

The Threat from the Right

The United States finds itself facing an extraordinary political development with the rise of a far-right Tea Party movement that has largely taken over one of the country's two major political parties, the Republicans. That development makes Election 2012 especially dangerous, writes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

Today's American Polity can be roughly divided into three basic groups the Far Right, the Conservative by Temperament, and the Moderate Majority which can be characterized as follows:

–The Far Right (about 10 percent of the population): Overwrought, hyper-vigilant, paranoid ultra-right wing authoritarians, the “True Believers.”

–Conservative by temperament (about 20 to 30 percent): This group hews closer to the political center-right, keeping some distance from the wild-eyed ultra-right, but will embrace hard-right conservatism under extreme social or economic stress.

This faction's rightward march is being driven by the Tea Party movement. It is not a contiguous block and is a bit more closely tethered to reality, but it is actively decoupling itself from the center-right GOP mainstream and creating a worrisome super-right-wing faction when it combines with the far-right 10 percent.

–The rational, moderate majority (about 70 percent): It ranges from center and left of center.

(Source: Chip Berlet, Political Research Associates. Reed Richardson. See the Pew Research Center for recent party identification statistics.)

Dear “rational, moderate” 70 percent: we don't have to be just a sheep. And this is the time in U.S. history when we absolutely must not be sheep. Too many Americans are complacent and in denial.

Political philosopher Sheldon Wolin in his 2008 book portrays a country where citizens are politically uninterested and submissive – and where elites are eager to keep them that way. Both parties have their elites who, it can be argued, have betrayed the trust of the American public.

But it is the Republican Party that has evolved into the party of radical right extremists. For many, November 2012 is the final push by the ultra-right in

their hostile takeover of the United States.

Today's GOP has nothing to do with the party of Lincoln, or the Grand Old Party. It is an authoritarian party that wants to impose its brand of conservatism that would not only roll back the 20th Century, but would replace our democracy, now hanging by a thread, with an oligarchy in firm and complete control.

As David Schwartz notes: "It is no secret that the Koch brothers and others of the super-rich seem to have undertaken a final push to consolidate control through the conversion of a marginally democratic to an essentially fascist state; extreme right-wing, authoritarian, and demagogic. This kind of government is ideal for control of a populace by the moneyed elite."

Today's GOP gives new meaning to the phrase: "They know the price of everything, and the value of nothing." The comparison of today's Republican Party with the 20 characteristics of a fascist political party (see below) is chilling.

Many Americans react to the topic of a fascist threat in today's U.S. with glazed eyes, they have the simplistic and erroneous perception that all fascists wear jackboots. For them, the suggested threat is too frightening to accept as a possibility. It is frightening. Henry Giroux's perspective is that the public's imagination is limited. Also, Americans' historical amnesia has been long documented.

And where is the Left? The Democratic Party is supposed to represent the liberal perspective, but for many of its members, it has largely abandoned liberal principles along with the term "liberal," the New Deal, and moved to the right of center, it is seen by many as a reacting, retrenching, retreating party without strong commitment and effective organization.

The idea that President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party is "socialist" is laughable. The general public (which cannot define the term "socialism") appears to be confused as to just where the Democratic Party stands, in spite of its notable accomplishments over the last four years.

The President and the party's political courage are seen as less than stellar. There are many progressive organizations but, with notable exceptions, they do not form a solid, effective political bloc, do not challenge the Democratic Party establishment, and the progressive movement generally can be compared to the fragmentation of the Left in the Weimar Republic (Germany's failed experiment in democracy that preceded the rise of Adolf Hitler). The corporate media remains: *corporate, and controlled.*

Where are most of the American people? Diane Rehm of Washington D.C.'s NPR

recently noted: "America is experiencing an unprecedented rise in political extremism." Is this true of the country as a whole, or just in the roughly 30 percent that has heavily funded megaphones?

A report by *Campaign for America's Future* in 2007 found that: "in study after study, solid majorities of Americans take progressive stands on a full spectrum of issues, from bread-and-butter economics to the so-called 'values' issues where conservative claim preeminence." So what has been going on?

Mike Lofgren, who retired after a nearly 30-year career as a Republican professional staff member on Capitol Hill, believes he knows what has been going on.

George Packer of *The New Yorker*, reviews Lofgren's new book: "Lofgren's ideas are trenchant and far-reaching. ... With the feel of a long-repressed confession and the authority of an insider's testimony, like the anti-war views of a decorated infantry officer ... he writes about how the Republican Party took advantage of a profoundly ignorant electorate, an easily conned and distracted media, and a cowed Democratic Party to press the ideological struggle in spite of the deep unpopularity of many of its positions."

That echoes Sebastian Haffner's assessment of the non-fascist politicians in the Weimar Republic who lacked a clear counter-narrative based on principle, courage, and commitment.

The 70 percent of Americans still grounded in reality need to shed their ignorance, gullibility and apathy. Those who embrace the progressive values that have been the hallmark of our success as a nation in improving the quality of our lives need to demonstrate to the elite of both main political parties that they demand a democratic United States, and that they support progressive values. They need to confirm where they stand at the polls this November.

As Larry Sabato reminds us: "Every election is determined by the people who show up."

As Mike Lofgren observed: "[B]oth parties are not rotten in quite the same way. The Democrats have their share of machine politicians, careerists, corporate bagmen, egomaniacs and kooks. Nothing, however, quite matches the modern GOP... the crackpot outliers of two decades ago have become the vital center today...The Congressional directory now reads like a casebook of lunacy...

"A couple of months ago, I retired; but I could see as early as last November that the Republican Party would use the debt limit vote, an otherwise routine legislative procedure that has been used 87 times since the end of World War II,

in order to concoct an entirely artificial fiscal crisis. Then, they would use that fiscal crisis to get what they wanted, by literally holding the US and global economies as hostages. The debt ceiling extension is not the only example of this sort of political terrorism.”

Historian Geoffrey Kabaservice wrote: “The appearance of a Republican Party almost entirely composed of ideological conservatives is a new and historically unprecedented development. It is only in the last decade or so that movement conservatism finally succeeded in silencing, co-opting, repelling, or expelling nearly every competing strain of Republicanism from the party.”

Cultural critic Henry A. Giroux noted: “The lessons of history provide clear examples of how the emergence of reactionary politics, the increasing power of the military, and the power of big business subverted democracy in Argentina, Chile, Germany, and Italy.

“In spite of these histories, there is no room in the public imagination to entertain what has become the unthinkable, that such an order in its contemporary form might be more nuanced, less theatrical, more cunning, less concerned with repressive modes of control than with manipulative modes of consent, what one might call a mode of authoritarianism with a distinctly American character.”

Author Chip Berlet commented: “The only way to stop the antidemocratic right is to contest every inch of terrain. Politics is not a pendulum that automatically swings back and forth, left and right. The ‘center’ is determined by various vectors of forces in an endless multidimensional tug of war involving ropes leading out in many directions. Whether or not our country moves toward democracy, equality, social justice, and freedom depends on how many hands grab those ropes and pull together.”

Beverly Bandler’s public affairs career spans some 40 years. Her credentials include serving as president of the state-level League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands and extensive public education efforts in the Washington, D.C. area for 16 years. She writes from Mexico.

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