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Lashing Out at the Capitol

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Tens of Thousands Protest Obama Initiatives and Government Spending

By Emma Brown, James Hohmann and Perry Bacon Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writers
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Tens of thousands of conservative protesters, many complaining that the nation is racing toward socialism, massed outside the U.S. Capitol on Saturday, angrily denouncing President Obama's health-care plan and other initiatives as threats to the Constitution.

The crowd -- loud, animated and sprawling -- gathered at the West Front of the Capitol after a march along Pennsylvania Avenue NW from Freedom Plaza. Invocations of God and former president Ronald Reagan by an array of speakers drew loud cheers that echoed across the Mall. On a windy, overcast afternoon, hundreds of yellow "Don't Tread on Me" flags flapped in the breeze.

"Hell hath no fury like a taxpayer ignored," declared Andrew Moylan, head of government affairs for the National Taxpayers Union, urging protesters to call their representatives. The demonstrators roared their approval.

"We own the dome!" they chanted, pointing at the Capitol.

The demonstrators are part of a loose-knit movement that is galvanizing anti-Obama sentiment across the country, stoking a populist dimension to the Republican Party, which has struggled to find its voice since the 2008 elections.

With Democrats in control of Congress, battling the president legislatively has been difficult. But after a spring of anti-tax rallies and summer health-care protests proved to be effective, a growing number of GOP leaders are dropping their wariness and seeing the political possibilities of latching onto this freewheeling coalition. Others are cautious about embracing views that can be seen as extremist.

The protests in recent months come as Obama is trying to regain control of the health-care debate and bolster public confidence in his leadership.

Authorities in the District do not give official crowd estimates, but Saturday's throng appeared to number in the many tens of thousands. A sea of people surrounded the Capitol reflecting pool, spilling across Third Street and along the Mall. The sound system did not reach far enough for people at the edges of the rally to hear the speakers onstage.

"You will not spend the money of our children and our grandchildren to feed an overstuffed government," Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) said of the Obama administration, drawing raucous applause.

"Our history is decorated by those who endured the burden of defending freedom," Price said. "Now a new generation of patriots has emerged. You are those patriots."

The group's sponsors included FreedomWorks, a Washington-based group headed by former House majority leader Richard Armey (R-Tex.), and the groups Tea Party Patriots and ResistNet. They and others involved in the rally comprise a loose coalition of conservative groups that helped organize the health-care and anti-tax demonstrations in the spring and summer.

"Health care is not listed anywhere in the Constitution," said Brian Burnell, 45, who owns an insurance company on Maryland's Eastern Shore. His placard read, "How Is That Hopey Changey Thing Workin' Out For Ya?"

"You want socialism?" said Susan Clark, a District resident marching with a bullhorn. "Go to Russia!"

The huge turnout indicated the growing frustration with Obama among conservative activists and showed that his nationally televised speech Wednesday did little to move his political opponents on health care.

Although it is unclear whether the demonstrators represent a large segment of voters or even of Republicans, Saturday's march illustrated that activists, some of whom are not enthusiastic about the GOP, have been galvanized.

The White House declined to comment on the demonstration, but Democrats said the rally and other protests in recent months represent a small minority of voters and will not slow Obama's proposals.

"There is a lot of intensity on the far right to defeat the president's agenda, but I am not sure that holding up signs that say we have to bury health reform with Senator Kennedy will go over well with moderates and independent voters," said Doug Thornell, an adviser to Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.).

Saturday's demonstrators spanned the spectrum of conservative anger at Obama, including opponents of his tax, spending and health-care plans and protesters who question his U.S. citizenship and compare his administration to the Nazi regime.

Most signs were handmade: "Socialism is UnAmerican," "King George Didn't Listen Either!" "Terrorists Won't Destroy America, Congress Will!" and "The American Dream R.I.P." Many protesters carried the now-familiar poster of Obama made up to look like the Joker, captioned "Socialism."

"Nobody's standing up for us, so we have to stand up for ourselves," said Phil Chancey, 66, who drove to Washington from Clinton, Tenn.

"We're all endangered!" shouted Dave Rue, 67, a retired Mobil Oil employee who traveled to Washington from New Jersey. "We're endangered because they're pushing socialism on us."

Some came to protest what they see as government interference with gun ownership. Shaun Bryant, 40, a leadership trainer, was among eight people who flew in from Salt Lake City. They fashioned a sign with a drawing of an AR-15 assault rifle and the words, "We came unarmed from Montana and Utah . . . this time!"

Debbie Wilson, 51, of Apollo Beach, Fla., flew to Washington a week ago, driving to Colonial Williamsburg with her husband for sightseeing before the rally.

"We want our country to go back to the roots of doing what our Founding Fathers wanted us to do -- less government in every aspect of my life," she said. "We walked the streets of Williamsburg, and it felt like we were learning how to be a patriot."

Dozens of signs mentioned Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.), who heckled Obama during a Wednesday night speech to Congress. Dee Meredith, 62, of Callao, Va., said she had never heard of Wilson before he shouted at the president, "You lie!" At the rally, Meredith waved a placard: "Thank You Joe Wilson."

"We're the forgotten people," she said, "and he's given us a voice."

When Arney, speaking to the crowd, referred to Obama having pledged to uphold the Constitution, the protesters shouted at the president in absentia: "Liar! Liar!"

Jeff Mapps, 29, a stagehand and labor union member from South Philadelphia, left home about 6 a.m. to attend the protest. He said he had not been involved in previous demonstrations but that he watches Fox News host Glenn Beck "all the time" and wanted to be part of an event that he thinks will be historic. Beck had drummed up support for the march.

Holding a sign that said "Preserve, Protect, Defend" on a Red Line Metro train packed with conservative activists, Mapps fretted over a "blatant disregard for the Constitution."

"We've been watching it for six to eight months," he said. "It was finally an opportunity to get involved. It's been boiling over. . . . It's not just about health care. It's about so much more than that."

Anna Hayes, 58, a nurse from Fairfax County, stood on the Mall in 1981 for Reagan's inauguration. "The same people were celebrating freedom," she said. "The president was fighting for the people then. I remember those years very well and fondly."

Deriding what she called "Obamacare," Hayes said: "This is the first rally I've been to that demonstrates against something, the first in my life. I just couldn't stay home anymore."

Staff writers Joel Achenbach, Paul Duggan, Dan Eggen and Anne E. Kornblut contributed to this report.

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