

Tax Day sees tea partiers descend on Capitol

Contributed by Andy Hogue
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Some passionate taxpayers got a little catharsis for a change on income tax deadline day.

In a rare display of conservatives demonstrating and picketing government policy, hundreds of thousands hit the streets in towns across America April 15 with a message to Washington: Stop borrowing and spending so much or there may come a heavy price to pay next election cycle.

Two such events took place at the seat of Texas government. There were nearly 2,000 people at the lunchtime "Don't Mess With Texas Tea Party" rally at the Austin City Hall, hosted by Americans for Prosperity and headlined by Gov. Rick Perry and leaders of Travis County Republican and Libertarian parties.

Perry called the event a rare opportunity to see so many small government advocates gathered in Austin.

At 4 p.m., a line of protestors which at one point spanned the entire length of Congress Avenue from Ceasar Chavez Street to the South entrance of the Capitol (possibly numbering 5,000 or more — DPS would not release the official count by press time) marched to Auditorium Shores for a re-enactment of the Boston Tea Party.

Though no actual tea was intentionally thrown into Ladybird Lake, several boxes representing the tea were dropped in via boats on the water. The afternoon rally was spearheaded by Austin couple Judy Holloway and Greg Holloway via the Web site Havinganaustinteaparty.com.

Meanwhile, crowds of nearly 8,000 massed in Waco, and possibly 10,000 outside the Alamo in San Antonio, where commentator Glenn Beck and gun-loving rock artist Ted Nugent spoke.

Signs at the Austin rallies read "Free markets, not freeloaders," "Follow the Constitution," and "Bush tapped my phone, Obama tapped my wallet, I’m all tapped out." A couple of hand-made signs compared several leading Democrats to Somalian pirates.

At the noon rally, Texas Railroad Commission Chairman and U.S. Senate candidate Michael Williams called the rally a collection of "real Americans making sure that we’re not taxed into a third world nation."

"This is a true grassroots effort. There’s no rich person or organization guiding us," Williams said. "There’s no Michael Moore. There’s no George Soros. There’s no union head mobilizing us, or ACORN bringing you here today."

Origins of the Tea Parties

Deriving their name from the Boston Tea Party that helped precipitate the American Revolution, this week’s tea parties this week were organized to protest growth of the federal government in conjunction with the income tax filing deadline. Media reports vary about how many rallies took place across the country this week, but numbers range from 700 to 800.

Protesters generally oppose recent federal spending bills, primarily "stimulus" plans — believing that the costs of repaying such spending will be borne by future generations and perhaps would result in a diminished economy.

The concept of a modern-day Tea Party started when bloggers organized protests in February to protest the federal

efforts at spending borrowed funds to stimulate the economy. This soon inspired CNBC commentator Rick Santelli's now-famous report from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, calling government plans to refinance mortgages as promoting bad fiscal behavior.

Santelli then called for a "Chicago Tea Party" to protest the move, an idea that caught fire in the blogosphere and political and Christian talk radio. About 30 cities in Texas hosted such parties this week.

Though Perry has publicly rejected "stimulus" funds for unemployment insurance, Texas is still poised to receive billions from the federal government. An April 14 report from the select committee on economic stabilization said Texas is expected to receive \$16 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

An unlikely coalition?

Those comprising the crowds at each event ranged from members of the Texas Federation of Republican Women, to Ron Paul Republicans, to members of the Libertarian Party, to dyed-in-the-wool independents.

What unified these protestors was opposition to the biggest government spending programs in recent memory. Perhaps with foreign policy issues such as the War on Terror, and moral issues such as abortion and the drug war, not factors, the crowd was focused on economics. Gov. Rick Perry said it was a chance for those gathered "to restore commitment to our shared set of values." Many of the values Perry touched on, though, were familiar campaign themes he has vocalized since gaining a major rival in the form of U.S. Kay Bailey Hutchison.

"You're surrounded by fellow patriots. Individuals who embrace concepts like lower taxes and smaller government, and freedom for every individual," Perry said. "I'm talking about states' rights."

Perry then repeated "states' rights" two additional times, meeting raucous applause, perhaps in support of HCR 50, which affirms Texas has sovereignty under the U. S. Constitution's 10th Amendment over all powers not otherwise granted to the federal government.

An opportunity for opposition

A handful of cries from audience members calling for secession (by this reporter's estimate, maybe two or three such persons) prompted an AP reporter to ask Gov. Rick Perry what he thought of the calls for Texas to separate from the union.

"I think there's a lot of different scenarios. Texas is a unique place …" Perry said to an AP reporter aside the earlier Austin rally. "We've got a great union. There's absolutely no reason to dissolve it. But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what might come out of that? But Texas is a very unique place, and we're a pretty independent lot to boot."

Perry's response garnered the attention of CNN, making for national headlines. It wasn't long before Rep. Jim Dunnam (D-Waco), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, called for a press conference. Addressing reporters April 16, Dunnam called Perry's words "reckless."

A press release from the Texas Democratic Party issued prior to the Tea Parties said, "Fans of irony may take note and point out that nationally, eight years of Republican rule created the largest budget deficit in history while here in Texas, the state budget plan supported by Gov. Perry's fellow Republicans depends on billions in stimulus fund dollars" (though the Democrats attained a sizeable majority in the Congress following the 2006 elections).

Heard at the rallies

Perry said at the lunchtime rally that he was concerned with the erosion of rights associated with the federal spending plans.

"They're overturning our rights, one after another," he said. "Making choices that would leave our founding fathers scratching their heads. They're happily ignoring the founding documents of our republic. They're happily ignoring the limits put on our federal governments – limits that our early leaders ratified because they've seen what happens when government is left unchecked."

Michael Williams, chairman of the Texas Railroad Commission, said: "They've gone from 'Yes, we can' to 'No, you can't, the government will do it for you … We've had to tell Washington that there would be no tea party if you weren't spending like a bachelor party."

Other speakers at the lunchtime rally included Peggy Venable of Americans for Prosperity-Texas, Empower Texans Executive Director Michael Quinn Sullivan, Michele Samuelson of the Texas Federation of Republican Assemblies, President of the UT Young Conservatives of Texas Scott Specht, president of the UT College Republicans Lance Kennedy, and Libertarian Party of Texas Chairman Robert Butler.

Republican Party of Texas Chair Tina Benkiser compared the stimulus bill to George Orwell's "Animal Farm" – "of what happens when the hogs take control of the farm."

Speakers at the 4p.m. rally included U.S. Rep. Mike McCaul, the Free Market Foundation's Jonathan Saenz, Sen. Dan Patrick, and Reps. Doug Miller, Rob Eissler, Debbie Riddle and Allen Fletcher.

What could this mean for the future?

Radio host Rick Green said the Tea Parties represented a "second American Revolution … fought not with bullets, but with ballots." Assuming each of the protestors present could recruit at least a handful of voters to arm themselves with ballots, it may be enough to begin swinging some elections in a political environment where most pundits are favoring Democratic gains through the next decade. At the very least, it may represent a very vocal minority that could shift moderate Republicans to the right and popularize small government rhetoric.

Representatives of the several sponsoring groups and organizations present had sign-up lists present, as well as numbers cell phone users could text to submit their information to for further contact – likely for future politicking.

Prior to the 4 p.m. march, McCaul called the Tea Party "an awakening" – a sentiment echoed by Perry earlier in the day.

"This is a movement that is building strength, and gaining momentum," Perry said. "And we will not be ignored."