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Beyond the days of mimeographed tracts

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 13, 2010

Tea party demonstrators march in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington Sept. 12. (AFP/Nicholas Kamm)

Back on my street in the Bronx, around 1972, I was sitting on my friend?s stoop discussing the finer points of music by The Who, when his father came to the front door.

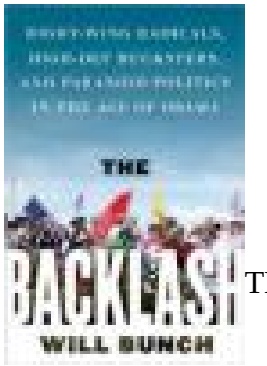
He anxiously handed me a smudged mimeographed sheet of paper that blared in big type: ?Peace sign or sign of Satan?? The tract discussed how the peace sign was actually a broken cross and went on to reveal an anti-Christian, anti-American campaign directed from Moscow and Beijing.

As I passed the sheet back, I noticed some small print at the bottom: ?Published by the John Birch Society.?

What was a little disturbing to me back then as a teenager strikes me now -- in this year of the tea party -- as actually somewhat quaint: A notorious right-wing group calling itself ?a society,? their mimeographed paper, their low-tech forms of communication. Forty years later, similar Bircher notions race through the digital world at the speed of light, fueled by cable television, Twitter and Facebook.

Yet this is a great paradox of our age: We communicate more but are less informed. We share broad bands of knowledge in a blink but our individual understanding appears to ever narrow.

The consequences of this communication form the backbone of Will Bunch?s *The Backlash*. Bunch, a progressive columnist for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, seeking to explain the tea party phenomenon, travels to an annual gun shoot in Kentucky, to a ramshackle small town in Delaware, and then to an empty suburb of Phoenix after the housing bubble has burst.



THE BACKLASH: RIGHT-WING RADICALS, HIGH-DEF HUCKSTERS, AND PARANOID POLITICS IN THE AGE OF OBAMA
By Will Bunch
Published by HarperCollins, $25.99

At first blush, what he finds are the kind of people we have seen all too often in American politics. They were Ross Perot voters in the mid-1990s, Ron Paul rebels more recently. Before that, they were John Birchers, McCarthyites, even the Know-Nothings of the 1850s. They are the angry people political scientist Richard Hofstadter identified in 1964 as part of ?the paranoid style in American politics.?

The activists Bunch talks to believe Obama is building a gulag across rural America, are convinced he is a secret Kenyan, and are dead set against his plot to indoctrinate their children toward socialism. Many, Bunch writes, have been the spark for tea parties in their hometowns and states. His encounters with them initially smack of condescension -- those ex-urban yahoos who?ll swallow anything. But then Bunch starts to ask the right questions and uncover compelling answers.

Trace them back to 1850, for sure, but there is something different about this year?s brand of ?insurgents.? They are not as easily dismissed as the Perot people, and they are changing the political landscape.

What happened? Bunch says social networks happened; cable news happened. New forms of communication allow people to easily reach out to the like-minded, arrange for meetings, rally the troops and raise real money.

But most importantly, this virtual world helps insurgents create an information bubble that feeds on itself while keeping unwelcome ideas out.

Social scientists call this ?group polarization.? Here?s how it works: An April 2010 *New York Times*/CBS poll cited by Bunch finds that 84 percent of tea party supporters claimed their beliefs ?generally reflect the views of most Americans,? even though only 25 percent of Americans said that. An odd phenomenon, until you appreciate the way new forms of media allow us to insulate ourselves.

Time and again, tea partiers tell Bunch about a YouTube video they were sent detailing, say, Obama?s concentration camp construction program. They swap Facebook posts on ?anti-socialist? group pages they create or join, and share tweets on the latest ?birther revelations? coming from Glenn Beck?s telecasts.

It is, Bunch writes, a ?national infrastructure of conservative outrage.? Big city newspapers and their Web sites, along with network newscasts (outside of FOX), are not part of the menu.

Digital media has enabled the tea party to gain compelling momentum, which, in turn, has added yet another new twist to this latest edition of the paranoid style: mainstream acceptance.

Even amid the turmoil of the 1960s, it was the rare Republican politician who openly courted the John Birch Society. My friend?s father slipped me his Bircher communiqué like a spy passing secret documents in Vienna right after World War II.

But today?s GOP leaders have no such reluctance: Bunch notes that elected Republicans encouraged the ?birther? movement, and quickly got into bed with tea party activists who accused Obama of setting up ?death panels? through his health care overhaul.

So far, this has paid dividends, reviving a political party on the ropes after the 2008 general election. But this can be a double-edged sword: In the past, insurgencies rose up quickly in disquieting times then just as quickly melted away when the immediate danger passed -- like that father on my street. When I was done, he folded his political tract along well-creased lines, tucked it in his jacket pocket, and silently walked back inside. He was, I remember, a man who rarely shared what went on inside his head.

Today, no one is quiet and everyone shares. Easy digital communication keeps people connected with minimal effort.

If these activists stay angry, stay radical and stay engaged, that may not be good long-term news for the GOP.

[Joe Ferullo is a television executive living in Los Angeles. He is a blogger for NCR Today and has written for *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, among other publications.]

This week, *NCR* is reporting on some of the most hotly contested races of the 2010 midterm election cycle. Our coverage includes:

- Emotions run high [1], by Paul Moses *(On the race for Pennsylvania's 8th district)*
- When politics become frozen [2], by Thomas C. Fox
- Taking the midterm ground game to Virginia's neighborhoods [3], by Michael Sean Winters *(On the race for Virginia's 5th district)*
- Candidates talk God, country, jobs [4], by Joshua J. McElwee *(On the race for Missouri's 4th district)*
- Beyond the days of mimeographed tracts [5], Book review by Joe Ferullo

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