

what your world view is, and what you believe and what you've been taught, you can look at the same thing and come to a different conclusion," Seely explained. The exhibit, called "Starting Points," was intended to demonstrate the plausible divergence in theories about man's relation to dinosaurs, but it could just as easily have spoken for the assumptions we make about Barack Obama's past associations with figures like Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn.

Obama's selection last summer of the Republican congressman John McHugh to be his Secretary of the Army created the need for a special election, and provided the first opportunity for Tea Party activists to make an electoral impact both locally and nationally. It served as a dress rehearsal for the Massachusetts Senate race, and enabled activists to learn from their mistakes. McHugh's district, New York's Twenty-third, covers most of what locals call the North Country, from the Adirondacks to the St. Lawrence River and extending west to Lake Ontario. Primarily rural, its politics and class markers have more in common with Kentucky than with Manhattan, and the Republican Party had been in control since before the turn of the twentieth century. But Obama carried the district, with fifty-two per cent of the vote, and the eleven Republican county chairs made what seemed like an expedient choice in nominating the veteran state assemblywoman Dede Scozzafava to run for McHugh's seat. Scozzafava was a big-tent selection: pro-choice, in favor of gay marriage, and a friend of the teachers' union.

Tea Party adherents responded by backing a third-party challenge from an earnest accountant named Doug Hoffman, who had served as the C.F.O. for the Lake Placid Olympics in 1980. "We formed the foundation that created the Miracle, and I think the miracle was the start of the Reagan Revolution, and it eventually brought down the Soviet Union," Hoffman told a group of supporters. "Since this is the first congressional race of 2010, we're going to break down the wall again. And the miracle is we're going to take America back, and we're going to get our freedom back."

Shortly before the election, I went to Cicero, New York, to hear the former House majority leader Dick Armey address what one listener referred to as a "glorified sticker club." A group of about thirty people had assembled in the cavernous interior of Drivers Village, a cluster of adjoined auto dealerships. They had been meeting regularly for months to talk politics. "This could be the single most important election that any of us will ever get to work on in our lifetime—the game-changer," Armey, who now heads a supply-side nonprofit called FreedomWorks, declared. He predicted—correctly—that Scozzafava would end up conceding before Election Day, and said that the only remaining question was whether Hoffman, who was polling in third place, could manage to overcome the Democrats' likely election fraud, which he estimated to be worth three percentage points. "In '93, when the worm started to turn, it started to turn with a special election in Kentucky," he said, referring to a 1994 contest that was prompted by the death

of an incumbent Democrat, and won by a little-known Republican, a Christian-bookstore owner named Ron Lewis. “That election changed everybody’s mood,” Armeiy said. It also paved the way for the Republican takeover of the House in the ’94 midterms.

“None of us knew this was going to hit,” a young woman named Jennifer Bernstone said, looking up from a laptop. “We all went to D.C. in September: ‘*Woo hoo*, that was awesome!’ We all came home. ‘*Now what?*’ This is the what. Who the heck knew? I sing for a living. I’m an actress. I don’t *do* this stuff.” Her immediate concern was the effective deployment of Hoffman supporters from Connecticut and Westchester, with whom she’d been e-mailing. They were coming to canvass for the weekend, and needed places to crash.

“I feel a kinship with the Afghan hill men,” a young man with wavy hair and glasses said, eying Armeiy’s young associates with an air of caution. “We’re a bunch of ordinary people, and a bunch of very powerful groups are coming in with very different philosophies—maybe sometimes I agree with them, most of the time I don’t—and they’re having a proxy war in our back yard.”

The group at Drivers Village had organized through Meetup.com under the name Central New York 9.12, and, according to one of them, a Constitutionalist, they represented about eight political subgroups, including that most prized Tea Party scalp: Obama voters. They had brought no props, and none were dressed in period garb. They seemed united principally by their acute sensitivity to the raging-teabagger stereotype, and, as if to reassure each other, compared notes of their experiences on the Mall:

“You saw the lack of litter.”

“I think it had more to do with the calibre of the people involved.”

“Now, don’t feel bad if the people in the drugstore look at you funny when you hand them this prescription.”

“As you can see, we’re not really what a lot of people portray us as,” William Wells, the Afghanistan analogist, told me, after apologizing for the mud stains on his jeans, which he attributed to harvesting pinot gris earlier in the day. Wells’s father is an astronomer turned vintner, and his mother is a doctor. “I used to work at Fannie Mae,” he said. “I was a research analyst in the loss-forecasting division. If you understand that, you understand kind of why I’m here. In some ways, this, for me, is paying off my debt when I should have said something.” He added that Sean



Hannity and Keith Olbermann had each got the story of the housing crisis about half right, despite “very different angles of approach,” and that Glenn Beck, “whatever you think of his histrionics,” had been closer to ninety per cent correct.

As the meeting was breaking up, a soft-spoken project manager, and father of six, named Paul Dopp asked me if I knew who had won the Battle of Saratoga. “It was General Arnold,” he said—Benedict Arnold. “Part of the reason he turned traitor was that he didn’t get the recognition for it. He got ticked. But what he did is he rode right out in front between the soldiers, looked at the Americans, and said, ‘I’m fighting. Are you coming?’ And they came. Someone is going to stand up for principle.” Dopp said that his brother had travelled to the Soviet Union in the nineteen-eighties, while studying détente, and returned with a sober lesson on the corrupting effects of power. “For a lot of people, government is their religion,” he said. “That’s their place of worship, because they truly believe in the betterment of man.”

At night, with the dealerships closed, Drivers Village felt vast and lonely. “This used to be a mall before the economy crashed around here,” Dopp said, referring not to the recent tumult but to the Rockefeller era. “We’ve been ravaged so well, so long, we’re kind of like, ‘The last person that leaves Schenectady, please turn the lights off.’ The only reason we’re still alive is because of the bubble created by the financial system down in the city.” The mall had been resuscitated by a born-again car salesman whose political sympathies inclined him to let the Commons, as the interior corridors of Drivers Village are known, be put to revolutionary use.

Without paying attention, I followed the group out a different exit from the way I’d come in, and quickly realized that it would take a long time to find my car—parked amid acres of cars awaiting sale in a recession. One of the men at the meeting offered to drive me around the lot to speed up the search, taking the opportunity to show me a three-ring binder that he kept in the back seat of his van, full of homemade graphs showing the growth of the national debt, and Internet printouts that hinted at links between, for instance, ACORN and an Obama campaign office in Louisiana. “That’s what got us mad, those sorts of things,” he said. “You know, it drives us nuts. I would love for someone to actually come out and say this—someone that is credible, other than myself, in my own mind.”

The involvement of people like Dick Armey in the Tea Party movement led many Democrats, including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, to dismiss the significance of the activism as a creation of right-wing moguls. FreedomWorks and a host of lobbying firms and think tanks, including Americans for Tax Reform, the Club for Growth, Campaign for Liberty, and the Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights, sponsored the march in Washington last September. Lobbyists and think tanks in turn rely on financial support from corporate interests with enormous stakes in much of the prospective legislation on Capitol Hill. “Astroturfing” is the critics’ preferred term for this

phenomenon, with its imputation of a synthetic, top-down structure to contrast with the outward appearance of grassroots independence. Yet the presence of paid FreedomWorks operatives at meetings like the one in Cicero, handing out Obamacare Translator leaflets and legislator “leave-behinds,” would be cause for greater skepticism if the civilians in attendance weren’t already compiling binders of their own and reciting from memory the troublesome implications buried on page 59 of House Resolution 3200. The blogosphere can make trained foot soldiers of us all, with or without corporate funding.

“If you listen to the Democrats, they’re completely convinced somebody’s in charge of all this,” Dick Armey said, sitting at a hotel café in Syracuse with a press aide, the day after his pep talk to the sticker club. He took off his Stetson and said that he’d only just learned about the existence of the Tea Party Patriots and “a group that call themselves the 9.12 Project, and I’m not quite sure where they come from.”

“It’s Glenn Beck,” his press aide interjected.

“I don’t know Glenn Beck,” Armey said. “I think I was on his show one time. Was I?”

FreedomWorks has an annual budget of only seven million dollars and a paid staff of eighteen, most of whom travel comfortably within the Washington establishment, where debating the sanity of Beck remains a common cocktail-party gambit. Its employees are well versed in the differences between the Austrian and Chicago economic schools, and in the biographical details of Howard Roark and John Galt, but tend to cringe at some of the paranoid elements within the Ron Paul contingent. They provide logistical support and tactical know-how, like the dreaded community organizers mocked by Rudy Giuliani, to a network of some four hundred activists scattered around the country. In their advisory capacity, their aims are to push fiscal concerns, not social issues, and to deemphasize personal attacks on Obama, which could be perceived as having racial overtones; instead, they take on Pelosi and Harry Reid.

“Where did MoveOn.org come from?” Armey asked, citing the grassroots liberal group that was until recently the envy of all its conservative counterparts, and then answered his own question, incorrectly: “From George Bush.” In fact, as Armey’s aide was quick to point out, MoveOn originated in the Clinton impeachment proceedings, and subsequently gained wider attention under Bush, and specifically through its unofficial association with the grassroots campaign of Howard Dean—or “the governor from back East that ran for President,” as Armey put it, adding, “His name will come to me tomorrow.”

An absent-minded professor in cowboy boots, Armey saw his role as eliciting coverage of the growing conservative opposition from news organizations (like this one) that exist outside the Fox and Friends echo chamber. “I don’t know if you noticed, but in August, all of a sudden, I became the bogeyman,” he told me, with undisguised pleasure, and said

