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DECLARATIONS | SEPTEMBER 23, 2010, 9:27 P.M. ET

The Enraged vs. the Exhausted

By PEGGY NOONAN



If you thought the 1994 election was historic, just wait till this year.

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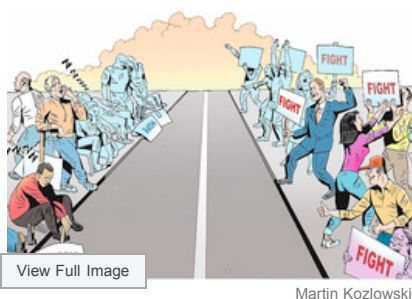
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All anyone in America who cares about politics was talking about this week was the searing encounter that captured, in a way that hasn't been done before, the essence of the political moment we're in. When 2010 is reviewed, it will be the clip the producers pick to illustrate the president's disastrous fall.

It is Monday, Sept. 20, the middle of the day, in Washington. CNBC is holding a town hall for the president. A woman stands—handsome, dignified, black, a person with presence. She looks as if she may be what she turns out to be, an Obama supporter who in 2008 put up street signs, passed out literature and tried to win over co-workers. As she later told the Washington Post, "I was thinking that the people who were against him and didn't believe in his agenda were completely insane."

The president looked relieved when she stood. Perhaps he thought she might lob a sympathetic question that would allow him to hit a reply out of the park. Instead, and in the nicest possible way, Velma Hart lobbed a hand grenade.

"I'm a mother. I'm a wife. I'm an American veteran, and I'm one of your middle-class Americans. And quite frankly I'm exhausted. I'm exhausted of defending you, defending your administration, defending the mantle of change that I voted for, and deeply disappointed with where we are." She said, "The financial recession has taken an enormous toll on my family." She said, "My husband and I have joked for years that we thought we were well beyond the hot-dogs-and-beans era of our lives. But, quite frankly, it is starting to knock on our door and ring true that that might be where we are headed."



Martin Kozlowski

What a testimony. And this is the president's base. He got that look public figures adopt when they know they just took one right in the chops on national TV and cannot show their dismay. He could have responded with an engagement and conviction equal to the moment. But this was our president—calm, detached, even-keeled to the point of insensate. He offered a recital of his administration's achievements: tuition assistance, health care. It seemed so off point. Like his first two years.

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Noonan: The Enraged vs. the Exhausted

But it was the word Mrs. Hart used that captured everything: "exhausted." From what I see, that's how a lot of Democrats feel. They've turned silent, too, like people who witnessed a car crash and can't talk anymore about the reasons for the accident or how many were injured.

This election is more and more shaping up into a contest between the Exhausted and the Enraged.

In a contest like that, who wins? That's like asking, "Who would win a sporting event between the depressed and the anxious?" The anxious are wide awake. The wide awake win.

But Rep. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee suggests I have the wrong word for the Republican base. The word, she says, is not enraged, but "livid."

The three-term Republican deputy whip has been campaigning in Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. We spoke by phone about what she is seeing, and she sounded like the exact opposite of exhausted.

There are two major developments, she says, that are new this year and insufficiently noted, but they're going to shape election outcomes in 2010 and beyond.

First, Washington is being revealed in a new way. The American people now know, "with real sophistication," everything that happens in the capital. "I find a much more knowledgeable electorate, and it is a real-time response," Ms. Blackburn says. "We hear about it even as the vote is taking place." Voters come to rallies carrying research—"things they pulled off the Internet, forwarded emails," copies of bills, roll-call votes. The Internet isn't just a tool for organization and fund-raising, it has given citizens access to information they never had before. "The more they know," Ms. Blackburn observes, "the less they like Washington."

Second is the rise of women as a force. They "are the drivers in this election cycle," Ms. Blackburn says. "Something is going on." At tea-party events the past 18 months, she started to notice "60% of the crowd is women." She tells of a political rally that drew thousands in Nashville, at the State Capitol plaza. She had brought her year-old grandson. When the mic was handed to her she was holding him. "I said, 'How many of you are grandmothers?'" The hands! That was the moment I realized that the majority of the people at the political events now are women. I saw this in town halls in '09—it was women showing up at my listening events, it was women talking about health care."

Why would more women be focusing more intently on politics this year than before? Blackburn hypothesizes: "Women are always focusing on a generation or two down the road. Women make the education and health-care decisions for their families, for their kids, their spouse, their parents. And so they have become more politically involved. They are worried about will people have enough money, how are they going to pay the bills, the tuition, get the kids through school and college."

More Peggy Noonan

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how Washington works and what it does, had prompted mothers to rebel.

The media called 1994 "the year of the angry white male." That was the year of the Republican wave that yielded a GOP House for the first time in 40 years. "I look at this year as the Rage of the Bill-Paying Moms," Ms. Blackburn says. "They are saying 'How dare you, in your arrogance, cap the opportunities my child will have? You'll burden them with so much debt they won't be able to buy a house—all because you can't balance the budget.'"

How does 2010 compare with 1994 in terms of historical significance? Ms. Blackburn says there's an unnoted story there, too. Whereas 1994 was historic as a party victory, a shift in political power, this year feels more organic, more from-the-ground, and potentially deeper. She believes 2010 will mark "a philosophical shift," the beginning of a change in national thinking regarding the role of the individual and the government. This "will be remembered as the year the American people said no" to the status quo. The people "do not trust" those who make the decisions far away. They want to restore balance.

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Declarations

Peggy Noonan is a columnist for The Wall Street Journal whose work appears weekly in the Journal's Weekend Edition and on [OpinionJournal.com](#).

She is the author of eight books on American politics and culture. The most recent, "Patriotic Grace," was published in October 2008. Her first book, the bestseller "What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era," was published in 1990.

She was a special assistant to the president in the White House of Ronald Reagan. Before that she was a producer at CBS News in New York. In 1978 and 1979 she was an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University.

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What is the mainstream media getting wrong about this election, and what is it getting right? The media, Ms. Blackburn says, do not fully appreciate "how livid people are with Washington." They see the anger but don't understand its implications. "They're getting right that people want change, but they're wrong about what that change is going to be." The media, she said, "are going to be amazed when Carly Fiorina and Sharron Angle win."

The mainstream media famously like the horse race—red is up, blue is down; Smith is in, Jones is out. But if Ms. Blackburn is right, the election, and its meaning, will be more interesting than the old, classic jockeying. And the outcomes won't be controlled by the good ol' boys but by those she calls "the great new gals."

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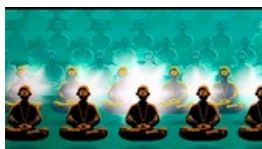
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