

# Threats of Secession and Other Recent Republican Rhetoric

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: April 16, 2009 | 05:12 PM (EST)

Am I the only one who upon reading that the governor of Texas has now referred to the possibility of seceding from the union as one of "a lot of different scenarios", wondered why the good people of Texas hadn't thought of that before the 2000 election. On a more serious note, this latest GOP tactic seems, at first, more surreal than offensive. Texas, of course, will not secede from the US. The threat of secession is not a realistic one but it suggests that the fabric of our democracy may be woven far less tightly than we would like to think.

Extreme partisan rancor is never pretty, but in a democracy like ours probably far more common and unavoidable than we would like to think. Dressing up in revolutionary war costumes, calling for the overthrow of the government and waving teabags at the behest of wealthy right wing funders is, while a little pathetic and strange, well within the realm of constitutionally protected behavior and may even play a somewhat constructive role in our democracy. The notion that Obama is a socialist because he wants a minor tax increase for a tiny fraction of Americans and would prefer to spend our treasure on helping people rather than on conducting wars of dubious origin or intention is more than a little strange, but if a small minority of people want to assert it, that is again well within their rights.

Floating the idea of secession over this, even in a somewhat tongue in cheek manner, is a very different story. The history of secession in the US is not a pretty one. It was tried once and the seceding states were brought back into the union, but the cost was high as the country was torn apart by what was, at that time, one of the bloodiest wars in human history.

The issues dividing Republicans and Democrats today are relatively mild, mainstream partisan issues, obviously not at all comparable to those which divided our country on the eve of the Civil War. Democrats and Republicans are fighting over a few percentage points in the tax rate for the richest Americans, increased domestic spending, and greater environmental, financial and other regulation. This is, frankly, ordinary and not all that interesting partisan fare which, in many respects, was not too different during the administrations of Roosevelt, Reagan, Clinton or many other presidents. That is why these threats and rhetoric are so concerning. Nobody really threatens secession over a mild increase in the tax rate or over a spending plan. Nobody really calls for revolution because the government is trying to spend too much on infrastructure.

Why then are Republicans willing to talk about revolution, secession and other ideas that would destabilize our country and our democracy. One hopes that most of this can be simply chalked up to a party that is weak, defeated, directionless and out of ideas, but it may not be that simple. Perhaps the demonstrators and, more significantly their leaders, feel that for some existential, and undoubtedly irrational, reason the Obama presidency is a profound threat to their worldview, values and vision of the US. If that is the case we can only hope that these people remain on the margins. This is likely to occur as Obama's worldview, values and vision not only reflect those

of a huge plurality of Americans, but will likely to continue to become more, not less, accepted over time.

The teabag protests and calls for secession and revolution followed a few days after a Homeland Security report outlined the threat posed by right wing extremists. This report, which, given that the second worst terrorist attack in our history was perpetrated by right wing extremists, may be something of an elucidation of the obvious, was met by predictable protests in many conservative corners. However, those on the far right can't have it both ways, calling for revolution and secession on the one hand, while protesting a report raising concerns about right wing extremist violence on the other.

Undoubtedly, many will argue that the words of Governor Perry should not be taken seriously because they were said in the excitement of a rally and were certainly meant to be hyperbolic. This is not convincing because public officials understand that words and statements matter. That is why elected officials are constantly making speeches, talking to reporters and sending out emails.

Governor Perry threat was in many ways the political equivalent of a child's threat to take his marbles and go home if he does not win a dispute. While it is easy and comforting to think that Perry cannot take his marbles and go home because he has already lost his, the failure of any GOP leaders to criticize his statement or remind Perry and his party that we are one union and a governor should not allude to secession lightly suggests that the problem is worse than that and may not be going away anytime soon.