

# WebMemo



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## Reclaiming America: Why We Honor the Tea Party Movement

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The period of history we know as the American Founding, stretching from 1763 to 1776 to 1787, is made up of a series of turning points, crucial moments like Lexington and Concord. After 1763, you recall, the British looked to the American colonies as sources of revenue and began taxing them, claiming that they had the authority to rule them in “all cases whatsoever.” And these colonists were forced to think through things they hadn’t thought about for some time, much as we are today.

At first reluctantly, and then increasingly with fervor and determination, they began to object and to resist. In hopes of pacifying the colonists, the British actually got rid of most of the taxes, except for one: a tax on tea. For those colonists, though, it wasn’t the amount that was the issue; it was the principle, because it violated the right not to be taxed without representation.

In the fall of 1773, seven ships had been sent to the colonies loaded with tea, and they showed up at four port cities. We always think of one Boston Tea Party, but tea ships showed up at New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston as well as Boston. In every case, there was protest and resistance. On December 16, the first Tea Party rally in American history, seven thousand people showed up at the Old South Meeting House, and that night some hundred or so individuals—not very well disguised as Indians—boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and threw 342 crates of tea overboard. John Adams called it “the grandest event which has ever yet happened since the controversy with Britain opened.”

For 200 years or so, America’s principles of liberty and equality, of consent, of religious liberty and private property, of the rule of law and constitutionalism have been under attack in the name of history and science and relativism, in favor of evolving truths, living constitutions, and bureaucratic government, through the Progressive Movement and the New Deal, the Great Society, and now into the age of Obama. Everyone in this room stands against that transformation. Many have fought for the truths of the American Founding for some time, following in the footsteps of statesmen and conservative heroes.

There have been many victories, defeats, successes, and setbacks. The left has always maintained that this progressive state they’ve created is inevitable and permanent. Many reveled in that fact. Unfortunately, many also accepted that argument.

But a funny thing has happened on the road to the latest iteration of progressive liberalism. An overpromising campaign gave rise to an overreaching agenda, and American citizens—many never before engaged in politics—began to protest and challenge elected officials, attending town hall meetings and then rallies, armed only with handmade signs, pocket Constitutions, and Gadsden flags.

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Is it possible that the American people are waking up to the progressive assault on their liberty? Perhaps the question of modern ever-expanding government, and its permanent inevitability, has not yet been settled—at least not in the minds of the American people?

The debate between America's Founders and the modern progressive paradigm of government, a debate that usually occurs only here and there in academic conferences and think tanks, has now been engaged in the public square, perhaps as never before in our lifetimes.

The Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship is given annually to American citizens who uphold America's principles, embody the virtues of character and mind that animated America's Founders, and emphasize the spirit of independence and entrepreneurial citizenship in the U.S.

In just over one year, the growing nationwide effort of American citizens called the Tea Party Movement has changed the landscape of American politics. In its civil protests and spirited opposition to the direction of American politics, these citizen patriots—many of whom were never before involved in political activity—reflect the civic virtues of popular participation, public discourse, and open dissent that are the very hallmarks of American self-government.

Behind their activities and motivating their efforts is not a single issue or partisan agenda but a deepening commitment and advocacy of the truths of the Declaration of Independence and the basic principles of the United States Constitution. Because of the significance of this effort, bringing America's first principles to the fore of the public debate, motivating millions of their fellow Americans to get involved in the effort to revive those principles and to reorient our politics toward them, the 2010 Henry Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship is awarded to the Tea Party Movement and thereby honors all those American citizens nationwide who are now newly committed to renewing American liberty.

After the first Tea Party in 1773, the British Parliament passed what were called the Intolerable Acts to force submission to their rule. One year later,

after the first Tea Party, came Lexington and Concord. The intolerable act today is called Obamacare—a massive bureaucratic expansion of government over one-sixth of the American economy and many aspects of our lives and medical decisions. But there is a key difference that I would like to emphasize: Those early patriots had to establish their independence and to start anew. Our task is different. It is not about fixed bayonets but fixed principles; not about bullets but ballots. Our task is not to overthrow; it is not revolution; it is renewal and restoration of those self-evident truths of constitutional government at the heart of America.

This is a teaching moment, and we must all redouble our efforts in this cause, deepening the sentiments of the day to be a truly constitutional moment. This is why the Salvatori Prize of \$25,000 will be used to meet the tremendous demand for educational materials we continue to receive from the Tea Party organizations nationwide, funding the expanded distribution of pocket Constitutions and other materials, and providing First Principles kits of monographs and books like *The Heritage Guide to the Constitution* to Tea Party leaders across the country.

Let me close with a story, one that I discovered in writing my new book. It is about Levi Preston, who was a young man who fought at the Battle of Concord. He was asked years later by a historian why he went out to fight that day against the best-trained and best-armed military force in the world. Was it the intolerable oppressions of the British? The Stamp Act? "No." What about the tax on tea? "I didn't drink tea," he said. "The boys threw it overboard." It must have been all your reading of all those books like Herrington and Sidney and Locke. "Never heard of them," he said. "I only read the Bible, the catechism, and the Almanac."

"Well, what was it then that made you go out and fight the British?" the historian asked. "Young man, what we meant in going after those Redcoats was simple. You see, we had always governed ourselves, we always intended to govern ourselves, and they didn't mean that we should."

I believe that we are at a turning point in our history. It is not clear what will happen. We will either

go the way of every other republic in world history, or we will regain our footing and reset our compass.

Because of the strength of our movement and because of the stirring of America's citizens and the unending call of liberty, I am confident that we are going to make the right choice. Someday in the future, some historian will ask some individual, perhaps one of you, "Why did you get involved in the Tea Parties? Was it the spending? Was it the bail-outs? Was it health care? "No," they will answer. It

was very simple. We had always governed ourselves, we always intended to govern ourselves, and those liberals didn't think that we should."

—*Matthew Spalding, Ph.D.*, is Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation and the author of *We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*. He delivered these remarks at a meeting of The Heritage Foundation Resource Bank on April 22, 2010.