wife and “take a 9-iron and smash the window out of big government in this country.”

Such violent imagery and invective, once largely confined to blogs and talk radio, is now spreading among Republicans in public office or aspiring to it. Last year Michele Bachmann, the redoubtable Tea Party hero and Minnesota congresswoman, set the pace [by announcing that she wanted “people in Minnesota armed and dangerous” to oppose Obama administration climate change initiatives](#). In Texas, the Tea Party favorite for governor, Debra Medina, is [positioning herself to the right](#) of the incumbent, Rick Perry — no mean feat given that [Perry has suggested that Texas could secede from the union](#). A state sovereignty zealot, [Medina reminded those at a rally](#) that “the tree of freedom is

occasionally watered with the blood of tyrants and patriots.”

In the heyday of 1960s left-wing radicalism, no liberal Democratic politicians in Washington could be found endorsing groups preaching violent revolution. The right has a different history. In the months before McVeigh’s mass murder, [Helen Chenoweth](#) and [Steve Stockman](#), then representing Idaho and Texas in Congress, publicly empathized with the conspiracy theories of the far right that fueled his anti-government obsessions.

In his [Times article on the Tea Party right](#), Barstow profiled Pam Stout, a once apolitical Idaho retiree who cast her lot with a Tea Party group allied with Beck’s 9/12 Project, the Birch Society and [the Oath Keepers](#), a rising militia group of veterans and former law enforcement officers who champion disregarding laws they oppose. She frets that “another civil war” may be in the offing. “I don’t see us being the ones to start it,” she told Barstow, “but I would give up my life for my country.”

Whether consciously or coincidentally, Stout was echoing [Palin’s memorable final declaration](#) during her appearance at the National Tea Party Convention earlier this month: “I will live, I will die for the people of America, whatever I can do to help.” It’s enough to make you wonder who is palling around with terrorists now.

[Maureen Dowd](#) is off today.

[The public editor's column](#) will return next week.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 2, 2010

The column by Frank Rich on Sunday, about the conservative movement, misstated the job status of Tim Pawlenty. He is the current governor of Minnesota, not former.

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