



Michael Patrick Leahy

An *Insider* Interview

Finding the Voices of the Tea Party

Michael Patrick Leahy is the editor of “Voices of the Tea Party,” a new e-book series from Broadside Books. The series helps Tea Party activists share insights about fighting for liberty at the grass roots level. Leahy has been involved with the Tea Party movement since its beginning. He is one of the co-founders of The Nationwide Tea Party Coalition, and a co-founder of the group Top Conservatives on Twitter. We talked recently with Leahy about the e-book series, grass roots activism, and the Tea Party.



THE INSIDER: *Who do you want to read the “Voices of the Tea Party” series?*

MICHAEL PATRICK LEAHY: The series tries to get the voice of the Tea Party out to folks within the Tea Party, but also so that folks who are not familiar with it will have an opportunity to hear what the folks who have organized the Tea Party believe.

TI: *Why e-books?*

MPL: They are relatively easy to complete and relatively easy to distribute, and you can get across in 7,500 to 10,000 words a key point.

TI: *How is the series doing?*

MPL: I think we’ve been very pleased with the reception it’s received. The latest e-book in the series is one that I wrote, *I, Lightbulb: A Death Row Testimonial*. As you probably saw, it has received quite a lot of coverage from thought leaders, especially *The Weekly Standard*, which had a feature article that talked about the *I, Lightbulb* e-book.

So from the point of view of getting the message out and having the Tea Party perspective shared among the thought leaders in the conservative movement—and thought leaders in general—I think it’s been very effective. The sales have been modest, but I think that’s pretty much what we expected.

Broadside Books—a new conservative imprint from HarperCollins—is launching several e-book series now. This is just the first of several.

TI: *How many titles are in the series now?*

MPL: My e-book is the sixth and we have another one coming out in September. Amy Handlin has written an e-book about crony capitalism. That will be coming out in September. Amy Handlin is a professor at Monmouth University in New Jersey, and is a Republican member of the New Jersey General Assembly.

TI: *How do you decide what topics to cover? Are you focused on submissions from Tea Party members, or do you solicit books?*

MPL: We have a place on the Web site where folks can send us submissions. And we’ve had several authors approach us. Some have been published in the past, and others haven’t. I have also sought out Tea Party activists who I know who have particularly important things to say.

TI: *What sets a “Voices of the Tea Party” book apart from a conservative book that might be published by say Regnery or Crown Forum?*

MPL: First, we focus on the three core values of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets.

Then there is also an activism element to it. The traditional conservative movement that’s been in D.C. has terrific thoughts and ideas but those are more from on high and not necessarily connected with the reality of the grass roots. One of our great titles, for instance, is Lorie Medina’s e-book *Community Organizing for Conservatives*. That talked about the get-out-the-vote efforts in Texas that were extraordinarily effective in the primaries in 2010.

And so it’s the combination of both the constitutional conservatism as well as the hands-on experience of what happens at the grass roots level that I think is distinctive.

TI: *Only three core values? Where does national security fit into the Tea Party framework?*

MPL: Let me give you a little background on the history of where the three core values came from.

Everything in the Tea Party movement is a collaborative process. That process started, as you probably know, with the group that I founded, Top Conservatives on Twitter back



in November of 2008. Top Conservatives on Twitter preceded the Tea Party movement, but many of the folks that started the Tea Party movement got involved through Top Conservatives on Twitter.

As part of that collaborative process we put a task force together from among the first members of that organization to determine what our mission statement was. And we started with the mission statement of The Heritage Foundation. There are actually five elements in the Heritage statement. One was about national defense. Another was traditional values.

We had a very elaborate process where we

wisdom you are offering?

MPL: I would go back to Lorie Medina's book, which basically is a nuts-and-bolts approach to how to get things done. Activism is more than just having the right answer. It's understanding how to interact with people in the real world.

And there are really great hands-on examples of how Lorie Medina was able to do that in Texas. Her book really has become almost a classic handbook, if you will, for grassroots Tea Parties around the country. I talk to folks all the time who are downloading it, reading it, and deploying some of those elements in there through local Tea Parties.

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looked at those. The reason we didn't add traditional values is we couldn't quite come to consensus. So we figured it's best to save the republic first and then let the traditionalists and non-traditionalists duke it out over social issues after that.

And with regards to defense, our conclusion was that defense is simply an outgrowth of constitutionally limited government. Providing for the defense is one of the most important constitutional obligations.

TI: *What are some of the best lessons readers will learn from the "Voices of the Tea Party" series? Can you give us a sample of the*

Another practical application: Bill Hennessy from the St. Louis Tea Party wrote a book called *Weaving the Roots*, which talked about some basic principles of how to use social media—an excellent discussion of the basic elements of using Facebook and Twitter, the dos and don'ts.

TI: *From where did the title of your book, I, Lightbulb, come?*

MPL: You are probably familiar with the classic essay written in the late 1950s by Leonard E. Read, the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education. He wrote a classic: *I, Pencil*.



It's actually only about 2,500 words, but in that he explained how the free market combines the various forces—the invisible hand if you will—of thousands of folks to create a very effective and not particularly costly pencil that does the job well.

And so when the ridiculous light bulb ban was passed, it struck me that the light bulb was a product that had been treated very poorly. In contrast to the free markets of the late 1950s, here we had big government, regulatory, crony capitalism at work. And the outcomes are very, very negative for the average consumer.

TI: *What are some of those negative consequences?*

MPL: For the consumer, the negative consequences are higher prices, less innovation, less responsive service, and limitations on economic choices. For small businesses and entrepreneurs, it's the loss of the opportunity to compete fairly.

TI: *What would you most like folks who are not Tea Party members to understand about the Tea Party?*

MPL: We are committed to traditional, constitutional American values. I talk about this idea in my upcoming book, *Covenant of Liberty: The Ideological Origins of the Tea Party Movement*. The Constitution, as we see it, is a secular covenant. It's a covenant between the states, the federal government, and the voters that outlines the nature of the relationship. And the promises of that secular covenant have been broken repeatedly by the federal government, and we are simply trying to restore that secular covenant.

TI: *Where do you think the federal government went off the track? Was it 2008? 2001? 1996? 1965? Surely we didn't get here over-*

night, right?

MPL: The federal government began really going off track during World War I, when the Wilson Administration used the excuse of the wartime emergency to insert itself into virtually every aspect of American economic life. Herbert Hoover was Wilson's Food Administrator, and he pushed an arbitrary set of limitations upon pricing and distribution decisions made by farmers and food retailers. Bernard Baruch and his aide Hugh S. Johnson wreaked havoc on American industry through the War Industries Board and its innumerable rules and regulations; and Harry Garfield, the Federal Fuel Administrator, shut down every manufacturing plant east of the Mississippi for five days, with disastrous effect.

The bureaucrats who ran these war agencies for Wilson got a taste of power during the military emergency of World War I and they liked it. So when the Depression came about a little more than a decade later, they were eager to re-assert their "emergency powers," first under the programs of the Hoover administration, then even more dramatically as the bureaucratic kingpins of Roosevelt's New Deal. It's been downhill ever since.

TI: *A few years back you wrote a list of "Rules for Conservative Radicals." Care to identify a few of those that are most pertinent for conservatives today?*

MPL: There's probably a new rule, which is: If you are working with somebody who shares the three core values of the movement, it's better to forgive them if you are having some kind of conflict and try to focus on your shared values and purposes and keep the ball moving forward. There's all sorts of human interaction and people don't always get along. Just because somebody does something in a certain way that you don't agree with, don't



dwell on that. Get past it and focus on common objectives.

TI: *Are there things that the think tanks—whether state-based or national organizations like The Heritage Foundation—and the activists need to do to work better with each other?*

MPL: The think tanks—and especially the Heritage Foundation—have been very helpful in providing intellectual firepower on policy issues to support grass roots activists. But I think the relationship between think tanks and activists has only scratched the surface of its potential.

out across the country and hold on-site seminars. Provide more conference call experts. The Heritage Foundation did that a lot during December 2008 with the conference calls we set up on the auto bailout at Top Conservatives on Twitter. The interaction between the activists and the policy experts was energizing for both sides. Heritage helped coordinate those calls, and I think you'd agree that those first calls were very significant in setting the stage for what became the Tea Party movement two months later.

I would like to see think tank professionals treat the grass roots activists with the same kind of respect they give their other

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To my mind, the think tanks really need to step up their game now. The nature of the relationship needs to change, in my opinion. Remember, the grass roots activists who comprise the Tea Party movement have virtually no money. Christina Botteri, a Tea Party activist from the beginning, has said that we've financed the Tea Party movement with the spare change we've found in the couch. She's quite right.

I would like to see all of the think tanks spend more on grassroots activists by reaching out much more extensively to support and engage with them. Fly them in to Washington and give them two-day policy seminars. Go

colleagues. After all, it's really the activists, not the think tankers, who've made this dramatic political turnabout of the past few years happen. We need both the policy strengths of the think tanks and the passion and energy of the grass roots activists working in tandem to return our country to the kind of limited constitutional government we all support.

TI: *What should be the focus of those working to roll back the size and scope of government?*

MPL: Engage. Engage now in your local Tea Party's get-out-the-vote efforts.

