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Days of rage: the Tea Party & America's right

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 Max Blumenthal begin_of_the_skype_highlighting end_of_the_skype_highlighting
 <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/max-blumenthal>> , 17 September 2010

About the author

Max Blumenthal begin_of_the_skype_highlighting end_of_the_skype_highlighting is a journalist whose work is published in the New York Times, the Daily Beast, the Nation, the Huffington Post, Salon, and other publications. He is author of Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party <<http://republicangomorrah.com/index.php>> (Basic/Nation Books, 2009). His website is here <<http://maxblumenthal.com/>>

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The rise of the Tea Party movement in the United States in the first twenty months of Barack Obama's presidency is shaking the political establishment, a trend reinforced by the victories of its candidates in Republican Party primaries. But where has the movement come from, and what is its inner life? Max Blumenthal begin_of_the_skype_highlighting end_of_the_skype_highlighting, author of "Republican Gomorrah", enters the heady world of the Tea Party to unravel

the mix of driven personalities, feverish rhetoric, toxic hatreds, and flirtation with violence that fuel its sub-culture's insurgent activism.

"He will tell you that he wants a strong authority to take from him the crushing responsibility of thinking for himself. Since the Republic is weak, he is led to break the law out of love for obedience. But is it really strong authority that he wishes? In reality he demands rigorous order for others, and for himself disorder without responsibility" - Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*

I am not sure when I first detected the noxious fumes that would envelop the conservative movement in the Barack Obama era. It might have been in April 2009, when I visited a series of gun shows in rural California and Nevada. Perusing tables piled high with high-calibre semi-automatic weapons and chatting with anyone in my vicinity, I heard urgent warnings of mass roundups, concentration-camps, and a socialist government in Washington. "These people that are purchasing these guns are people that are worried about what's going on in this country", a gun dealer told me outside a show in Reno. "Good luck Obama", a young gun enthusiast remarked to me. "We outnumber him 100 to 1." At this time, the Tea Party movement had not even registered on the national media's radar.

In September 2009, I led a panel discussion at the University of California-Riverside about my book *Republic Gomorrah* <<http://www.nationbooks.org/book/189/Republican%20Gomorrah>> (Basic/Nation Books, 2009). Inside an auditorium filled with nearly 100 students and faculty, I sat alongside Jonathan Walton, an African-American professor of religious studies and prolific writer, and Mark Takano, an erudite, openly gay former Democratic congressional candidate and local community-college trustee. In the middle of our discussion, a dozen college Republicans stormed the front of the stage with signs denouncing me as a "left-wing hack" while a hysterical young man leaped from the crowd, blowing kisses mockingly at Takano while heckling Walton as a "racist". Afterward, university police-officers insisted on escorting me to my ride after the right-wing heckler attempted to follow me as he shouted threats.

Who was this stalker? Just a concerned citizen worried about taxes? His name was Ryan Sorba and he was an operative of a heavily funded national conservative youth outfit, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Besides founding dozens of Republican youth groups across the country, Sorba has devoted an exceptional amount of energy to his interest in homosexuals. His intellectual output consists of a tract titled *The Born Gay Hoax*, arguing that homosexuality is at once a curable disease and a bogus trend manufactured by academic leftists. Adding to his credentials, Sorba has a history of run-ins with the law, he explained when I called him about the order.

My encounter with this aggressive right-wing cadre seemed a strange, isolated event. But the hostility turned out to be symptomatic of the intensifying campaign to delegitimise President Obama and his allies in Congress. The right's days of rage were only beginning.

The constellation

Through his first year in office, Obama seemed oblivious to the threat of the far right. He campaigned against partisanship, declaring that there were "no red states" and no "conservative America". Apparently, he thought it was merely a contrivance or myth that there were people who rejected science, demonised gays, assailed minority and women's rights - not that they genuinely believed in what they said. Speaking of changing Washington, Obama seemed to think that the entire history of politics since the rise of Ronald Reagan and the right and their strategies of polarisation was not deeply rooted but a superficial problem attributable to certain "divisive" personalities, easily wiped away with gestures toward bipartisanship. His view of the parties was that they were simply mirror images sharing fundamental beliefs but separated by "partisans". The skilled and devoted community organiser could bring them together.

Many of his supporters in the media, often partisans of political wars over the years, reinforced and amplified his innocence, proclaiming he was the one at last who could "bridge the partisan divide". Andrew Sullivan, a disaffected conservative who once called critics of George W Bush policies "fifth columnists" but now fervently supported Obama, wrote that the new president was destined to become "a liberal Reagan who can reunite America". This optimism

pervaded the White House as the new president and his aides sought out Republicans willing to vote for his programmes. After all, why couldn't we all just get along?

In his autobiographical book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama highlighted a key component of his political strategy: "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views." Once he was elected, conservatives concluded that they could reverse Obama's strength by transforming him into a human tableau for the most fearsome images they could conjure (see "Barack Obama, the fallen messiah" <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/max-blumenthal/barack-obama-fallen-messiah>> ", 23 December 2009).

Obama's multiracial background was crucial in cultivating resentment among the shock-troops. Those who rejected Obama's legitimacy to serve as president on the basis of his background gave birth to the "Birther" movement that sought to challenge his citizenship. The movement's most visible figure, and therefore the most eccentric, was Orly Taitz, a dentist and self-trained lawyer who had immigrated from the former Soviet republic of Moldova to Israel before settling in the conservative bastion of Orange County, California. Convinced by claims on the far-right website *WorldNetDaily* that Obama planned to create a "civilian national security force", Taitz told me she "realised that Obama was another Stalin - it's a cross between Stalinist USSR and Hitler's Germany."

After becoming transfixed by online conspiracy theories claiming Obama's family had forged his birth-certificate in Hawaii, Taitz snapped into action. She filed a lawsuit in November 2008 with California's secretary of state Debra Bowen demanding an investigation into Obama's eligibility to serve as president. Taitz's plaintiff in the case was Wiley Drake, an Orange County radio-preacher and former second vice-president of the Southern Baptist Convention who once publicly prayed for Obama's death. While her lawsuit went nowhere, and subsequent suits earned her angry rebukes from judges, Taitz became an instant media sensation, delivering heavily accented screeds against Obama before friendly interviewers from Sean Hannity to CNN's Lou Dobbs (the latter, described by Taitz as her "greatest supporter", was eventually fired as an indirect result of his hosting of her).

In March 2009, the Texas Representative Randy Neugebauer signed on to a Birther bill proposing that future presidential candidates must prove their citizenship before becoming eligible to campaign. The Birther movement had found its voice in government and made an indelible impact on the Republican grassroots. By June 2009, 28% of Republican respondents to a Kos/Research 2000 poll said they thought Obama wasn't born in the United States, while 30% "weren't sure". "Obama should be in the Big House", Taitz shrieked to me, "not the White House!"

When Obama announced healthcare reform as the first major initiative of his administration, the conservative movement activated a campaign of demonisation - transformational politics - designed to turn Obama into the "Other", making him seem as unfamiliar, and therefore as threatening, as possible. When the president urged the Congress to deliver a healthcare-reform bill in 2009, the right staged a living theatre of political hatred which turned Obama's dream of bipartisanship into a nightmarish version of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. On 12 September 2009, tens of thousands of far-right activists belonging to a loose confederation of anti-government groups called the Tea Party Patriots converged on Washington's National Mall for a giant protest against the Obama healthcare plan. The date was significant: Fox News's top-ranked talk-show host Glenn Beck had declared the birth of the "9-12 Project" to restore the sense of unity (and siege mentality) that Americans experienced on 11 September 2001. But this time, Obama - not Osama - was the enemy.

While covering the rally, I witnessed sign after sign declaring Obama a greater danger to America's security than al-Qaida; demonstrators held images that juxtaposed Obama's face with images of evildoers from Hitler to Pol Pot to Bin Laden; others carried signs questioning Obama's status as a United States citizen. "We can fight al-Qaida, we can't kill Obama", said an aging demonstrator. Another told me, "Obama is the biggest Nazi in the world", pointing to placards he had fashioned depicting Obama and House of Representatives' majority leader Nancy Pelosi in SS outfits. According to another activist, Obama's agenda was similar to Hitler's: "Hitler took over the banking industry, did he not? And Hitler had his own personal secret service police. [The community-organising group] Acorn is an extension of that."

The seemingly incongruous Tea Party propaganda recalled signs waved by right-wing Jewish settlers during rallies against Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and his support of the peace process, portraying him as an SS officer and as

the French collaborator Marshall Pétain <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/petain_philippe.shtml> . In 1995, amid this provocative atmosphere, a young right-wing Jewish zealot assassinated Rabin. The Israeli tragedy was a cautionary example of targeted hatred leading to violence.

Members of the Tea Party "Patriots" did not seem to care that their rhetoric was irrational, or that comparing Obama to Hitler and Stalin was contradictory and obviously hyperbolic. Their motives were entirely negative. By purging government of the multicultural evil that had seized power through illicit means (several activists told me they believed Acorn helped Obama steal the election), they were convinced that a mythical golden American yesteryear would return. They had no interest in building anything new or even articulating an agenda, much less discussing the merits of policies. The Tea Party's primary concern was cultural purification - freedom from, not freedom to. Against the dark image of the president and his liberal allies, Tea Party activists defined themselves as the children of light. The racial subtext was always transparent.

The Tea Party's strategy rested on a guerrilla campaign of chaos and sabotage designed not only to intimidate Democrats but also to disorient independent voters who might have supported healthcare reform. The Tea Parties were convinced this would be an easy feat, since they believed the majority of the country was on their side - that they represented the "real America". At the 9-12 rally Matt Kibbe, one of the march organisers, told the crowd that ABC News was reporting that 1 million to 1.5 million people were in attendance; ABC denied this, saying "ABCNews.com reported an approximate figure of 60,000 to 70,000 protesters." Then one Dick Armeley led the crowd in a chant of "Freedom works! Freedom works!" Unknown to most of the Tea Parties, they were intoning the name of a corporate-funded Beltway advocacy-group, not the battle-cry of Mel Gibson's version of William Wallace <http://www.opendemocracy.net/max-blumenthal/www.opendemocracy.net/people-vision_reflections/wallace_2774.jsp> in Braveheart.

Indeed, contrary to its image as a grassroots movement mobilised to stifle the machinations of Washington elites, the Tea Party movement was the creation of a constellation of industry-funded conservative groups with close Republican ties. The movement's leading puppet-master was the same Dick Armeley, who directed resources and talking-points to the Tea Party "Patriots" from his Washington-based advocacy group, FreedomWorks. Among the corporate clients of Armeley's lobbying firm, which he was forced to leave as a result of his involvement in the Tea Parties, was the pharmaceutical giant Bristol Myers Squibb, a company with a clear interest in defeating healthcare reform. (Armeley's other "real American" clients included the Marxist terror-cult, the People's Mojahedin of Iran, which received funding and assistance from Saddam Hussein in order to launch terrorist strikes throughout the 1990s against Iranian civilian targets.) Armeley collected a consulting fee of \$250,000 directly from FreedomWorks and \$300,000 from allied astroturf front groups. FreedomWorks paid out much of its money to an assortment of Republican political consultants.

The rumour

If Dick Armeley was the Tea Party king, Sarah Palin was eager to be crowned the Tea Party queen. Just days after Obama's inauguration, Palin abruptly quit her job as Alaskan governor to vie for the honour. Palin's motives for quitting became clear when she inked a lucrative deal to write her political memoir *Going Rogue*, signed on as a regular contributor to Fox News, and received \$1 million an episode for a reality-show on cable television, "Sarah Palin's Alaska". Palin's book-tour, which sent her through Middle America in a luxuriously outfitted bus, resembled both a presidential campaign and a travelling carnival.

Whether or not Palin intends to run for president, her growing media presence has magnified her influence within the Republican Party. Yet the ever-expanding Palin phenomenon was greeted with hostility by Republican politicians desperately seeking to expand the party's base after the drubbing in 2008. Steve Schmidt, formerly John McCain's campaign manager in the doomed presidential campaign of 2008, warned that Palin's nomination in 2012 would be "catastrophic" for the GOP. His doomsday prediction was backed by a Gallup poll in October 2009 revealing her as one of the most polarising and unpopular political figures in the country with a disapproval rating of over 50%. Unfortunately for Schmidt and other party pragmatists, those who approve of Palin represent the heartbeat of the Republican Party, its most fervent activists, and cannot be dissuaded from following her, even if she is leading the party off a cliff.

A special congressional election in New York's heavily Republican 23rd district in November 2009 was the first major test of Palin's power. Along with a parade of nationally recognised conservatives, Palin endorsed Doug Hoffman, an unknown far-right third-party candidate closely allied with the Tea Party - in the process helping to force a popular moderate Republican politician, Dede Scozzafava, from the race. In the end, Palin's ideological purge in upstate New York led to an improbable Democratic victory, the first in that district in more than 100 years. After the disaster Palin and her allies claimed victory, insisting they had at least hastened the purge of ideologically impure Republicans from the party. She went on to endorse Rand Paul, the son of right-wing libertarian Representative Ron Paul and a candidate in Kentucky's GOP senatorial primary; meanwhile George W Bush's vice-president Dick Cheney went out of his way to endorse Rand's regular Republican opponent, Trey Grayson, the Kentucky secretary of state.

The self-described "hardcore pro-lifer" Palin followed the Tea Party script of avoiding social issues like abortion and gay marriage in order to obscure the large presence of the Christian right within the movement's ranks, recasting herself accordingly as a libertarian concerned primarily with issues of "economic freedom". She claimed the Democratic "cap-and-trade" plan to limit carbon-emissions would harm the livelihood of blue-collar workers, and she assailed healthcare reform as a Trojan horse for "socialism" (though she admitted her family "used to hustle over the border" to take advantage of Canada's single-payer healthcare system). But no Palin attack had as much effect as the one she blasted out on her Facebook page claiming the Obama healthcare plan included a provision for "death panels" that would recommend euthanasia for severely ill patients like her Down syndrome-afflicted son, Trig. With the click of a button, Palin transformed the tone of the healthcare debate from rancorous to poisonous.

The source of Palin's "death panels" smear was a practiced propagandist, former New York's lieutenant governor Betsy McCaughey. When Bill Clinton introduced healthcare reform during his first term as president, McCaughey falsely claimed in an article published in the New Republic that the plan would force consumers to drop their private plans and buy into the government's programme (the article, widely circulated by Republicans, would go on to win a National Magazine Award, only to be retracted years later by the New Republic's editors). Now she was back in the spotlight, pushing a rumour that would be voted by the non-partisan fact-checking website Politifact.com as "the lie of 2009". McCaughey's latest innuendo was boosted by the cult of political crank Lyndon LaRouche, which mobilised to push the rumour into the mainstream.

In June 2009, one of LaRouche's top lieutenants publicly confronted Ezekiel Emanuel, the National Institute of Health's chief bioethicist and brother of White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, accusing him of seeking to reintroduce Hitler's T-4 programme to kill the handicapped through healthcare reform. "President Obama has put in place a reform apparatus reviving the euthanasia of Hitler Germany in 1939, that began the genocide there", LaRouche staffer Anton Chaitkin charged. Soon, LaRouche's followers were on street corners around the country with posters depicting Obama with a Hitler moustache. At a townhall forum on healthcare reform hosted by Barney Frank, a Democratic Representative, a LaRouche follower waved one of the Obama-as-Hitler posters and demanded: "Why do you continue to support a Nazi policy, as Obama has expressly supported this policy?"

Two months later, after Palin whispered the rumour on Facebook, prominent conservatives from former House speaker Newt Gingrich to ranking Senate finance-committee member Charles Grassley, parroted her claims before audiences of indignant Tea Partiers. Not to be outdone, Glenn Beck devoted an extended rant on his show to the reality of death panels. Beck, echoing the LaRouche cultists, accused Ezekiel Emanuel of "the devaluing of human life, putting a price on each individual." He thundered, "The death panel is not a firing-squad. Rationing is inevitable and they know it!"

The death-panel rumour served a variety of functions, all useful to the movement, but not necessarily to the Republican Party. Most importantly, the rumour resonated both with hard-core libertarians who resented the very existence of the federal government and Christian right activists who viewed the legalisation of abortion as a slippery-slope to government-sponsored euthanasia. The hysteria it engendered helped repair the rift exposed by the Terri Schiavo charade in 2005, when the evangelical conservative James Dobson publicly clashed with Armeiy, the libertarian leader, over the right of the government to interfere in a private family matter of life and death.

The enemy

The slurring of Obama as a sort of sleeper-agent crypto-Muslim helped bring the neo-conservatives back into the fray. The new neocon generation was led by Dick Cheney's daughter, Liz, who founded an anti-Obama advocacy group, Keep America Safe, by leveraging donations from pro-Israel sources. Asked by CNN's Larry King about the Birther movement that was challenging Obama's status as an American citizen, Liz Cheney remarked: "One of the reasons you see people so concerned about this is people are uncomfortable with having for the first time ever, I think, a president who seems so reluctant to defend the nation overseas." With the libertarians, Christian right, and the neocons seated around the same table, united in resentment of the alien president, the conservative movement was whole again.

The experiments in "terror-management theory" developed by three professors of psychology (Sheldon Solomon of Skidmore College, Jeff Greenberg of the University of Arizona, and Tom Pyszczynski of the University of Colorado) have demonstrated the connection between fear of death and intensification of conservative attitudes. The findings help explain the effectiveness of the death-panel rumour and insinuations by conservative figures that Obama was not truly American and somehow sympathetic to Islamic terrorists. Indeed, these seemingly irrational smears were guided by tactical reasoning, calculated to agitate voters with constant reminders of their own mortality. Whether or not independent voters responded, the rhetoric of death kept the Tea Party crowd in a persistent state of panic and rage, ensuring a standing army ready to fan out to rallies and town halls at the first sign of liberal malfeasance.

Obama's first year in office was marked by more than raucous protests; there were several disturbing murders committed by far-right extremists. In April 2009, a 22-year-old neo-Nazi wannabe named Richard Poplawski mowed down a SWAT team of Pittsburgh cops, killing three. Poplawski's best friend told reporters the young killer "grew angry recently over fears Obama would outlaw guns." Later it was discovered that Poplawski had posted a video-clip to a neo-Nazi website portraying Fox's Glenn Beck contemplating the existence of concentration-camps. (After a characteristically thorough investigation, Beck conceded they were not real.) On another occasion, the killer posted a video promoting Tea Party rallies. A month after the Pittsburgh bloodbath, Scott Roeder, a supporter of the militant anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, shot Dr George Tiller to death while he prayed at his church in Wichita, Kansas. Tiller was declared fair game by the anti-abortion movement because of his role as Kansas's only late-term abortion provider. During at least twenty-eight episodes of Bill O'Reilly's "O'Reilly Factor," O'Reilly had referred to Tiller as "Tiller the baby killer", a criminal guilty of "Nazi stuff." "I wouldn't want to be [Tiller] if there is a Judgment Day", O'Reilly proclaimed.

In August 2009, a middle-aged professional named George Sodini walked into a health club in suburban Pittsburgh and gunned down three women. The major media outlets explained Sodini's motives away by homing in on passages in his online diaries describing his loneliness, inability to convince women to have sex with him, and descent into chronic masturbation. Nearly every publication omitted or ignored a long deranged entry in which Sodini projected his sexual frustration onto Obama, whom he seemed to view as a symbol of black male virility and predation.

The day after Obama's election victory, Sodini wrote: "Good luck to Obama! He will be successful. The liberal media LOVES him. Amerika has chosen The Black Man. Good! In light of this I got ideas outside of Obama's plans for the economy and such. Here it is: Every black man should get a young white girl ... Kinda a reverse indentured servitude thing. Every daddy know when he sends his little girl to college, she be ... real good. I saw it. 'Not my little girl', daddy says! (Yeah right!!) Black dudes have thier [sic] choice of best white?? [ellipses in original]."

In another posting to an anti-Clinton forum in 1994, during the height of the Republicans' Whitewater investigation, Sodini revealed that he had purchased a bumper-sticker reading, "Stop Socialism, Impeach Clinton," from a National Review ad. A year later, Sodini ranted on an anti-government militia site: "I am convinced that more drastic action is required to bring the country back to the Constitutional order that it was 200 years ago. I don't think any group of political leaders will achieve this for us." Whether or not Sodini's murder-spree was motivated by his political passions, he was pathologically death-driven and fixated on the phantasmagoria of right-wing imagery. In his final diary entry, Sodini proclaimed: "Death lives!"

The bible

More than any other media figure of the Obama era, Glenn Beck encouraged the campaign of racial demonisation and conspiracy that consumed the Tea Party "Patriots". During a broadcast of "Fox and Friends", Beck opined that Obama

"has exposed himself over and over and over again as a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for white people, or the white culture." As evidence, Beck pointed to White House green-jobs czar Van Jones, an African-American former community organizer who was eventually forced to resign as a direct result of Beck's crusade. From there, Beck targeted another black Obama adviser, Valerie Jarrett, highlighting her ties to Acorn while upholding her and Jones as evidence of Obama's "socialist" agenda. In another broadcast, Beck played an audio clip of unidentified African-Americans referring to "Obama money" as they collected welfare-cheques in Detroit. Then he showed footage of members of a Kansas City-based youth group practicing a step show, a traditional African-American group dance apparently unfamiliar enough to Beck and his transfixed audience that he felt at liberty to claim the footage as evidence that "Obama's SS" was being trained across inner-city America.

In September 2009, Beck relentlessly targeted Acorn, the right's new favourite hobgoblin, admitting that he intended to use the poor people's advocacy group to distract his viewers from the healthcare debate. "Trust me", Beck said, "Everybody now says they're going to be talking about healthcare. I don't think so." (His statement was reminiscent of Rush Limbaugh's scandal-mongering remark during the early Clinton administration: "Whitewater is about healthcare.")

Beck promptly cued up a series of hidden-camera videos shot by conservative youth activists James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles inside Acorn field offices.

In the videos, O'Keefe baited African-American staffers into making statements explaining that Giles, who claimed she was a prostitute, could obtain low-income housing. O'Keefe edited in images of himself clad in an outlandish pimp costume to create the impression that he was dressed that way during the meetings with Acorn; however, Giles later admitted her partner had lied about wearing his costume to further incriminate Acorn. In the end, Acorn was exonerated of all criminal wrongdoing.

In a separate incident O'Keefe was arrested and charged with a federal crime after he and several conservative pals disguised themselves as telephone repairmen and attempted to wiretap phone-lines in the office of Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana. Like Ryan Sorba, O'Keefe and his posse were movement cadres paid and directed by well-funded conservative outfits; O'Keefe had been trained by the Leadership Institute, the right-wing youth group that nurtured leading lights like Jack Abramoff, Karl Rove, Ralph Reed, and Jeff Gannon.

While O'Keefe and his buddies plea-bargained with prosecutors, Beck basked in his formula for success. His show earned the highest ratings at Fox News, topping network franchises like O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. In the process, Beck's opinions became firmly implanted in the nervous systems of Tea Party activists. "Glenn Beck has taught us everything we know", a demonstrator at the 9-12 rally told me. "He's opened our eyes to so much."

But unlike the right-wing radio warhorses who helped usher in Newt Gingrich's Republican counter-revolution of 1994, Beck was not an authentic product of the movement. When Rush Limbaugh first began dominating the AM airwaves, Beck was mired in the world of mid-level commercial radio, delivering corny yarns about lesbians and celebrity trash in hopes of becoming the next Howard Stern. By night, as he has tirelessly recounted, he medicated his anxiety with cocaine and alcohol, destroying his first marriage in the process. "We remember Glenn from the womanising, the drinking, the drugs. Everybody who knew him at the time saw what a complete mess he was", a shock-jock from Tampa, Florida, who called himself Bubba the Love Sponge remarked to me during a broadcast of his nationally syndicated show.

Like Dusty Rhodes, the pseudo-populist demagogue of Elia Kazan's 1957 film, *A Face in the Crowd*, Beck was a self-destructive drifter who might have been crumpled up with a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 in an alleyway or been locked away in a prison cell had fame not found him first. Beck was only able to stabilise his life when he made his escape from freedom, marrying a conservative Mormon, converting to her religion, and transmuting his urge to abuse drugs into conservative radio diatribes.

When Beck first broke into television on CNN's Headline News Channel, he struggled to articulate a coherent political worldview. If he distinguished himself from other big-time conservative hosts in any way, he did so through strained and often snide attempts at humour, remnants of his failed radio career. Nevertheless, with help from his liberal agent, Matthew Hiltzik, Beck snagged a primetime slot at Fox News in early 2009. Around this same time, Beck began

promoting the work of an arcane Mormon conspiracy-peddler named W Cleon Skousen, whom he described as his political lodestar. Suddenly, Beck had something more to offer than irritable mental gestures.

Thanks to Beck's designation of Skousen's pseudo-historical tract *The 5000 Year Leap* as "required reading" on the website of his 9-12 Project, and his promotion of the book on his show, the previously obscure Skousen became the Hidden Imam of the Tea Party movement. By summer 2009, Skousen's *Leap* was among the top ten books on Amazon and a fixture on literature tables at Tea Party gatherings. It went from selling a puny couple of thousand copies in 2007 to selling over 200,000 copies in 2009. Just why the book generated such an instant appeal is difficult to understand. It is little more than a slapdash of quotes from the Founding Fathers, often taken out of context and deliberately oversimplified, to explain why America is the greatest nation in history. In the process, Skousen claims that church and state separation is un-American, that "coercive taxation" is communist, and that marriage is the underpinning of a free society. Benjamin Franklin, who wrote at length on the merits of "amours" with "old women," and who famously solicited prostitutes and fathered a son out of wedlock, was the ultimate authority Skousen quoted on the importance of marriage.

Though Skousen claims the Founders as the world's foremost source of eternal wisdom, he buttressed his points with fringe sources like the conspiracist Norman Dodd's screeds about the Illuminati. According to Skousen, Dodd claimed that "powerful influences congregating in the United States" like the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds had forced the United States into the first world war. Skousen published Dodd's manifestoes in his obscure journal *Freemen's Digest*, which he founded for the express purpose of propagating conspiracies.

Skousen's paranoid politics were an outgrowth of his participation in extreme anti-communist groups during the 1950s. He boasted of a close friendship with then-FBI director J Edgar Hoover and said he provided him with research on communist plots, claims disputed by FBI historians. (During a recent interview, Skousen's son, Paul, told me that contrary to rumours of Hoover's cross-dressing and homosexual dalliances, he would set the top cop up on blind dates with live women.) Skousen was fired from his job as Salt Lake City's police chief for, in the words of the city's conservative Mormon mayor, "conduct[ing] his office as chief of police in exactly the same manner in which the communists operate their government." From there, Skousen sailed off to the far shores of the right-peddling conspiracy tracts like *The Naked Communist*, and earning condemnation from his beloved FBI, which accused him in an internal memo of "promoting [his] own anti-communism for obvious financial purposes."

Skousen's vocal support for the far-right John Birch Society's claim that communists controlled President Dwight Eisenhower cost him the support of the corporate backers who had paid for his Red-bashing lecture tours. He went off the radar for several years, returning during the late 1960s to accuse the Jewish Rothschild family of secretly bankrolling everyone from Ho Chi Minh to the civil-rights movement. By the late 1970s, even the Church of Latter-Day Saints distanced itself from Skousen and his conspiracy theories. His work fell through the margins and might have disappeared entirely had Beck not revived it, turning *The 5000 Year Leap* into the bible of the Tea Party movement. Alexander Zaitchik observed in his authoritative profile of Skousen on Salon that Skousen's renewed influence through Beck and the Tea Party "suggests that the modern base of the Republican Party is headed to a very strange place."

The descent

Besides influencing Beck, Skousen's teachings inspired one of the Tea Party movement's most visible grassroots celebrities, retired sheriff Richard Mack. I met Mack in February at a far-right rally just outside of Montgomery, Alabama. On a makeshift stage towed into the middle of a rodeo arena by a pickup truck, Mack recalled with reverence his mentorship by Skousen, who he said taught him everything he needed to know about the constitution. Mack urged his spellbound audience to stockpile ammo and store food. "If you control the food supply", Mack warned, "you control the people. And that's the first step to slavery."

Already a hero to conservatives for successfully suing the Clinton administration over the provision in the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act requiring law enforcement to conduct criminal-background checks of gun purchasers, Mack reemerged in the Obama era as the archetypal local lawman who vowed to resist the tyrannical federal government. Along with a few dozen former and active military and law-enforcement personnel, Mack helped form a