



# THE VIEW

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## OUTRAGE THEN AND NOW

BY

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One of the truly fascinating things about being a spectator of the grand game of politics is the ability to observe the swing of the political pendulum from right to left and back again. I believe that it is an absolute truth in politics that what goes around almost always comes around. While watching the endless news accounts of town hall meetings on Congressional health care plans and the impassioned and often disruptive responses from grassroots opposition groups, I was overcome by a combination of nostalgia and *déjà vu*. This is not the first time that the First Amendment to the United States Constitution has been put to such a vigorous test.

The year 1968, a little over 40 years ago, serves as an excellent time period to observe these same tactics applied to public policy. That year was a year of controversy marked by speak-ins, sit-ins, teach-ins, and disruptions of scheduled speakers. The proponents were convinced that right was on their side while those in opposition were certain that they were abusing, not using, their First Amendment rights and that what they were doing was certainly un-American. Words like communist, socialist and Hitler were tossed around with great abandon. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Free Speech Movement, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP and many others helped to mobilize Americans against the Viet Nam War, for Civil Rights, for Women's Rights and against government in general. Those who disagreed with such vocal demonstrations reacted with outrage and claims that the perpetrators were mobilized by organizations lacking the best interests of the country as a whole. Does such criticism of organizing groups sound familiar?

Fast forward 40 years. Once again the air is filled with angry shouts as grass roots opponents gather to express outrage at government efforts to enact an overhaul of the nation's health care system. No doubt their frustration is compounded by the impact of the worst economic downturn since the passing of the Great Depression. Just as was the case 40 years ago those who wish to act on their frustrations can gain their marching orders from such organizations as Americans for Prosperity, Patients First, The Tea Party Patriots, Americans for Limited Government, Defiance, Not Fear and many others. The similarities to the movement now and the movements 40 years ago are uncanny. Even today, plans are

being solidified for a nationwide rally on August 22 that will merge the passions of the anti-tax, anti-government Tea Party participants with those who oppose government involvement in health care. The rhetoric then and now was often long on shock value and short on real facts, but its effectiveness in motivating crowds cannot be denied.

These ironies give one pause to wonder -- Have the modern day demonstrators acquired their tactics from yesteryear? How ironic is it that the protestors 40 years ago and those heading for the Tea Parties and the town hall meetings now hold a similar disdain for the nation's government and in fact express that disdain in very similar terms?

Citizens who get up from their comfortable seats and head out to meetings to vent their feelings about the actions of government have been given directions on why and how to do so since the founding of the country. Perhaps the most well known treatise on civil disobedience was written by Henry David Thoreau, originally titled *Resistance to Civil Government*, later shortened to simply *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau argued that people should not permit governments to overrule consciences and that when government was working injustice it was the duty of conscientious citizens to be a "counter friction" and stop the process. It is perhaps the greatest irony of all that the tactics and organizational expertise being applied today and those employed four decades ago can be taken from the play book of grassroots activist Saul Alinsky in his *Rules for Radicals*. It will be remembered that in the 2008 Presidential campaign Barack Obama was highly criticized by those on the right for his time as a "community organizer" and the use made of Alinsky's work by those in the field of community activism. Rule 12 in *Rules for Radicals* states that "the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative." Rule 13 tells the activist to "pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." These Alinsky directives are very similar to instructions given by a litany of Web sites today, and they were second nature to the activists of 1968.

What does history tell us about the effectiveness of such tactics? The 1960's witnessed passage of definitive Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation. Women burned their undergarments to gain attention and the women's movement is going strong to this day. President Lyndon Johnson abruptly quit the 1968 Presidential race in the face of withering attacks of the anti-war protestors. President Obama and the Democratic majority should perhaps take heed. These tactics have worked when deployed by the left and they may be equally effective when put to use by those on the right.



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