

Who Are the Tea Party Patriots?

By [William John Cox](#)

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Most people only see the public faces of the Tea Party Patriots: those doing television interviews, appearing on the covers of magazines, waving from the steps of private jets at political rallies, and who spend the millions of dollars in tax-free donations they have raised; but who are the 15 million “patriots” who actually attend the thousands of local tea parties across the heartland of America? Answers were sought at the TPP’s American Policy Summit held during the last week of February in Phoenix, Arizona.

The Faces of Fear

Although organizers had planned for 7,000 attendees, about 2,000 showed up and several thousand more attended, virtually, via the Internet.

There weren’t many body piercings or tattoos visible among the activists at the summit; no horns or forked tails were detected; nor were there very many colonial costumes or tri-cornered hats in evidence. There was, however, an abundance of serious faces and crossed arms.

There were as many women as men in attendance, but the most striking thing was the absolute absence of faces of color. None. Not a single Black, Hispanic or Asian face could be seen in the crowd. This is not to say that the “Patriots” are racist; they cheered former CEO Herman Cain, the conservative African-American Republican presidential candidate who claims that liberals are destroying the American Dream.

When Tea Party leader Mark Meckler was asked about the absence of faces of color, he said he doesn’t “pay attention to color” and he doesn’t know why there aren’t more. He didn’t answer when asked if the Tea Party intended to do anything to attract minority members.

Many women wore crosses on neck chains, but Stars of David and “peaceful coexistence” pendants were not displayed. There were numerous references by speakers to America as a Christian nation, including a prayer by Congressman David Swickart that called on all members to become “soldiers for the message.” Another speaker said a “Christian Nation doesn’t need health care reform,” only Good Samaritans to help others. The prayer service on Sunday morning was held by Al Larson, who seeks to establish a “network of dangerous men in and through our churches who so treasure Christ as Leader in their hearts that they are willing to risk anything to follow Him.”

If nothing else, the Patriots are very patriotic. Sessions were opened with the national anthem and the pledge of allegiance to the flag, and all veterans were encouraged to stand and offer a military salute.

The Patriots want a government that does nothing more than what it is authorized to do by the Constitution. The conference tote bags contained three copies of the Constitution, and the overriding theme of the Summit was a reduction of the federal government to conform to the powers set forth in Article I of the document.

Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition called upon the audience to restore the nation to the principles on which it was founded, and said, if the government fails to protect life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, “there is a moral obligation to overthrow the government, by force if necessary.” He stated America was settled with “three tools: the axe, the plow and the Bible.” Then he added a fourth – the gun.

Arizona State Senate President Russell Pearce told the crowd it was time for a “rag tag army” led by the “congregations” to step up and fight against illegal immigration and the failure of government to do its job.

More than half of the audience appeared to be of retirement age and more than a few carried oxygen bottles; however, most cheered when Yaaron Brook of the Ayn Rand Institute stated “social security was the most immoral scheme ever devised by politicians” because it forces the responsible to care for the irresponsible.

Howard Sprague, a retired financial advisor who collects social security, believes it would be unfair to take social security away from those who were already receiving it, but that future generations should have a choice to opt in or out of social security and Medicare. Retiree Ralph Westburg wants to replace social security for the next generation with individual payments into private insurance company annuities; however, he also wasn’t willing to give up his own social security and Medicare benefits.

The only crack in the solid wall of conservatism was exposed by the few young people who were in attendance. Unlike older participants who declined to talk about “social issues,” Alexander Falkenstein and Carlos Alfaro of Students for Liberty, a libertarian youth organization, favor gay human rights and freedom of choice for women. They oppose the War on Terror and the War on Drugs. They believe in free market ideals; however, they fear the political power of big corporations. They stated the U.S. should be placing goods rather than troops in other countries.

More than anything else that can be said, the Patriots are fearful. They fear the loss of the quality of life they and their parents enjoyed following World War II; however, they also believe that the unions who led the battle for the wages and benefits they received are becoming too powerful. They fear the influx of immigrants and the loss of “American” jobs; however, they overlook that every single one of them is either an immigrant or the descendant of immigrants. They fear the loss of the moral values they were raised with; however, they are quick to deny others the choices they have had the freedom to make.

Those who join the Tea Party Patriots could be your parents, the veteran next door, the Little League coach, or the guy at the hardware store. They are hard-working, conservative, self-sufficient people who are afraid for the future of their families and their way of life. Having been empowered by the rewards of their efforts, they now feel helpless to confront the forces that threaten them. They feel compelled to do something, anything, to defend their beliefs. They are drawn to the Tea Party to meet like-minded patriotic people and to “make a difference.”

The fears of the Patriots are not unreasonable. However, it is not reasonable for their leaders to encourage and to take advantage of their fears; nor is it right that the leaders sell out the membership to those who finance their efforts to influence Patriots to act against their own self interest.

***William John Cox** is a retired prosecutor and public interest lawyer, author and political activist. His efforts to promote a peaceful political evolution can be found at VotersEvolt.com, his writings are collected at WilliamJohnCox.com and he can be contacted at u2cox@msn.com.*

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