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# The tea party and the debt deal: Fiscal 'terrorists' or principled heroes?

Shrugging off unfavorable polls and harsh criticism from Biden and other Democrats, the tea party faithful take stock of their influence on Capitol Hill's debt deal and look ahead to the next battle.



A man dressed as Captain America poses as dozens of Tea Party supporters rally against raising the debt limit on July 27 near the US Capitol.

Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Enlarge

By Patrik Jonsson, Staff writer / August 2, 2011

## Atlanta

Local tea party activists Tuesday shrugged off Vice President Joe Biden's reported use of the word "terrorist" – and the use by other Democrats of terms like "arsonists," "saboteurs," and "extortionists" – to vent anger at a debt-ceiling deal that, largely because of the tea party, included no new taxes while mandating massive spending cuts.

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"The tea party is just people wanting their voices to be heard ... so it's sad that Vice President Biden calls us terrorists for speaking our minds," says Brad Scott, a tea party activist in Knoxville, Tenn. "But at the same time, I have to say, he's giving great soundbites [to the Republicans] for the 2012 election."

Barraged from its early days with invectives from the left, the tea party movement has steadily marched on, helping Republicans retake the House in 2010, and, this weekend, forcing the Republican leadership into a game of chicken with

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the White House – where President Obama blinked first, backing off his vow that increased tax revenues must be part of the debt deal.

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"They discounted us to start with, then they started laughing at us, then people like Biden started attacking us – and in all that we see hope that maybe we might win in the end," says Buddy Gray, a tea party organizer in Calhoun, Ga.

Democrats' reaction to the debt deal and tea party's role did not end with Biden's exchange, which his spokespeople have since denied despite multiple sourcing of the story by the news site Politico. Democrats argued that at the very point when the unemployed and marginalized need assistance and the economy needs more stimulus from Washington, the right is keen to rip the funds away, worsening the pain and dragging the country into a fiscal abyss.

"Consider what the towel-snapping Tea Party crazies have already accomplished," writes Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd. "They've changed the entire discussion. They've neutralized the White House. They've whipped their leadership into submission. They've taken taxes and revenues off the table. They've withered the stock and bond markets. They've made journalists speak to them as though they're John Calhoun and Alexander Hamilton."

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver (D) of Missouri called the deal a "sugar-coated Satan sandwich," onto which House minority leader Nancy Pelosi piled on, "with a side of Satan fries."

Democrats' anger is understandable: The massive government spending cuts and lack of new revenue sources in the political deal that raises the debt ceiling by \$2.4 trillion so the country can meet its fiduciary obligations hints at a shift of power and priorities away from the Democrats philosophy of "good" government growth toward the tea party's goal of scaling back Washington spending and influence.

But political scientists say the tea party can't take all the blame, nor all the plaudits, for the debt deal.

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