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## Tea Party for the Left?

**As Occupy Wall Street explodes, the movement is being pegged as a left-wing Tea Party. John Avlon on the key differences between the protests—and why they both miss the mark.**

by [John Avlon \(/contributors/john-avlon.html\)](/contributors/john-avlon.html) | October 10, 2011 9:39 AM EDT

We are living in a time of decentralized populist political movements, fueled by economic anxiety and magnified by social media.

As [Occupify Wall Street \(http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/10/07/a-blow-by-blow-account-of-the-occupy-wall-street-protests-turned-into-mass-arrests.html\)](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/10/07/a-blow-by-blow-account-of-the-occupy-wall-street-protests-turned-into-mass-arrests.html) spread into satellite protests this past week, there was an understandable impulse to impose an established narrative, asking whether this was the mirror image of the Tea Party protests.

Most of the protesters I spoke to dismissed the comparisons quickly. “The Tea Party is the opposite of Occupy Wall Street. The only thing we have in common is our homemade signs,” Eric Seligson of Brooklyn told me, as he folded anarchist pamphlets by the light of a headlamp in Zuccotti Square on Friday night.

One of the ironies of the coverage of the Wall Street protests to date is that the right is condemning them in almost the same terms as the left condemned the Tea Party movement, and the left is likewise angrily arguing that media bias is behind anything less than uncritical coverage.

For example, here’s Republican Majority Leader Eric Cantor on Friday. “I’m increasingly concerned about the growing mobs occupying Wall Street and other cities around the country ... Believe it or not, some in this town [Washington, D.C.] have actually condoned the pitting of Americans against other Americans.”

And here’s Eric Cantor rallying the crowd at 2009’s Values Voters Summit: “Right now, millions of Americans are waking up, realizing that they don’t recognize their country anymore.” Down the hall, his conservative compatriots were hosting seminars with unifying titles like “Thugocracy: Fighting the Vast-Left Wing Conspiracy” and “ObamaCare: Rationing Your Life Away.” Double standards and situational ethics are the way the hyperpartisan game is played.



Occupy Wall Street demonstrators walk down Broadway from Washington Square Park to Zuccotti Park on Saturday, Henny Ray Abrams / AP Photo

But it is a two-way street. Liberals loved the telling snapshots of the more unhinged signs at Tea Party rallies—among those I saw were: “Don’t make the U.S.A. a Third World Country—Go Back to Kenya,” “King George Didn’t Listen Either,” “Obama Lied, Granny Died,” and “Don’t Touch My Medicare.” But now they are claiming that similar snapshots of the messages penned at the Occupy Wall Street protests are taken out of context and unrepresentative. Among the signs I’ve seen across the street from Ground Zero are: “How Long Can the Corporate-Military Occupation of Earth Go On?” “Corporatism is Fascism,” “9/11 Truth,” “We are Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, Palestine, Spain, Yemen, Chile, Bahrain, Syria, Bolivia and Libya.” That’s a lot of context.

It’s an old trick: populist rallies gain intensity by encouraging a loss of perspective, fueling anger with apocalyptic urgency. In the case of the Tea Party, conservative activists seemed to believe that losing the 2008 election was like living under tyranny. And today, too many in the Occupy Wall Street crowd toss around comparisons to Arab Spring uprisings, where state-police dictatorships are still murdering peaceful protesters everyday.

So here’s a mathematically measurable reality check: Zuccotti Square—the official name of what is known locally as Liberty Park—is just 26,000 square feet, or roughly half an acre. Inside, there is a food line, clothes bank, lending library, and a lot of space taken up by sleeping bags. The numbers of protesters swell to the thousands during the day and on weekends, but the square still defines the essential contours of the protests, housing a few hundred earnest souls overnight, as tourists and journalists circle.

It’s an old trick: populist rallies gain intensity by encouraging a loss of perspective, fueling anger with apocalyptic urgency.

Occupy Wall Street protesters claim that there are 200 sympathetic satellite protests in 12 states around the

country, including one that attempted to occupy the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum on Saturday. But it is still far less than the 346 Tea Party protests documented around the country on Tax Day 2009, drawing more than 300,000 people, including 3,500 in lower Manhattan and 15,000 in Atlanta. And it's safe to say that if any of the Tea Party rallies turned violent and clashed with the cops—as Occupy Wall Street did on Wednesday night, trying to storm police barricades—there would have been intense and appropriate condemnation.

There is no question that the Tea Party benefitted enormously from groups like Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks underwriting organizational costs—and Fox News running 100 near-PSAs beginning a week before the protests. But likewise, support from some 39 unions and community organizations have helped bulk up and organize the Occupy Wall Street crowd, and now select MSNBC shows and Current TV seem to be competing to see who can outpromote these protests.

Just as the Tea Party initially pushed the idea that they were an independent movement angry at both Republicans and Democrats, there is a drive to try and describe the Wall Street protests as being beyond partisanship. They are decidedly left wing, as opposed to simply liberal or even Democrats. Among the pamphlets I've been handed while walking through the crowd include primers on "Public Anarchism," a brief autobiography of Emma Goldman, and "Women in the Spanish Revolution."

"The Tea Party is phony, a fake grassroots. They're supported by the Koch Brothers and Fox News. They're not representative of workers. They're mostly disenfranchised white people," Eric Seligson told me, gesturing to the young and comparatively diverse crowd. "Maybe some of them are losing their jobs but their anger is misdirected, because they're being taught to side with those who crashed the economy," added Sara Quinter, from Queens, N.Y. "Instead of identifying with their fellow 99 percent, they're thinking they should identify with the 1 percent."

But at least one man in the crowd, wearing an "End the Fed" T shirt and a tricorn hat argued for common cause with the Tea Party. "I believe there's a lots of overlap between the message of Ron Paul and Occupy Wall Street," said Gabriel Brown of Long Island. "We're against the war. We're against the Federal Reserve. We're against the police state and the Patriot Act. I think there's lots of unity here. They need to start coming down here and start being in the marketplace of free ideas."

The "marketplace of free ideas" is a great phrase that is needed these days—an open civic conversation about societal problems and policy solutions. But populist protests quickly polarize into us-against-them, demanding all-or-nothing fealty, increasingly enforced by partisan media. Healthy skepticism, a sense of humor and independent perspective are essential but endangered by these dynamics.

The Tea Party protests began as fiscal-conservative protests against the generational theft of deficits and debt, but a serious strain of Obama Derangement Syndrome soon emerged. The problem in trying to talk about the Tea Party at the time was that the right only recognized the principled fiscal-conservative protests, while the left could only see the fever of Obama Derangement Syndrome—civic conversation became almost impossible across that divide.

Just as the excesses of the Tea Party obscured the real issue of dealing with the deficit and the debt, making common ground more difficult to achieve, in these early weeks of the Occupy Wall Street protests, we are seeing a rush to the ramparts. This threatens to obscure the very real reasons people should be angry at our screwed-up financial system that led to corruption and collusion and economic malpractice. We should have a fact-based debate about growing gaps between the super-rich and middle class in America, reinstating

Glass-Stiegel or whether Harry Reid's millionaire's tax is the best way to pay for the Jobs Bill while beginning to pay down the debt. It's not insensitive to say that comparing the U.S.A. to dictatorships while banging away in a drum circle isn't the best way to get taken seriously.

What gets lost in the pendulum swing of populist protests is a sense of citizen responsibility to actually solve problems in a democratic republic—defining the common ground that exists and then building on it. In the current polarized political environment, that just might be the most revolutionary idea of all.

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## Southern Sudan's Historic Independence Referendum

**After years of war and a genocide that left 2.5 million dead, the first day of a referendum on Southern Sudan's independence was a stunning triumph—now being tested by reports of violence. John Avlon talks to jubilant Sudanese voters on the ground at a moment of unaccustomed celebration.**

by [John Avlon \(/contributors/john-avlon.html\)](/contributors/john-avlon.html) | January 9, 2011 5:52 PM EST

After walking across Sudan during two decades of civil war, 17 “Lost Boys” took a final step toward liberty on Sunday morning, joining their fellow Southern Sudanese in a long-awaited vote for independence.

“After all of the struggle, loss of life, separation, and killing, we can see that we are now allowed to vote freely for our destiny,” Valentino Achak Deng told me in the southern capital city of Juba, along the banks of the Nile. Deng, the subject of a “fictionalized memoir” by Dave Eggers, [What Is the What?](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0307385906/thedaibea-20/) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0307385906/thedaibea-20/>), helped tell the story of the Lost Boys and the suffering of Southern Sudan. Now he is both witnessing and participating in a new chapter in the deeply troubled history of the region, this one framed by hope for peace and stability. “We’re going to vote in large numbers, together, and then just look at our faces and our eyes and be happy,” Deng said.



Senator John Kerry greets a southern Sudanese woman, holding a picture of South Sudan's late rebel leader John Garang, outside a polling station in Juba on Jan. 9.

At stake in the seven-day referendum is the separation of Africa's largest state into two sovereign states. The divisions between the Muslim and Arab-dominated government in the north and the Christian and African tribal populations of the south have been festering since end of colonial rule in 1956. In 1983, those tensions erupted into a 20-year civil war that killed 2.5 million people. As North and South negotiated a peace treaty that would be signed in 2005, Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, began a genocide against Muslims in Darfur, a western province of Sudan; he has since been indicted by the International Criminal Court for his crimes there.

The Bush administration negotiated the comprehensive peace agreement of 2005 and set Jan. 9, 2011, as [the date of a Southern Sudan referendum](/articles/2011/01/07/sudan-elections-the-moment-of-truth.html) to decide the fate of the two-state solution.

As this hopeful and historic day unfolded, and counter to most official expectations, the south resisted provocations in the early going--only to see the initial triumph tested by [reports of violent clashes Monday](/cheats/2011/01/10/deadly-clashes-mar-sudanese-election.html).

It is a moment of unaccustomed celebration in a country that has known unimaginable suffering. Poverty endures even in the bustling port city of Juba, where the buildings are one story with tin roofs, the roads mostly unpaved, and trash and rubble covered with red dust under a broad blue sky. But the spirit of the Southern Sudanese people is a mix of jubilation and determination, as they anticipate deliverance in the birth of the world's newest nation.

Over the past four days, I have traveled throughout Juba and flown up to the contested state of Abyei, the likely next flashpoint between north and south, with [George Clooney and John Prendergast of the Enough Project](/articles/2010/11/06/george-clooney-a-grand-bargain-for-peace-in-sudan.html), who used several previous trips to Sudan to bring international scrutiny to the conflict. I now find myself witnessing up close the creation of a new democracy, a rare occasion this side of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many challenges remain,

but the start of this referendum promises a new era.

Crowds started to gather outside polling stations in Juba at 3 a.m. on Sunday morning. When the polls opened five hours later, the lines were double deep and remained packed until closing at 5 p.m. Men and women wore brightly colored suits and dresses for the occasion and waved their voter registration cards in the air as evidence of their new electoral empowerment. I asked one young man named Gaddafi how it felt to vote for the first time. He paused for a moment, as if overcome by the reality, then replied, "I feel free at last, free at last, like Martin Luther King. Thank God almighty we are free at last."

"We're going to vote in large numbers, together, and then just look at our faces and our eyes and be happy."

Barring massive fraud, there is little doubt the south will vote overwhelmingly for secession—the betting at local bars is on whether the vote in favor will be over or under 95 percent. But there is another threshold that must be passed: verification that 60 percent of the 3.9 million registered South Sudanese voters participated in the referendum.

Street signs and billboards here are uniformly pro-independence, telling passers-by that a "yes" vote for secession, signified by an open hand, rather than a clenched fist, is a "symbol of dignity" and a "symbol of justice." Poll watchers are more muted, wearing white hats imprinted with the words "Vote Wisely." It is difficult to find any Southerner who wants to remain part of the existing Sudanese state under Sharia law—unsurprising, considering the 55 years of struggle and 2.5 million lives that have been lost fighting for independence.

Additionally, an estimated 40,000 refugees known locally as "Returnees" have flooded the south over the past three months to participate in the referendum and build a new life in their new nation. At a visit to the Port of Juba on Thursday, I spoke to several of the returnee families who now sit on Southern soil surrounded by piles of their belongings, like a house without walls. I asked Santiago MacWhite where he would make his permanent home. "I am home beneath this tree," he said through a translator. "I am free. I am home."

For all the spirit of celebration, the referendum's success was far from ordained. Just three months ago, it was widely believed that the voting would have to be pushed back or delayed indefinitely. International attention had shifted away from Sudan in the aftermath of the peace accords, and "Save Darfur" started to sound like a dusty bumper sticker from 2005. With decreased attention came increased tension between the north and the south. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that Sudan was "a ticking time bomb," while then-Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair declared that "a new mass killing or genocide is most likely to occur in Southern Sudan."

But renewed focus on Sudan from the Obama administration, including the appointment of Senator John Kerry as a special negotiator, helped turn the tide. Clooney raised public awareness about the referendum with his high-profile visits, reaching a far larger audience than a United Nations press release ever could and pressuring elected officials to keep plans for the referendum on course. And in October, China surprised observers by announcing that it would support the outcome of the voting, making it more difficult for the north to suppress the south without displeasing its largest investor. The South Sudanese leadership rose to the occasion as well under the leadership of one-time rebel leader and current Vice President Salva Kiir, whose trademark black cowboy hat was a gift from George W. Bush. Sending a message of restraint in the event of violent provocation, Kiir also drew tribal leaders into a new coalition committed to the creation of the world's 193rd nation.

On this first day of referendum voting, there were, however, two reports of tribal violence. They occurred in the provinces of Unity State and Abyei in the 48 hours before people went to the polls. Specifics are slow to travel in Sudan, and even local government officials seemed short on detailed information, but unconfirmed reports from the regions indicate that four people were murdered in Unity State and as many as 30 in Abyei.

Reports of the violence have thus far failed to dampen the hopeful tone of Sunday's voting. But serious hurdles await the fledgling state. A new government will need to be formed, and official independence will not be granted until July 9. This gives the north at least six months to disrupt the transition and derail the secession after the international camera crews depart. And it's anybody's guess whether Monday's clashes portend greater conflict.

While President Bashir has earned a reputation as an untrustworthy negotiator, he recently has said repeatedly that he will accept the results of the referendum. In a telephone call on Sunday with reporter Ellen Knickmeyer on behalf of The Daily Beast, Rabie Abdullati Obeid, a senior member of the president's National Congress Party, reiterated that pledge. "No, no, no, there's not any possibility of war," Obeid said, speaking from Khartoum. "Whatever the case, whatever the outcome of the referendum, be it secession or unity, there's no inclination to war."

Nonetheless, a contentious issue remains in the fate of the still-contested border state of Abyei. In closed-door meetings, tribal leaders made it clear that their people's allegiance is with the south, though they are legally barred from participating in the referendum. Their frustration could result in a popular declaration of affiliation with the south at any time, which could in turn provoke an attack. Tribal proxy wars have proved a devastatingly effective tactic for the north in the past, with the town of Abyei entirely destroyed as recently as 2008.

"If the north thinks they could do something and get away with it without dramatic serious implications, they are making the biggest mistake of a lifetime," Senator Kerry told me before he left Sudan on Sunday afternoon. "I think they know that. I think both sides are committed to avoiding a war. But sometimes things happen on the ground that can spiral out of control."

Mindful of such risks, [Clooney and Prendergast have organized a privately financed satellite project](http://www.cheats.com/2010/12/29/google-joins-clooney-on-sudan-project.html) ([/cheats/2010/12/29/google-joins-clooney-on-sudan-project.html](http://www.cheats.com/2010/12/29/google-joins-clooney-on-sudan-project.html)) that provides [real-time imaging of the Sudanese north-south border](http://www.satsentinel.org) (<http://www.satsentinel.org>) to interested global citizens from their computers. With its ability to keep public attention focused on any troop build-up along the border, this new tool is an example of the kind of innovation and continued international commitment that will be necessary to complete the peaceful transition of Southern Sudan to independence.

Even given the many challenges ahead—and with the balance of the week's polling activity still to come—one could not help but savor this first day in Southern Sudan's civic resolve, for it represented the at least temporary triumph of hope over hate. One-time killing fields are being transformed into a fledgling democracy that promises to be an ally of the United States, with English as its official language. This story is far from over, the more so since the world cannot afford to turn the page assuming a happy ending. But it was a day of unique, hard-won, and memorable promise, as Valentino Achak Deng reminded me: "It's like the people in the United States almost 300 years ago," he said. "We are determined to be a nation of our own."

*John Avlon's new book [Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe Is Hijacking America](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0984295119/thedaibea-20/) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0984295119/thedaibea-20/>) is available now by Beast Books both on the Web and in paperback. He is also the author of [Independent Nation: How Centrists Can Change American](#)*

[Politics \(http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1400050243/thedaibea-20/\)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1400050243/thedaibea-20/) and a CNN contributor. Previously, he served as chief speechwriter for New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and was a columnist and associate editor for *The New York Sun*.

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# U.S. POLITICS

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## John Avlon: Vaclav Havel's Heroic Politics of Truth and Responsibility

Dec 19, 2011 3:53 PM EST

In a century marked by the totalitarian temptation, Havel took a stand against the lie of ideology and played a crucial role in tearing down the walls of dictatorship, says John Avlon.

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It is a small irony of history that playwright, prisoner, and Czech president Vaclav Havel died on the same day as North Korean dictator Kim Jung-il. But the world that Havel helped shape had reduced Kim Jung-il to a strange museum piece the last of the totalitarian rajas, bodyguarded by lies, surrounded by suffering,

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In part because of the personal courage of this diminutive dissident and leader of the Velvet Revolution, once widespread walls of communism collapsed under their own weight. Democracy defeated dictatorship. Truth triumphed over tyranny.

Havel was a hero who shrugged off the title, understandably uncomfortable with the assumptions of stony perfection. But in the long winter that followed the Prague Spring, he did more than any other Czech dissident to keep hope alive behind the Iron Curtain by persistently defying the Soviet-backed state. He refused to flee to the West when he had the chance, preferring to stay and create a countercultural resistance to the corrosive conformity of communism.

His 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless" deserves to be remembered alongside the works of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela as landmarks in the literature of civil disobedience. In the essay, Havel imagines a grocer hanging a "Workers of the World, Unite!" sign in his shop window and comments, "If the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan 'I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient,' he would not be nearly as indifferent to its semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth ... The sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high. And that something is ideology," Havel wrote. "Ideology offers human beings the illusion of an identity, dignity, and morals while making it easier to part with them." Amen.



*Vaclav Havel, center, addresses a crowd of demonstrators in Prague on December 10, 1988 during a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declarations of the Human Rights. The following year, Havel would be elected the first president of Czechoslovakia when the state-communist system crumbled in the Velvet Revolution. , Lubomir Kotel / AFP-Getty Images*

Over time, as with Mandela, the principled prisoner became regarded as a prophet. I have a photograph of Havel framed to the side of my standing desk at

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home; in the photo he is meeting with the Czech military upon his release from prison. They are gazing on with some measure of admiration as Havel speaks, wearing a parka, on the way from prison to the palace. The Velvet Revolution toppled a dictatorship without a shot fired, through the strength of moral suasion, embodied by the absurdist playwright, Havel. In perfect form, his first words to the nation after being sworn in as president on New Year's Day 1990 were this: "My dear fellow citizens ... I assume you did not propose me for this office so that I, too, would lie to you."

In the heady and hopeful days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Havel was the perfect icon of epochal change, an artist using his newfound authority to break molds and send forth ripples of new possibility.

## Havel's call to individual responsibility and generational responsibility was truly revolutionary because it didn't look to some 'other' to save us.

His vision of a civil society was decidedly human scale and skeptical of utopian schemes after his country's searing experience with Nazism and Communism. "Life, with all its unfathomable diversity and unpredictability would not be squeezed into the crude Marxist cage," he wrote.

I wrote my college thesis on his political philosophy, piecing together his anti-totalitarianism and call for "anti-political politics," making the case that "genuine politics, worthy of the name--and the only kind I will devote myself to--is a matter of serving those who will come after us ... If you are modest and do not lust after power, not only are you suited to politics, you absolutely belong there."

Havel's call to individual responsibility and generational responsibility was truly revolutionary because it did not look to some "other" to save us--it was essentially modest and durable, rooted in small but transcendent truths such as the desire to leave a city, state, or nation better than it was handed to us. That sense of obligation did not allow much room for cynicism or a sense of civic impotence. When the Bosnian genocide was raging, it was the former playwright who argued most forcefully for multilateral military intervention. Honoring the imperative *never again* was more important than lofty concepts of *realpolitik* that tolerated slaughter.

In the end, the power of Havel's example will endure and it will animate new generations of idealists to get involved in civic life.

It is a legacy that fits this rebel with a cause, a hero of our time who deserves to be remembered for all time.

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John Avlon is senior columnist for *Newsweek* and The Daily Beast. He coedited the new anthology *[Deadline Artists: America's Greatest Newspaper](#)*

Columns and is the author of *Independent Nation: How Centrists Can Change American Politics* as well as *Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe Is Hijacking America*, published by BeastBooks. Previously, he served as chief speechwriter for New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and was a columnist and associate editor for the *New York Sun*. He is a CNN contributor.

For inquiries, please contact The Daily Beast at [editorial@thedailybeast.com](mailto:editorial@thedailybeast.com).

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**Sam Steele**  
2 Months Ago

Another Czech writer, Milan Kundera, pointed out that when Bohemia threw the Holy Roman emperor out the window in 1618 (the "Defenestration of Prague"), this act of resistance led to the

disastrous Thirty Years War. When the Czechs meekly acquiesced as Nazi tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia in 1938, it led to seven years of brutal Nazi occupation and more than 40 years of communist rule.

The Czechs have always been a victim of geography: it has never mattered whether they resisted the major European powers or not.

 Sebastianlikes this.

[REPLY](#)

**armchairfirebrand**  
2 Months Ago

Thank you for the excellent column, John. With all of the hype surrounding Kim Jong Il's demise, it's important to remember Havel's great accomplishments as both a playwright and a Statesman.

I agree that "The Power of the Powerless" is one of the best political essays ever written. And Havel was such a cool guy too. A Head of State who loved the Velvet Underground. They don't make them like that anymore...

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