

Opinion: congressmen shutdown

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with

By Dan Morain, Sacramento Bee

Rep. Paul Cook, a first-term congressman from San Bernardino County, is not crazy, and he's not radical.

But along with 79 of the wackiest conservatives in the House, Cook signed the letter that helped bring about the partial shutdown of the most powerful government the world has ever known.

"What a mess," Cook said by phone from Washington, shortly before heading to the floor to cast more votes in the Republicans' futile and probably self-defeating attempt to defund the Affordable Care Act.

Rep. Mark Meadows, a freshman from North Carolina, wrote the letter in August to Speaker John Boehner. FreedomWorks, the slick and heavily funded tea party group, helped line up support for it.

Most of the signatories to Meadows' letter are from Southern and Midwestern states. No members from Oregon, Washington or Nevada signed it. But three members from this bluest of states – Cook, Rep. Tom McClintock of Elk Grove and Rep. Doug LaMalfa of Richvale – aligned themselves with Meadows. They knew exactly what they were doing.

Meadows, who represents the heaviest Republican district in North Carolina, won his seat last year with support from the banks, Koch Industries, the National Rifle Association and others including Boehner and House Whip Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield.

In the letter, Meadows and his gang of 79 Republicans sought to link appropriations for Obamacare to Congress' obligation to approve a continuing resolution to keep the government afloat after Oct. 1.

"Since most of the citizens we represent believe that Obamacare should never go into effect," the letter to Boehner says, "we urge you to affirmatively defund the implementation and enforcement of Obamacare in any relevant appropriations bill brought to the House floor in the 113th Congress, including any continuing appropriations bill."

Conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer called shutdown supporters the "suicide caucus." Rep. Devin Nunes, a San Joaquin Valley Republican, likened shutdown backers to lemmings wearing suicide vests.

But the pressure to leap lemminglike into the abyss is considerable. FreedomWorks, which spends millions on campaigns, has included signing Meadows' letter as part of its litmus test.

"Republicans in both chambers of Congress must all be committed to absolutely refusing to vote for any spending bill that contains funding for Obamacare," FreedomWorks wrote recently.

FreedomWorks has named McClintock one of only five congressional members who have perfect scores on the issues it considers most important this year. Although LaMalfa and Cook signed the Meadows letter, they have strayed on other issues important to FreedomWorks, perhaps opening them to a primary challenge from the right.

Sacramento political consultant Sal Russo makes a tidy living as the man behind Tea Party Express, a political action committee that contributed \$5,000 to Meadows' campaign last year. In the past week, Russo has been busy sending out fundraising appeals revolving around the shutdown, including

one attacking four House Republicans and one Republican senator for “giving in” to Obama.

“Once again,” a Russo fundraising pitch said, “we need your immediate support to put pressure on the weak Republicans to pass a sensible solution that allows America to avoid the Obamacare train-wreck, while fully funding the federal government.” Consider it a cautionary note to other Republicans thinking of “giving in.”

McClintock, who didn’t respond to my request for comment, also is using the shutdown as a fundraising vehicle, for himself, sending out an email pitch last week saying: “Defunding Obamacare is absolutely essential if people are going to continue to have access to affordable, quality health care. And for that matter, be able to keep their jobs or the hours that they’re working.”

There is a measure of irony in the line about jobs. LaMalfa, McClintock and Cook occupy districts that include national parks, which were closed as a result of the shutdown, leaving workers without hours or jobs, and businesses that depend on them without sources of income. McClintock represents the Yosemite area, where tourism is suffering because of the massive Rom Fire.

“We got burned by the recession. We got burned by the fire. Now we are getting burned by the shutdown,” said Lauren Nickell, who along with her husband, Bill, owns Sunset Inn, two miles outside Yosemite National Park.

Unable to fill her rooms because of the shutdown, Nickell, registered as a decline-to-state voter, is angry at the whole bunch in Washington. “In the real world, we have to compromise. So why doesn’t government? They need to work together. Otherwise, they’re all fired.”

Nickell’s view, alas, probably is not shared by the majority of the voters in McClintock’s district, or in LaMalfa’s or

Cook's. Congressional districts 1, 4 and 8 occupied by LaMalfa, McClintock and Cook run from the Oregon border, past Mount Lassen, down the Sierra past Tahoe, Yosemite and south to the Mojave Desert.

Their California is far removed from Berkeley, Marin and Santa Monica. Their districts are far whiter, grayer and more Republican than the rest of the state, according to data supplied by Paul Mitchell of Political Data Inc., and UC Davis political scientist Mindy Romero.

McClintock's district of 411,100 voters includes 66,000 more Republicans than Democrats. Only 9 percent of the voters are Latino, Asian or African American. The vast majority, 371,500, were born in the United States. Almost half, 202,100, are 55 or older.

LaMalfa's district of 390,000 voters has 45,480 more Republicans than Democrats. Voters in his district are even older than McClintock's; 205,800 are 55 or older, and 15 percent are ethnic minorities.

Cook's district is only slightly more diverse. But even there, only 24.5 percent of the 303,600 voters are nonwhite; 41 percent are 55 and older.

Cook, a well-read and thoughtful politician, by most measures is a centrist. A decorated Vietnam veteran, he taught history at California State University, San Bernardino, and served six years in the Assembly. He dislikes the Affordable Care Act, calling it a radical change, and said most voters in his district oppose it.

He also understands certain political realities. One is that Republicans don't control the Senate or the White House. Democrats "are not going to defund Obamacare, and they are not going to wait on it."

"I'm not going to be stupid, but I am more pragmatic than some

of my colleagues,” Cook said. “You have only so many cards to play.”

He also knows that he will face a primary challenge. One candidate who has set up a website describes himself as “100 percent pro-life,” claims the right to bear arms is God-given and opposes any amnesty for illegal immigrants.

Smart Republican pundits understand that if the shutdown goes on for long, the Republican Party will suffer nationally. But Cook, McClintock and LaMalfa know the nature of their districts. The mess that is Washington aside, they could see clearly that there was great advantage to aligning themselves with Mark Meadows of North Carolina.