

Herman Cain and the Tea Party Legacy

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During recent weeks the Tea Party has only received media attention when it is being compared to Occupy Wall Street, but the Tea Party continues to have an influence on politics, particularly in the Republican primary for president. The big stories around sexual harassment charges against Herman Cain, as well as that candidate's bizarre [statement of fealty to the Koch brothers](#), for example, are also part of the story of the Tea Party.

In some respects, the main theme of the Republican primary has been the ascendancy and failure of various candidates seeking to represent the right wing against the more moderate frontrunner Mitt Romney. Various politicians, most of them not good candidates in any conventional sense, and a surprising number of them not currently holding any real job, including Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum and Cain, have sought this mantle. During the last year or two, leading candidates for this role, including Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry, have emerged and collapsed. Cain has now emerged and appears to be about to collapse as a serious candidate.

This raises the question of why no serious, experienced right-wing conservative has entered the race. There are a numerous right-wing Republican senators who, had they entered the race in earnest two years ago, would have had an easy time against the current weak field of conservative candidates, and would, along with Romney, be the frontrunner for the nomination.

The role of the Tea Party is part of the answer to this question. During the height of its popularity and influence, the Tea Party was so extreme and unmoored that almost any radical right-wing assertion, from disputing the President's citizenship, to abolishing taxes, repealing all regulations on industry, or making labor unions illegal, became part of the Tea Party buzz. Naturally, politicians without serious jobs and who had very little to lose were drawn to this environment. Sarah Palin, who no longer had any role in Washington or elsewhere in politics, could meet the Tea Party appetite for extremist rhetoric more than even a right-wing senator like Jim DeMint, who still had a real job, could. Today Herman Cain is in a similar position.

The requirements for being a Tea Party favorite and those for being a legitimate candidate for a major party nomination are significantly different. The former takes little more than allegiance to far-right rhetoric, willingness to say outrageous things and some media flair. The latter requires the ability to raise money, build an organization and make a plausible argument about winning a general election. None of the candidates for the Republican nomination has been able to do both these things, but Tea Party requirements are much easier to meet, so candidates who could do that got into the race.

The result of this is that with about two months before the first primary or caucus, the leading non-Romney candidate, representing the right wing of a party that has been all but taken over by the far right, is a retired businessman who has never held elected office, is concerned that [China might develop nuclear weapons](#), and has raised almost no money for his campaign. This cannot be construed as the Tea Party's greatest accomplishment, but it is the almost inevitable result of that movement. Ironically, of course, this may help the Republicans in November, as Romney is both the most electable of the major candidates and the strong favorite to be the nominee, but it also demonstrates the flaws in the Tea Party approach.

A general election between Romney and President Obama will be significant largely because of its normalcy. This general election matchup would pit a center-left Democrat who has governed, as most presidents do, largely from the center, against a center-right Republican businessman-turned-politician. At a time when the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street are both emerging, or have emerged, as significant and largely unprecedented social movements, and people have extremely little confidence in our institutions of government, we are moving toward an election that could have been ordered up from central casting, any time in the last three decades.

Obama and Romney will both court the activist and extremist wings of their party, but this, too, is normal in most presidential elections. These activists will make noise about sitting out the election, but by November of 2012, most of these people, from both ends of the political spectrum, will reluctantly vote for their party's centrist standard bearer. This will be a form of political comfort food for many, particularly in the media and punditry, but it will also be empty political calories. At a time when there is substantial discontent on the left and the right, more of which is shared than either side would like to admit, major problems that require new and bold approaches, and little faith in our political system, we are moving toward an election that is not likely to introduce any new ideas or take on the problems raised by the activists wings of either, or both, parties.