Tea Party's strange brew: Unmitigated disasters

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Major crises in recent years have been fostered by an unregulated private sector. Wall Street's recklessness unraveled the economy and put millions out of work. BP oil company cut corners on safety and ravaged the environment in pursuit of profits. And yet, the major new political movement that has arisen in this period has directed its furor not at Wall Street or Big Business but at the federal government, which has tried to mitigate these disasters.

The radical antigovernment Tea Party movement may represent less than a fifth of the electorate, but it is one of the most energized political forces of the day, and it is shaping debate across the nation, especially in the Republican Party. The Tea Party movement was sparked in 2008–2009 in reaction to the government bailout of mortgage holders, big banks and auto companies and by the government stimulus package that sought to ease the impact of the worst financial recession in 80 years.

The movement's deep suspicion of the federal government was reflected recently in Texas Representative Joe Barton's apology to BP for what he termed President Obama's "shakedown" of the company after Obama secured from BP a $20 billion escrow fund to compensate victims of the oil spill in the gulf. Barton called it "a tragedy of the first proportion, that a private corporation can be subjected to what I would characterize as a shakedown, a $20 billion shakedown." Though Barton was forced to recant by Republican leaders who know it's politically treacherous to side with BP as thousands of gallons of oil are spewing into the gulf each day, he had reason to think he was on safe ground: his "shakedown" comment was a talking point issued by 115 House Republicans who are members of the Republican Study Committee. Judson Phillips, the leader of Tea Party Nation, supported Barton, calling the White House pressure on BP "extortion."

The Tea Party movement represents an effort to undo the 20th-century consensus of corporate liberalism, according to which Big Government is the necessary

counterweight to Big Business, an arrangement that has offered a modicum of protection to the public while maintaining a stable political and economic environment for business.

Individual resistance to Big Anything is understandable. But in directing their libertarian passions at government alone, Tea Party activists fail to grasp the complexities and scale of modern life. None of the major political challenges of our time—health care, environmental dangers, social security, the globalization of the economy and the immense power of banks and companies that become “too big to fail”—is addressed by the Tea Party’s antitax, antigovernment ideology.

Soon after Obama negotiated the escrow fund from BP, the *New York Times* (June 17) reported on the long-standing environmental disaster in Nigeria. That oil-rich country has suffered major oil spills every year for the past 50 years. Spills from oil wells and pipes in the once-fertile Niger delta have destroyed rich fishing and farming lands on which not only locals but the entire population of the country depend. The locals live in poverty. Those who protest the environmental disaster are met with violence. And imagine this: the government doesn’t interfere.