It's Enough to Make You Die Laughing

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Michael I. Niman is scratching his head in amazement over the latest deranged tactics of those wacky republicans

Activists took to the streets a generation ago to protest nuclear power, unpopular immoral wars, sexism, homophobia, police violence, racism, sweatshops, environmental destruction, human rights violations, union-busting, and anti-labor trade pacts, to name a few causes. Protests such as the 1982 New York City march against Ronald Reagan’s nuclear weapons policies drew historically unprecedented crowds with, for example, police estimating 750,000 participants and organizers estimating over one million at that demonstration. Despite the size of these protests, corporate media organizations did their best to minimize, trivialize or outright ignore these events.

Today we’re seeing a new wave of angst, only this time it has produced relatively small numbers of rather inarticulate protesters, buoyed by an intellectually vapid mass media that celebrates their semi-lucid intellectual flatulence at every opportunity. It’s the last hurrah of angry white Republican guys, rising to protest the conspiracy to guarantee their right to receive healthcare and perhaps avoid being pauperized by the experience.

The 15-year-old boys weaned on Beavis and Butthead are now 30-year-old Republicans phoning death threats in to congressional offices and gathering in small numbers to scream incoherent phases to Fox News crews whose wonks deify them as “patriots.”

This is one of those weird junctures in history when we have to stop, take a deep breath, and gather some data – if not to figure out what has happened, at least to chronicle the moment for future comedians.

Republican beliefs by the numbers

Perhaps some recent polling data can shed light on the zeitgeist of this new Know-Nothing Movement. A March 2010 Harris poll surveying a “representative sample” of slightly more than 2,000 voters found that 24 percent of Republican voters think President Obama “may be the Anti-Christ.”

Of course, it’s telling that such questions make their way into a political poll in the first place, but to put it into context, a Gallup poll found that 18 percent of Americans believe that the sun revolves around the earth, so hey, I guess if enough people suspect a political candidate has cloven hooves, that can turn an election. For the sake of understanding, let’s indulge the Republican political debate, if for no other reason than to understand how nutjobs like Pennsylvania’s Rick Santorum get elected to the US Senate. “M-i-s-t-e-r,” that’s six letters; “B-a-r-a-c-k,”
One fifth think Obama not a socialist, an observation that’s perhaps informed by his right-leaning determination to preserve the private banking and health insurance industries and a tax system that favors the rich.

Another six; “H. O-b-a-m-a,” another six. That’s it, smoking gun, 666, the beast. I get it now.

According to the same Harris poll, 47 percent of Republicans believe that President Obama “resents America’s heritage,” 41 percent say he’s anti-American, 42 percent think he’s a racist who hates white people, 22 percent say “he wants the terrorists to win,” whatever that means, and 38 percent say “he is doing many of the things that Hitler did.” (Like eating and sleeping, perhaps?)

Two thirds of Republicans polled believe Obama is a “socialist,” while 40 percent, seemingly unclear on the concept of socialism, think he’s under the control of “Wall Street and the bankers,” who presumably must also be socialists, albeit in denial.

Most Republicans, according to the poll, think the president is a sort of one-man sleeper cell who “wants to turn over sovereignty of the United States to a one world government,” which makes sense to them since 45 percent of them think the Hawaiian-born president was, like the Panamanian-born John McCain, not born in the United States – a premise with which many native Hawaiian rights activists would agree. And 57 percent of them think he’s a Muslim. You’d think all his church-going and his lack of any affiliation with a mosque might have clued them in otherwise.

Forty-five percent of Republicans polled think Obama “is a domestic enemy that the US Constitution speaks of.”

Another recent poll, conducted by Research 2000, and using a similar sample size and methodology, came to relatively similar conclusions on similar questions. One fifth think he’s not a socialist, an observation that’s perhaps informed by his right-leaning determination to preserve the private banking and health insurance industries and a tax system that favors the rich. But the survey found that two-thirds of Republicans thinking the president who rode into office on a wave of corporate campaign contributions is a socialist, while 16 percent struggled with the question. Fifty-eight percent of Republicans in this poll either think Obama is a foreigner (36 percent) or are not sure where he was born (22 percent).

A Research 2000 poll breaks into other areas of Republican thought, showing that 33 percent of Southern Republicans would themselves like to be foreigners: They think their states should secede from the US. The nationwide number of Republicans no longer wanting to be American is just under one quarter. A majority of Republicans polled believe that reality show host, half-term Alaska governor, and former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin “is more qualified to be President than Barack Obama.” One third weren’t sure about that, while 14 percent thought that perhaps the president was smarter or more experienced in worldly matters.

**Republican intellectuals**

This recent data is contextualized by a University of Maryland poll conducted in 2003 that found that people who got their news from commercial networks were more likely to believe that the secular Iraqi government was aligned with its fundamentalist al-Qaeda enemies, and hence presumably linked to the 9/11 attacks; that US troops actually found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; and that world opinion supported the US invasion of Iraq. Fox News viewers, the poll showed, were the most confused and misguided, with their misconceptions informing their political opinions and actions.

Fast-forward to the present. Radio host Rush Limbaugh reacted to the Harris poll last week by bemoaning that only 67 percent of Republicans believe Obama to be a socialist. His argument: “I mean, the facts are the facts. The president is a socialist.” If that empiricism hasn’t put your skepticism to rest, try Fox News host Glenn Beck’s argument on for size. Obama, he argued earlier this month, “has surrounded himself with Marxists his whole life.” Of course, with Marxist economic scholars producing some of the most prescient economic predictions, perhaps a capitalist like Obama would stand to
benefit from immersion in an intellectual environment that included such thinkers. Alas, Beck made it all up. There’s no evidence of any such associations in the president’s past – just a lot of hobnobbing with the usual crowd of neo-liberal conservative capitalists.

Beck’s Fox News colleague, Sean Hannity, argued in late march that Obama’s decision to fight against the popular demand for a Canadian-style single payer healthcare plan, and instead further entrench a for-profit private health insurance industry in his healthcare proposal, was “the single biggest power grab and move toward socialism in the history of the country.” I guess Hannity is unaware of Roosevelt’s “New Deal,” the expansion of the military, the creation of Social Security and Medicare, and the creation of public education and the interstate highway system. Sadly, Stephen Hayes of the Wall Street Journal quickly chimed in to agree with Hannity. I say “sadly” because until its recent acquisition by Fox News’ owner, Republican activist Rupert Murdoch, the Wall Street Journal was a reputable conservative news organization.

The racism allegations don’t stem from anything Obama wrote, said, did, or supported, but from the Republican noise machine. Limbaugh, for example, proclaimed last July, “They’re finally hearing me. He’s an angry black guy. I do believe that about the president. I do believe he’s angry.”

Not to be outdone, Glenn Beck, on the following day, told his Fox audience that Obama harbors “a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture,” whatever that may mean. “This guy,” he went on, “is, I believe, a racist!”

There we have it.

Republicans in action
In Washington, the Republicans may be the Party of No, trying to gain idiot points by opposing all Democratic and independent attempts to rectify or even address the economic, environmental, and social destruction left in the wake of the Bush presidency. The reality is that the Bush wars and tax cuts for the richest Americans compounded the structural problems created by the Reagan tax cuts for the rich, ultimately turning the budget surplus left by the Clinton administration into the worst deficit in history. Likewise, decades of apocalyptic consumerism and environmental inaction have left the world with an ecological deficit that is coming due in the form of catastrophic climate change and species extinctions.

Now that the grownups have returned to the White House, it’s time to start cleaning up the mess. Like the austerity measures the Clinton administration imposed, mostly on the backs of the poorest Americans, after the fiscal irresponsibility of the Reagan and Bush Senior presidencies, the new fiscal and environmental medicine will be harsh to swallow. If history teaches us anything, it is that Republicans will grandstand against all painful remedies, leaving the Democrats to impose them, then retake power on the “are you any better off” platform. Then they will once again loot the economy and leave the mess for Democrats to fix – again, usually on the backs of poor and working folks.

The Party of No strategy leaves Republicans with clean hands, because their hands never leave their pockets. Hence, the party that has controlled government for most of my life can ride to a new victory on a wave of anti-government feelings while their corporate masters continue to benefit from the social injustices of both Democratic and Republican administrations. The real difference between the parties is that the Democrats more or less try to keep the country afloat and save capitalism from collapse, mostly at the expense of working people who see their quality of life and economic security declining. The bones that Democrats have historically thrown our way, things like the New Deal, Social Security, and now minimalist healthcare reform, keep popular discontent in check, and keep a miniscule social safety net in place in order to hold rampant crime and disease epidemics at bay.

Republicans, on the other hand, just shout and loot between sex scandals.

“Dittoheads” who drink too much of Lim-
Limbaugh rallied his rabid sheep, telling them, “We need to defeat these Democratic bastards, we need to wipe them out.”

Later in the week, liberal Democrat Louise Slaughter, who represents parts of Buffalo and Rochester in Congress, got a brick through her office window in Niagara Falls and another through the window of her party’s headquarters in Rochester, while a phone caller left a message that snipers were readying to assassinate the children of Democratic members of Congress like Slaughter, who voted to guarantee them a right to healthcare.

Republican officials, for their part, are crying foul on their followers’ death threats, saying Democrats are playing them up for political gain. You know, threatening to assassinate politicians and their families has gotta be just some harmless dumb fun, like pranking a rival frat or torturing some Iraqi prisoners. The Republican response to these violent response has been, “Who, us, what did we do? Sure, some of the fellas are getting a bit unruly, but that’s not our fault. What, are we their mothers or something? Don’t look at us.”

But I did look. I went right to their goddess’s Twitter page on March 26, just as the bricks were flying and the phone lines were ablaze with terrorist threats, knowing that if anyone could master a tweet, it would be Sarah Palin. Her wisdom for her followers? “Don’t Retreat, instead Reload! Pls see my Facebook Page.” Reload? I went to her Facebook page. There I found a map of the US with target crosshairs over 20 Democratic congressional districts.

What I didn’t find there or anywhere else in the Republican noise machine was a coherent argument for maintaining the healthcare status quo, as Palin’s party did during the eight years they controlled the White House, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court.

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