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Tea Party Triumphs

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

New Hampshire hosts the nation's first presidential primary, but this year it also hosted the first test of the Tea Party's strength at the local level of the Republican Party. The verdict rendered by the meeting of the N.H. Republican State Party was mixed. Mitt Romney won the straw poll among presidential hopefuls, but the Tea Party-backed candidate for chairman of the state party defeated an establishment politician.

The Romney victory was unsurprising. Romney invested a great deal in the state during his 2008 presidential run and, additionally, he was Governor of neighboring Massachusetts for many years. The most populous towns in New Hampshire are all located along the Massachusetts border, and many voters there turn to Boston television stations for their news, so Romney is virtually a hometown favorite in the Granite State.

The more interesting result was the election of Jack Kimball as state chairman. Kimball is a businessman, an adoring fan of Glenn Beck, who said in his victory speech, "We are in a war and we are going to win it." Not much interest in "toning down" the rhetoric there. His victory was matched by the victory of Tea Party-backed candidates in Washington state, which selected a talk radio host as its party chair, and Arizona, where a conservative activist won the nod.

Party structures are less important to campaigns now than fundraising networks. But, as an indicator of how deeply the Tea Party cancer has infected the GOP, these three elections are ominous. Armed with a simplistic understanding of the Founding Fathers, an originalist interpretation of the Constitution (except for the Second Amendment, which of course in its original meaning applied only to muskets, not to assault weapons), a congeries of platitudes about American exceptionalism and, most importantly, with an almost demonic antipathy to what we Catholics call the "Common Good," the Tea Party is a blight upon the GOP.

Tomorrow night, Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin will deliver the GOP response to the State of the Union. Ryan is widely viewed as a serious legislator, someone who has put forth real proposals to face the nation's economic difficulties. But, his will not be the only response. Rep. Michelle Bachmann will deliver the Tea Party response. Can't wait to hear that rant.

I am tempted to say that the Tea Party is to the GOP what some of the Net Roots are to the Democrats, except the writers at Daily Kos have not taken over the Democratic Party. Keith Olbermann was fired because, aside from the apparent inter-personal issues, MSNBC aspires to being a news outlet, not a propaganda ministry. Beck, Hannity, et al., have not been handed their walking papers because Fox has no such aspiration.

It is time for the grown-ups in the GOP to find ways to restrain the Tea Party zealots. Apart from any ideological considerations, I wonder if a talk radio host knows much about the grunt work a state party chair must do, the voter lists, the fundraising, the schmoozing with state legislators, etc. But, going three-for-three in state party chair races should scare the living bejesuz out of the GOP grown-ups. It sure scares the hell out of me!

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