The Boston Tea Party Ship is not open to the public. She has no masts, no rigging, and hardly any decking. To clamber aboard, I had to climb down an iron ladder, cross two floating docks, crawl under a stretch of ropes, and walk a plank, barefoot. This ship is a replica; the original Beaver, whose cargo of tea was dumped overboard in 1773, is long gone. In 1972, three Boston businessmen got the idea of sailing a ship across the Atlantic in time for the tea party’s bicentennial. They bought an old Baltic schooner, built in Denmark, and had her re-rigged as an English brig, powered by an anachronistic engine that was, unfortunately, put in backward, and caught fire on the way over. Still, she made it to Boston in time for the hoopla. After that, anchored at the Congress Street Bridge, next to what’s now the Boston Children’s Museum, the Beaver became a popular tourist attraction. In 1994, the ship was bought by Historic Tours of America, “The Nation’s Storyteller,” a heritage-tourism outfit founded in the nineteen-seventies by entrepreneurial Floridians who also run, among other things, duck tours in D.C. In 2001, the site was struck by lightning, after which the Beaver was towed, by tugboat, twenty-eight miles to Gloucester, for renovation, where she has been ever since, all but forgotten.

The Tea Party, meanwhile, is the talk of the nation. Last year, the CNBC business commentator Rick Santelli, outraged by the federal government’s bailout plan, called for a new tea party. He wanted to dump some derivative securities into Lake Michigan. “This is America!” Santelli hollered from a trading-room floor in Chicago, surrounded by
cheering commodities brokers. “How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage?” He was sure about one thing: “If you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves.”

The importance of the Founding Fathers and of the events of 1773 for the twenty-first-century Tea Party movement might seem slight; surely the name is happenstance, the knee breeches knickknacks, the rhetoric of revolution unthinking. But that’s not entirely the case, especially in Boston, where the local chapter of the Tea Party bears a particular burden: it happened here. After Santelli’s call to arms—dubbed “the rant heard round the world”—Austin Hess, a twenty-six-year-old engineer, showed up at a Tax Day rally on the Boston Common carrying a sign that read “I Can Stimulate Myself” and wearing a tricornered hat, the genuine article, wide-brimmed and raffish. “Everybody, anywhere I go, always asks me, ‘Where did you get that hat?’ ” Hess told me. “Everybody in the movement is interested in the Revolution.” He takes his debt to the Founders seriously: “We believe that we are carrying on their tradition, and if they were around today they would be in the streets with us, leading us, and they’d be even angrier than we are. I imagine we’d have to politely ask them to leave their muskets at home.”

The Boston Tea Party holds monthly meetings at the Green Dragon Tavern, just a few steps from Faneuil Hall, along the Freedom Trail’s signature red brick path. By the front door, a painted statue of a redcoat, the Revolutionary equivalent of a tobacco-store Indian, stands guard. Inside, muskets decorate the walls. Beginning in 1764, the year that Parliament passed the Sugar Act, the Green Dragon served as a meeting place of Boston’s Freemasons, who were pretty much the same guys who started the Sons of Liberty the following year, to oppose the Stamp Act, when James Otis, Jr., a Boston lawyer, insisted that taxation without representation was tyranny. In August of 1765, a Boston mob destroyed the houses of both the stamp collector and the lieutenant governor, Thomas Hutchinson. In 1766, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, but the next year levied the Townshend duties, which Bostonians proved so forbiddingly unwilling to pay that the colony’s royally appointed governor, Francis Bernard, called in the British Army. In 1768, two regiments of British regulars wearing coats the color of boiled lobster landed on the Long Wharf, marched through the streets of the city, and pitched tent on Boston Common.

Christen Varley ran the Green Dragon meeting that I went to in early March; she’s the Boston Tea Party’s president. Fierce, cheerful, and determined, Varley is thirty-nine and wears her brown hair in a ponytail. She is fed up with the federal government, with taxes and the bailout. “Our topic tonight is that our wonderful federal government is trying to cram health care and whatnot down our throats,” she told an audience huddled around a long table in a dimly lit bar that could pass for the set of “Cheers,” and where more than a dozen Tea Partiers sat cheek by jowl with almost as many reporters, photographers, and television cameramen. A Harvard political-science graduate student wandered around, trawling for a paper topic. Austin Hess’s girlfriend, Kat Malone, was wearing a red-white-and-blue T-shirt celebrating the day that Scott Brown was elected, a victory the Tea Party claims as its own:

1.19.10
We the People
HAVE SPOKEN.

Doug Bennett, a candidate for Boston City Council, was there courting voters. He fumbled in his pockets and handed me a crumpled slip of paper. On it, he had pencilled a few lines from Oliver Wendell Holmes’s 1873 “A Ballad of the Boston Tea Party,” which he recited, with feeling:

No! ne’er was mingled such a draught
In palace, hall, or arbor,
As freeman brewed and tyrants quaffed,
That night in Boston Harbor!

Everyone was gabby, and excited. Varley had important information: the Tea Party Express would be bringing Sarah Palin to Boston on April 14th, for a rally on the Common, the day before the Tax Day protest on the Washington Mall. Palin’s visit, Varley said, was good news, “no matter what you think of her.” Varley talked about the plan for the big day: “The Obama Hitler sign. Let’s look out for those people, and make sure people know they’re not us.” A middle-aged, out-of-work Republican from Jamaica Plain agreed that it was crucial to police the line between the reasonable Tea Party people and party crashers: “We need to disabuse the public of some of the more exotic rumors out there.” Someone said that the problem is that too few people know that the “tea” in Tea Party is an acronym. Blank stares. “Taxed Enough Already. People need to know that’s what we stand for.”
Later, I sat down with Varley. “I’m from Ohio,” she said. “Massachusetts is a foreign country to me.” She moved in 2004, for her husband’s job, and although, with the exception of an internship with the Ohio Republican Party in 1992, she had never been involved in politics before, living in Taxachusetts triggered something in her. “I started blogging in 2006, and in early 2009 I just thought we should have a Tax Day thing,” she said. (Varley’s old blog is called GOPMom.) She had been home raising her daughter, but last year she took a job with the Coalition for Marriage and Family, a nonprofit formed to try to get a same-sex marriage ban on the ballot.

Behind Varley hung a huge framed print depicting a group of patriots, drinking in this very tavern. Varley was sitting just below the Sons of Liberty, which made it seem as if they were anointing her. That’s what had drawn all those photographers and television crews. I asked Varley what it meant to her that patriots had plotted here. “We admire their battle,” she said. “But we also meet at Bertucci’s.”

Beginning even before it was over, the American Revolution has been put to wildly varying political ends. Federalists claimed its legacy; so did anti-Federalists. Jacksonian Democrats said they were the true sons of the Revolution. No, Whigs said, we are. The Union claimed the Revolution; so did the Confederacy.

Today’s Tea Party has roots in a battle over the Revolution that dates to the Bicentennial, when no one could agree on what story a country torn apart by the war in Vietnam and by civil-rights strife at home ought to tell about its unruly beginnings. Congress established an American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in 1966. “My view is that the Bicentennial should be a vehicle for social change,” Richard Barrett, who was a director of the commission under Lyndon Johnson, said. After Richard Nixon took office, in 1969, Barrett left. The new Administration, he said, “is not prepared to deal with the kinds of problems I’d like to see dealt with.”

On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard fired into a crowd of Kent State students protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, killing four. This caused a lot of people to think about the Boston Massacre; almost exactly two hundred years earlier, British soldiers had fired into a crowd, killing five. In those years, Bostonians had opposed the military, insisting that a standing army was inconsistent with a free government. To a generation dodging the draft, that argument looked pretty interesting. The week after the shooting, a Kent State student said to the Times, “‘They told King George or whoever that guy was, ‘Look, leave us alone.’ And he said no. And they said, ‘Come on, leave us alone or there’s going to be trouble.’ And he still said no. So they said, ‘All right, mother,’ and they picked up a gun and started killing a bunch of British and tossing tea in the Boston harbor. And that’s what’s happening here.”

The debate about sovereignty and liberty that took place between 1764 and 1791 contains an ocean of ideas. You can fish almost anything out of it. Today’s Tea Partiers like to describe their movement as a catchall—Hess identifies himself as a libertarian, Varley describes herself as a social and fiscal conservative—but it doesn’t catch everything. “All the government does is take my money and give it to other people,” Hess told me. Hess’s own salary is paid by the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security; he works for M.I.T.’s Lincoln Laboratory, studying chemical and biological warfare. “I’m not an anarchist,” he said. “It’s not that I think all government is bad.” Opposition to military power doesn’t have a place in Hess’s Tea Party.

It had a place in Howard Zinn’s. In May of 1970, Zinn was arrested for blocking the road to a Boston Army base; he said that he was acting “in the grand tradition of the Boston Tea Party.” The next year, an antiwar activist named Jeremy Rifkin established a Peoples Bicentennial Commission. (Zinn’s “People’s History” is a product of the Bicentennial, too.) In a protest staged by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, more than a hundred veterans marched, or wheeled their wheelchairs, from Concord to Lexington—as if undertaking a piece of Paul Revere’s ride, in reverse—in an effort to “secure the liberty and peace upon which the country was founded.” The National Park Service took a different view; one of its men in Lexington was sure that the “Minutemen would be appalled.” On Lexington Green, the crowd swelled, and riot police arrested nearly five hundred people, including John Kerry, who, like all the arrested veterans, had been instructed to give 1775 as his date of birth.

“What ails the American spirit?” Newsweek asked six historians for its 1970 Fourth of July issue. Richard Hofstadter’s answer was bleakest: “Part of our trouble is that our sense of ourselves hasn’t diminished as much as it ought to.” Nixon thought Americans’ sense of themselves had fallen too far. “Our children have been taught to be ashamed of their country,” Nixon said in his second inaugural, in January of 1973. “At every turn, we have been beset by those who find everything wrong with America and little that is right.” The Bicentennial could help fix that: “Let us pledge together to make these next four years the best four years in America’s history, so that on its two-hundredth birthday America will be as young and as vital as when it began.”
That summer, on the Fourth of July, at an event sponsored by another rival to Nixon’s commission, the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, James Earl Jones read an 1852 speech of Frederick Douglass’s, asking, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?”: “It is not just the 18th century that tried men’s souls. Our generation, too, has to act on democratic—and constitutional—principles in the face of arrogant use of power.” Tea Party Weekend was intended to be

Removing slavery from the Revolution takes some doing. In 1764, Otis insisted, in the same pamphlet in which he denounced taxation without representation, “The colonists are by the law of nature freeborn, as indeed all men are, white or black.” The Boston Town Meeting instructed delegates to the legislature to propose a law prohibiting the purchase of slaves. Worcester’s Town Meeting urged emancipation. “The years 1765 and 1766 will be ever memorable for the glorious stand which America has made for her liberties,” one Boston merchant wrote. “How much glory will it add... if at the same time we are establishing Liberty for ourselves and children, we show the same regard to all mankind that came among us?”

This meant a choice. Massachusetts could either abolish slavery (in 1772, the landmark Somerset case would effectively end slavery in England) or it could lead the colonies in the effort to resist parliamentary rule. It could not do both. When the anti-slavery bill finally came up for a vote, a friend warned John Adams, “If passed into an act, it should have a bad effect on the union of the colonies.” It failed. In 1773, Boston’s blacks petitioned the Assembly, “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them.” That summer, the question at Harvard’s graduation debate was “the Legality of Enslaving the Africans.” By then, though, everyone was concerned about tea.

Parliament passed the Tea Act, in May of 1773, in order to bail out the East India Company, which, with a surplus of tea and stiff competition from smugglers, was facing bankruptcy. In the fall of 1773, ships loaded with tea were sent to four cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. In late November and early December of 1773, the Beaver, the Eleanor, and the Dartmouth arrived in Boston Harbor. (A fourth ship ran aground off Cape Cod.) They had twenty days to unload their cargo. At ten o’clock on the morning of December 16th, five thousand people showed up at Boston’s Old South Meeting House to decide what to do. They debated for hours. Today, that debate is restaged at Old South most weekdays, by kids from the city’s public schools, who research real people, and play parts. One Wednesday last month, I watched a class of fifth graders from Dorchester duke it out. Zerah Jakub works for Old South’s education program. “Mr. Samuel Adams, where are you?” she called. Up to the front stepped a dark-skinned boy with glasses, to denounce the Tea Act. A tiny, willful girl played a shoemaker named George Robert Twelves Hewes: “Gentlemen, we cannot let the King and Parliament treat us like this.” “Fie!” the little Loyalists cried. “King George treats us well,” another girl whispered, from behind brown bangs. (The kids are always surprised to discover that, by eliminating duties on tea in England and lowering the import tax to just three pence, the Tea Act actually reduced the price of tea in the colonies.) “But we did not get to vote on it,” a kid with dimples pointed out. Finally, the small Samuel Adams shouted, “This meeting can do nothing more to save our country!” Thirty-seven fifth graders nearly blew the roof off: “Huzzah!”

Adams’s shout may have been the signal for three groups of men, about fifty altogether, to head to prearranged spots, including the print shop of Benjamin Edes’s Boston Gazette and possibly the Green Dragon, where they disguised themselves as Mohawks, smearing their faces with soot. Then, while townspeople watched and joined in, they marched to Griffin’s Wharf, boarded the three ships, and dumped into the harbor three hundred and forty chests of tea.

In 1973, after Nixon’s Bicentennial Commission failed in every attempt to organize a national celebration, it narrowed its focus to four cities, with Boston as its flagship. Kevin White, Boston’s mayor, decided to make the Bicentennial a highlight of his administration; he set up his own commission, Boston 200, and began searching for corporate sponsors. The Bicentennial Beaver set sail from Denmark in May of 1973, her voyage made possible by the makers of Salada tea.

The Salada Beaver reached Massachusetts in October, 1973. “I’m not a crook,” Nixon told reporters on November 17th. On December 10th, the Boston Globe covered its front page with an illustrated editorial titled “THE BOSTON TEA PARTY... AND THIS GENERATION”: “It is not just the 18th century that tried men’s souls. Our generation, too, has to act on democratic—and constitutional—principles in the face of arrogant use of power.” Tea Party Weekend was intended to be
the national kickoff of the Bicentennial. On the morning of December 16th, more than a thousand people gathered at Faneuil Hall for a meeting held by the Peoples Bicentennial Historical Commission, where Thomas Boylston Adams, a descendant of John Adams and the president of the Massachusetts Historical Society, called for Nixon’s impeachment. He argued that, instead of a day of commemoration, the anniversary “should be a day of mourning, because in the executive branch of government we see the corruption, the rot, the arrogance” that the 1773 tea partiers protested. Then everyone in the hall marched to the waterfront. By noon, as falling snow turned to sleet, an estimated forty thousand people gathered to watch the action on board the Beaver. The National Organization for Women was picketing: “Taxation Without Equal Rights Is Tyranny.” Another banner read “Gay American Revolution.” Rock music blared from loudspeakers. At two o’clock, men from the Charlestown Militia, a reënactment group founded by an Irish-American longshoreman named Jim O’Neil, boarded the Beaver and dumped casks of tea into the harbor. Minutes later, six protesters boarded the ship and unfurled a flag that read “Impeach Nixon.” The Associated Press reported, “A member of the group, wearing a huge mask resembling President Nixon’s face, circled the brig in a rowboat and waved his hands high in Nixon’s familiar ‘V’ style.” On board, they tarred and feathered an effigy of the President.

What happened in Boston that day made front-page news across the country. The coverage wasn’t the kind Kevin White wanted. “The first anguished attempt to make something—anything” out of the Bicentennial, according to an editorial in the Washington Post, was “distinguished by commercial and ideological hucksterism.” The whole thing, including the protests, was “strained, self-conscious, artificially contrived,” and “concocted.” Watergate made everything look bogus.

This year, the day before the House vote on the health-care bill, the Boston Tea Party held a rally in front of Faneuil Hall. Several dozen people turned up. Some waved flags of thirteen stars. Most carried signs: “The Constitution SPEAKS.” Christen Varley told a woman with a Hitler sign to leave. The place was bustling with tourists on their way to shop at Quincy Market. Austin Hess, wearing his tricorne and a mock-Obama campaign T-shirt that read “NOPE” instead of “HOPE,” posed for snapshots in front of a statue of Samuel Adams. A nurse from Worcester who grew up in the Midwest and is registered as an Independent explained what getting back to the country’s eighteenth-century roots means to her: “I don’t want the government giving money to people who don’t want to work. Government is for the post office, and to defend our country, and maybe for the roads. That’s all.”

“Can you imagine if the British said not only do you have to pay a tax on the tea but you have to buy the tea and you have to buy tea for your neighbor?” Hess said. He told me that he had briefly thought about printing out a copy of the twenty-four-hundred-page health-care bill and dumping it into the harbor, but when he learned that he would get arrested for it he changed his mind. A lot of other junk has been dumped into Boston Harbor over the years, though. In 1988, the Just Say No days, a troop of Boy Scouts dumped a cask labelled “CRACK.” Four years later, Teamsters meeting on Labor Day poured cans of beer into the water, and then tossed in the empty cases, though that sounds more like littering. In 1997, a bunch of doctors and nurses, wearing scrubs, boarded the Beaver and threw overboard some H.M.O.s’ annual reports. Dick Armey once unloaded a copy of the U.S. tax code. Three years ago, state senators from Massachusetts, Texas, Georgia, and Virginia went to the wharf toting boxes of unfunded federal mandates.

The dumping of the tea wasn’t always such a big deal. In 1823, its fiftieth anniversary passed without observance. Not so the rest of the semi-centennial. “Those who established our liberty and our government are daily dropping from among us,” Daniel Webster said, as the cornerstone was laid for the Bunker Hill Monument, in 1825. The following year, Adams and Jefferson died on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In 1831, Holmes wrote a poem about an old man who was known around Boston as “the last of the cocked hats,” with his “old three-cornered hat, / And the breeches, and all that,” and who was the best-known surviving participant of what had always been called, simply, “the destruction of the tea,” until George Robert Twelves Hewes was found in New York.

As the historian Alfred F. Young discovered a few years ago, this business with the tea wasn’t called a “tea party” until 1834. The name made it sound like a political party. In the seventeen-seventies, parties were anathema (“If I could not go to heaven but with a party,” Jefferson wrote, “I would not go there at all”), but in the eighteen-thirties parties ran politics. As Young recounts in “The Shoemaker and the Tea Party,” Hewes was brought to Boston for the Fourth of July, 1835. The Founding Fathers were dying, but, by parading a ninety-two-year-old man through the streets, the city’s Whigs claimed the Revolution’s so-called Tea Party as their own. Lost was what American independence meant to Hewes, a poor man all his life: before it, he bowed before his betters; after, he refused to doff his hat to any man.
On the day of the health-care vote, Boston Tea Partiers held a vigil at the Green Dragon “to watch enemy troop movements on C-SPAN,” as Hess put it. When the bill passed, Hess grew more convinced of the aptness of his analogy: “We sent Scott Brown to Washington to kill this bill, but the people in Washington did everything they could to thwart the will of the people, and especially the people of Massachusetts.” In 1774, in response to the dumping of the tea, Parliament passed what colonists called the Intolerable Acts, which closed the port of Boston and restricted Massachusetts town meetings. Thomas Gage, the commander of the British forces in America, was named governor. It was just like health care, Hess said. “I really feel like this is a modern-day Intolerable Act.”

Today’s Tea Partiers say that they’re concerned, for the most part, with taxes. So was the left-wing Peoples Bicentennial Commission, which, in 1974, called on Americans to form a new Tea Party (the acronym standing for Tax Equity for Americans); it urged organizers to use the slogan “Don’t Tread on Me,” and suggested “How about forums on Tax Day, or on the anniversary of the Boston Tea Party—in front of IRS or H. & R. Block?” The Peoples Bicentennial Commission also published a manifesto called “Common Sense II: The Case Against Corporate Tyranny.” It was left, not right, but, aside from that, it has a lot in common with a book published last year, “Glenn Beck’s Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government.” Thomas Paine, Beck said on his show in February, was the Glenn Beck of the American Revolution. Paine isn’t rolling over in his grave, though. Ten years after he was buried, his bones were dug up and they’ve since been lost. All things considered, that might be for the best.

By April 8th, when the Boston Tea Party held its regular monthly meeting at the Green Dragon, word about Palin’s visit had got around. Two buses from the Maine Tea Party were already confirmed. Twenty thousand people might turn up, maybe forty thousand, and who knew how many would be counter-protesters? I sat down at a table with George Egan, a soft-spoken Boston cop, retired and living on a pension. He had been a Democrat until “Kennedy killed that little girl,” and had never worked on a political campaign until Scott Brown’s, but then he threw himself into it, because “the government is out of control.” Egan’s twin brothers, John and Joe, were there, too. Their grandparents came over from Ireland in 1907; they grew up in Dorchester. They have worked very hard, all their lives. They’re mad about the bums—the bums on the streets, the bums in Washington. George said, “Every drug addict gets a check. We write those checks.” Joe said, “Stay out of our wallets. I don’t care: Democrat, Republican? I don’t care.” Then George told me, “My little girl, when she was three, she got real sick. Had to be in intensive care for ten days. Had to have a tracheotomy. I had shit for insurance. The hospital sent me a bill. Ten thousand dollars. I got a second job; I sent the hospital one hundred bucks a week. That was the right thing to do. This is wrong. People want something, they have to work for it.”

Hess stopped by. He was wearing his “Don’t Tread on Me” T-shirt. The house where I grew up was a lot like the Egans’, but Hess figured me for a foreigner. “Jane Goodall, meet the man who’s going to beat Barney Frank,” he said, introducing me to Sean Bielat, who is running for Frank’s seat in the fall elections. I started scribbling notes on Bielat’s campaign brochure. “She’s going to make a contribution to your campaign,” Joe Egan joked. “Really?” Bielat asked, lighting up. “No, of course not,” George said. “She’s from the People’s Republic of Cambridge.” Patrick Humphries, a software engineer who was born in Indiana and grew up in Iowa, was handing out pocket-size copies of the Constitution, printed by the National Center for Constitutional Studies, which was started in Utah in 1971, to promote originalism, the idea that the original meaning of the framers is knowable and fixed and the final word. “I don’t think the Founding Fathers wanted lobbyists running around Washington,” Humphries said.

Originalism in the courts is certainly a matter for debate. Jurisprudence stands on precedent, on the stability of the laws. But originalism has long since reached beyond the courts. Set loose in the culture, it looks like history but it’s not. It is to history what astrology is to astronomy, what alchemy is to chemistry, what creationism is to evolution. The history that Tea Partiers want to go back to is as much a fiction as the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. Humphries quoted the Tenth Amendment: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” He wants those powers. He feels disenfranchised. He didn’t vote for Obama; he doesn’t like what he’s doing. To Tea Partiers, Obama’s Administration, his very Presidency, is unconstitutional. Massachusetts is a foreign country. The present is a foreign country.

The rise of this sort of thinking has gone, to some degree, unchallenged, just as, in the nineteen-seventies, historians mocked the Bicentennial as schlock and its protests as contrived, but didn’t offer an answer, a story, to a country that needed one. The American historical profession defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study. That stuff is for amateurs and cranks. Hofstadter disagreed. He recognized the perils of presentism—seeing the past as nothing more than a prologue to the present
introduces evidentiary and analytical distortions and risks reducing humanistic inquiry to shabby self-justification—but he believed that scholars with something to say about the relationship between the past and the present had an obligation to say it, as carefully as possible, by writing with method, perspective, and authority. Hofstadter died in 1970. He was one of the last university professors of American history to reach readers outside the academy with sweeping interpretations of his own time.

The Bicentennial—a carnival of presentism—helped make the position that Hofstadter once occupied impossible. That left a great deal of room for a lot of other people to get into the history business. Today’s reactionary history of early America, reductive, unitary, and, finally, dangerously anti-pluralist, ignores slavery and compresses a quarter century of political contest into “the founding,” as if the ideas contained in Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense,” severing the bonds of empire, were no different from those in the Constitution, establishing a strong central government. “Who’s your favorite Founder?” Beck asked Palin in January. “Um, you know, well,” she said. “All of them.”

Boston Common was lined with vendors on the day that the Tea Party Express drove into town, on April 14th. The gimcrackery: “Fox News Fan” T-shirts; “Tea Party Tea”; “Don’t Tread on Me” flags; “Straight Pride” signs; a tote bag picturing a revolver and the caption “An Armed Society Is a Polite Society”; and, at a special day-of-the-rally discount, copies of “The Constitution Made Easy.” Varley’s Coalition for Marriage staffed a table. George and John Egan and Patrick Humphries were passing out Boston Tea Party information. “Look, a Black Tea Partier,” read the sign that Kat Malone carried. As a crowd gathered around the bandstand, a man in a hard hat cried out, “The liberals are coming! The liberals are coming!”

On the night of April 18, 1775, the patriots who met at the Green Dragon discovered that General Gage planned to march troops to Lexington and Concord, where the colonists were stockpiling weapons, and Revere began his famous ride. Two hundred years later, on April 18, 1975, Gerald Ford came to Boston. Nixon had resigned in August; Ford pardoned him in September. In a speech at the Old North Church, Ford called on Americans to learn, by examining their history, that the American experience “has been more of reason than revolution.” In Concord, thirty thousand protesters were camping out, while Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie played through the night. Rifkin said, “The theme of the demonstration is ‘Send a Message to Wall Street,’ and we want the corporations to know, by our mass presence at Concord, that people are fed up with them running the country.”

Meanwhile, the evacuation of Saigon was beginning. Just before ten o’clock on the morning of April 19, 1975, Ford arrived in Concord, by helicopter. In the two centuries since the shot heard round the world, the President said, “the United States has become a world power.” He boasted of American military might, decried isolationism, and argued for change, quoting Jefferson: “Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent and inalienable rights of man.” He said he hoped that, at the Tricentennial, people would look back at this day and see it as the first in a century of American unity. After Ford flew away and the protesters went home, a Globe reporter wrote, all that was left was trash, and a sign that read “The Revolution Is Not Over.” Saigon fell eleven days later.

Boston’s Bicentennial, seized, at first, by antiwar activists, began its turn rightward when opponents of busing took up the mantle of the Revolution. A federal judge had mandated the integration of Boston’s schools in 1974 and, as J. Anthony Lukas wrote in “Common Ground,” anti-busing activists turned up at Bicentennial events in force, and in Colonial garb, to argue that the court’s ruling was the equivalent of taxation without representation. “We’re right back where we began 200 years ago,” read an anti-busing banner displayed during the reënactment of the Battle of Bunker Hill, on June 17, 1975. Ray Flynn, who was then a member of the state legislature, warned, “The sacred principles on which this nation was founded are threatened by a new tyranny, a tyranny dressed in judicial robes.” At a reënactment of the Boston Massacre, four hundred anti-busing protesters paraded with a coffin marked “R.I.P. Liberty, Born 1770—Died 1974.” But what most people remember from the coincidence of Boston’s anti-busing riots and its bid for national attention during the Bicentennial is a single picture, taken on April 5, 1976, at City Hall Plaza, just across from Faneuil Hall, and printed on the front page of newspapers across the country: a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a white teen-ager attempting to impale a black man with the American flag.

While everyone waited for Palin on the Common, the Tea Party Express put on a musical show: “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “America the Beautiful,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Someone on the stage cried out, “I heard there ain’t no party like a Boston Tea Party!” John Philip Sousa IV gave a speech: “Mr. Obama, we want the Southern border shut down so tight a rattlesnake couldn’t get through it.” The crowd, five thousand at its peak, chanted, “U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” Varley was given a few minutes on the stage, but not until
the end, by which time the bulk of the crowd had left. Hess spent much of his time working hard to make sure clusters of protesters and counter-protesters didn’t break out into fisticuffs. “Moonbats Go Back to Harvard,” one sign read. (Howie Carr, a columnist for the Boston Herald, regularly calls liberals moonbats.) Next to a man from Beacon Hill carrying a sign, “Our Tea Party is NOT Yours,” a Tea Partier waved a warning: “Moonbat —>.”

On the stage, the national talk-radio host Mark Williams took the microphone: “I am here to reclaim my home town for America. The hippies have had it long enough.” He denounced the “lamestream media,” and Communists in Cambridge and in the White House. “Political correctness led to 9/11. Political correctness led to Barack Hussein Obama.” As the flags waved, Debbie Lee, whose son was the first Navy SEAL to die in Iraq, told the story of his death. Our troops are fighting this war abroad, she said, and we are fighting it here on the home front. Standing where Vietnam Veterans Against the War, dressed in battle fatigues and carrying babies in backpacks, once listened to Eugene McCarthy tell them they were bearing witness to life, and peace, the Tea Partiers heard taps, grew hushed, and found redemption, in death and war.

Palin’s warmup took the stage. “I am not an African-American,” he shouted. “I am Lloyd Marcus, an American.” He sang. Then he broke out into revival-style call-and-response. “Are y’all racists?” he shouted out to the crowd. “No!” Absolution. The former governor of Alaska arrived. “I love Boston,” she said. It was “the town that the Sons of Liberty called home.”

When I got on board that ship in Gloucester, I remembered that I had been on the Beaver before. In an attic somewhere, there must be a picture of me on a third-grade field trip, a red-white-and-blue Bicentennial feather in my Red Sox cap, standing on a crate marked “TEA.” There is no tea here anymore. Scattered from aft to stern are the remnants of work, interrupted: C-clamps, eyebolts, sheaves of plywood, a rumpled canvas, and a can of WD-40, missing its cap. A coil of rope occupies a bench. In the bottom of the hull, bilgewater sloshes past a pile of rusty pulleys. Down below, the ship’s rudder is bound with rope, held fast against the ocean’s everyday sway and the magnificent violence of each passing storm.

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