The Grand Old Plot Against the Tea Party

By FRANK RICH

ONE dirty little secret of the 2010 election is that it won’t be a political tragedy for Democrats if a Tea Party icon like Sharron Angle or Joe Miller ends up in the United States Senate. Angle, now synonymous with racist ads sliming Hispanics, and Miller, already on record threatening a government shutdown, are fired up and ready to go as symbols of G.O.P. extremism for 2012 and beyond.

What’s not so secret is that some Republicans will be just as happy if some of these characters lose, and for the same reason.

But whatever Tuesday’s results, this much is certain: The Tea Party’s hopes for actually effecting change in Washington will start being dashed the morning after. The ordinary Americans in this movement lack the numbers and financial clout to muscle their way into the back rooms of Republican power no matter how well their candidates perform.

Trent Lott, the former Senate leader and current top-dog lobbyist, gave away the game in July. “We don’t need a lot of Jim DeMint disciples,” he said, referring to the South Carolina senator who is the Tea Party’s Capitol Hill patron saint. “As soon as they get here, we need to co-opt them.” It’s the players who wrote the checks for the G.O.P. surge, not those earnest folk in tri-corner hats, who plan to run the table in the next corporate takeover of Washington. Though Tom DeLay may now be on trial for corruption in Texas, the spirit of his K Street lives on in a Lott client list that includes Northrop Grumman and Goldman Sachs.

Karl Rove outed the Republican elites’ contempt for Tea Partiers in the campaign’s final stretch. Much as Barack Obama thought he was safe soliloquizing about angry white Middle Americans clinging to “guns or religion” at a San Francisco fund-raiser in 2008, so Rove now parades his disdain for the same constituency when speaking to the European press. This month he told Der Spiegel that Tea Partiers are “not sophisticated,” and then scoffed, “It’s not like these people have read the economist Friedrich August von Hayek.” Given that
Glenn Beck has made a cause of putting Hayek’s dense 1944 antigovernment treatise “The Road to Serfdom” on the best-seller list and Tea Partiers widely claim to have read it, Rove could hardly have been more condescending to “these people.” Last week, for added insult, he mocked Sarah Palin’s imminent Discovery Channel reality show to London’s Daily Telegraph.

This animus has not gone unnoticed among those supposedly less sophisticated conservatives back home. Mike Huckabee, still steamed about Rove’s previous put-down of Christine O’Donnell, publicly lamented the Republican establishment’s “elitism” and “country club attitude.” This country club elite, he said, is happy for Tea Partiers to put up signs, work the phones and make “those pesky little trips” door-to-door that it finds a frightful inconvenience. But the members won’t let the hoi polloi dine with them in the club’s “main dining room” — any more than David H. Koch, the billionaire sugar daddy of the Republican right, will invite O’Donnell into his box at the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center to take in “The Nutcracker.”

The main dining room remains reserved for Koch’s fellow oil barons, Lott’s clients, the corporate contributors (known and anonymous) to groups like Rove’s American Crossroads, and, of course, the large coterie of special interests underwriting John Boehner, the presumptive next speaker of the House. Boehner is the largest House recipient of Wall Street money this year — much of it from financial institutions bailed out by TARP.

His Senate counterpart, Mitch McConnell, will be certain to stop any Tea Party hillbillies from disrupting his chapter of the club (as he tried to stop Rand Paul in his own state’s G.O.P. primary). McConnell’s pets in his chamber’s freshman G.O.P. class will instead be old-school conservatives like Dan Coats (of Indiana), Rob Portman (of Ohio) and, if he squeaks in, Pat Toomey (of Pennsylvania). The first two are former lobbyists; Toomey ran the corporate interest group, the Club for Growth. They can be counted on to execute an efficient distribution of corporate favors and pork after they make their latest swing through Capitol Hill’s revolving door.

What the Tea Party ostensibly wants most — less government spending and smaller federal deficits — is not remotely happening on the country club G.O.P.’s watch. The elites have no serious plans to cut anything except taxes and regulation of their favored industries. The party’s principal 2010 campaign document, its “Pledge to America,” doesn’t vow to cut even earmarks — which barely amount to a rounding error in the federal budget anyway. Boehner has also proposed a return to pre-crash 2008 levels in “nonsecurity” discretionary spending — another mere bagatelle ($105 billion) next to the current $1.3 trillion deficit. And that
won’t be happening either, once the actual cuts in departments like Education, Transportation and Interior are specified to their constituencies.

Perhaps the campaign’s most telling exchange took place on Fox News two weeks ago, when the Tea Party-embracing Senate candidate in California, Carly Fiorina, was asked seven times by Chris Wallace to name “one single entitlement expenditure you’re willing to cut” in order “to extend all the Bush tax cuts, which would add 4 trillion to the deficit.” She never did. At least Angle and Paul have been honest about what they’d slash if in power — respectively Social Security and defense, where the big government spending actually resides.

That’s not happening either. McConnell has explained his only real priority for the new Congress with admirable candor. “The single most important thing we want to achieve,” he said, “is for President Obama to be a one-term president.” Any assault on Social Security would defeat that goal, and a serious shake-up of the Pentagon budget would alienate the neoconservative ideologues and military contractors who are far more important to the G.O.P. establishment than the “don’t tread on me” crowd.

For sure, the Republican elites found the Tea Party invaluable on the way to this Election Day. And not merely, as Huckabee has it, because they wanted its foot soldiers. What made the Tea Party most useful was that its loud populist message gave the G.O.P. just the cover it needed both to camouflage its corporate patrons and to rebrand itself as a party miraculously antithetical to the despised G.O.P. that gave us George W. Bush and record deficits only yesterday.

Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News and Wall Street Journal have been arduous in promoting and inflating Tea Party events and celebrities to this propagandistic end. The more the Tea Party looks as if it’s calling the shots in the G.O.P., the easier it is to distract attention from those who are actually calling them — namely, those who’ve cashed in and cashed out as ordinary Americans lost their jobs, homes and 401(k)’s. Typical of this smokescreen is a new book titled “Mad as Hell,” published this fall by a Murdoch imprint. In it, the pollsters Scott Rasmussen and Douglas Schoen make the case, as they recently put it in Politico, that the Tea Party is “the most powerful and potent force in America.”

They are expert at producing poll numbers to bear that out. By counting those with friends and family in the movement, Rasmussen has calculated that 29 percent of Americans are “tied to” the Tea Party. (If you factor in six degrees of Kevin Bacon, the number would surely double.) But cooler empirical data reveal the truth known by the G.O.P. establishment: An
August CNN poll found that 2 percent of Americans consider themselves active members of the Tea Party.

That result was confirmed last weekend by The Washington Post, which published the fruits of its months-long effort to contact every Tea Party group in the country. To this end, it enlisted the help of Tea Party Patriots, the only Tea Party umbrella group that actually can claim to be a spontaneous, bottom-up, grass roots organization rather than a front for the same old fat cats of the Republican right, from the Koch brothers to Dick Armey’s FreedomWorks. Tea Party Patriots has claimed anywhere from 2,300 to nearly 3,000 local affiliates, but even with its assistance, The Post could verify a total of only 647 Tea Party groups nationwide. Most had fewer than 50 members. The median amount of money each group had raised in 2010 was $800, nowhere near the entry fee for the country club.

But those Americans, like all the others on the short end of the 2008 crash, have reason to be mad as hell. And their numbers will surely grow once the Republican establishment’s panacea of tax cuts proves as ineffectual at creating jobs, saving homes and cutting deficits as the half-measures of the Obama White House and the Democratic Congress. The tempest, however, will not be contained within the tiny Tea Party but will instead overrun the Republican Party itself, where Palin, with Murdoch and Beck at her back, waits in the wings to “take back America” not just from Obama but from the G.O.P. country club elites now mocking her. By then — after another two years of political gridlock and economic sclerosis — the equally disillusioned right and left may have a showdown that makes this election year look as benign as Woodstock.