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Op-Ed Columnist

Paranoia Strikes Deep

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

Last Thursday there was a rally outside the U.S. Capitol to protest pending health care legislation, featuring the kinds of things we've grown accustomed to, including large signs showing piles of bodies at Dachau with the caption "National Socialist Healthcare." It was grotesque — and it was also ominous. For what we may be seeing is America starting to be Californiafied.

The key thing to understand about that rally is that it wasn't a fringe event. It was sponsored by the House Republican leadership — in fact, it was officially billed as a G.O.P. press conference. Senior lawmakers were in attendance, and apparently had no problem with the tone of the proceedings.

True, Eric Cantor, the second-ranking House Republican, offered some mild criticism after the fact. But the operative word is "mild." The signs were "inappropriate," said his spokesman, and the use of Hitler comparisons by such people as Rush Limbaugh, said Mr. Cantor, "conjures up images that frankly are not, I think, very helpful."

What all this shows is that the G.O.P. has been taken over by the people it used to exploit.

The state of mind visible at recent right-wing demonstrations is nothing new. Back in 1964 the

historian Richard Hofstadter published an essay titled, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which reads as if it were based on today’s headlines: Americans on the far right, he wrote, feel that “America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.”

Sound familiar?

But while the paranoid style isn’t new, its role within the G.O.P. is.

When Hofstadter wrote, the right wing felt dispossessed because it was rejected by both major parties. That changed with the rise of Ronald Reagan: Republican politicians began to win elections in part by catering to the passions of the angry right.

Until recently, however, that catering mostly took the form of empty symbolism. Once elections were won, the issues that fired up the base almost always took a back seat to the economic concerns of the elite. Thus in 2004 George W. Bush ran on antiterrorism and “values,” only to announce, as soon as the election was behind him, that his first priority was changing Social Security.

But something snapped last year. Conservatives had long believed that history was on their side, so the G.O.P. establishment could, in effect, urge hard-right activists to wait just a little longer: once the party consolidated its hold on power, they’d get what they wanted. After the Democratic sweep, however, extremists could no longer be fobbed off with promises of future glory.

Furthermore, the loss of both Congress and the White House left a power vacuum in a party accustomed to top-down management. At this point Newt Gingrich is what passes for a sober, reasonable elder statesman of the G.O.P. And he has no authority: Republican voters ignored

his call to support a relatively moderate, electable candidate in New York's special Congressional election.

Real power in the party rests, instead, with the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin (who at this point is more a media figure than a conventional politician). Because these people aren't interested in actually governing, they feed the base's frenzy instead of trying to curb or channel it. So all the old restraints are gone.

In the short run, this may help Democrats, as it did in that New York race. But maybe not: elections aren't necessarily won by the candidate with the most rational argument. They're often determined, instead, by events and economic conditions.

In fact, the party of Limbaugh and Beck could well make major gains in the midterm elections. The Obama administration's job-creation efforts have fallen short, so that unemployment is likely to stay disastrously high through next year and beyond. The banker-friendly bailout of Wall Street has angered voters, and might even let Republicans claim the mantle of economic populism. Conservatives may not have better ideas, but voters might support them out of sheer frustration.

And if Tea Party Republicans do win big next year, what has already happened in California could happen at the national level. In California, the G.O.P. has essentially shrunk down to a rump party with no interest in actually governing — but that rump remains big enough to prevent anyone else from dealing with the state's fiscal crisis. If this happens to America as a whole, as it all too easily could, the country could become effectively ungovernable in the midst of an ongoing economic disaster.

The point is that the takeover of the Republican Party by the irrational right is no laughing

matter. Something unprecedented is happening here — and it's very bad for America.

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