

Who votes and who doesn't, who our lawmakers are and who and what influence them, and how we will fill leadership positions in the future are questions that surround state politics in Idaho. In this issue of *FOCUS*, we examine these issues that dot Idaho's political landscape and look at forces that likely will shape the future of politics in Idaho.

# At A Crossroads

*The religious right seeks its place in Idaho politics*

**By Bob Evancho**

**G**et ready for the backlash, says former state Rep. Dave Baumann. In the wake of White House romps, pro-choice militancy, gay-rights advancements and the general belief that our nation's morals are going down the tube, Baumann aligns himself with those who look askance at these political calamities and envision a shift to more virtuous times. The result, predicts the 67-year-old retired minister, will be a resurgence of the religious right and a wellspring of political conservatism in Idaho and elsewhere.

Baumann compares the current political climate to that of the late 1970s when the Christian right — responding to the anything-goes ideology of the '60s and early '70s — gained national prominence on the political scene with the formation of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. From both a national and Idaho perspective, the power of religious conservatives was never more evident than in the '80s when they twice helped elect Ronald Reagan to the White House and Steve Symms to the U.S. Senate.

“The pendulum always swings the other way when people see things going downhill,” says Baumann. “We feel the majority of people are fed up with what's going on in this country. They're disgusted, and our president is the worst



example of this. I think the American people will stand up and say the whole country is suffering from this rotten mess.”

Sure, there are plenty of Idahoans who are up in arms over the Clinton caper. But will it really lead to a ground swell of support for the religious right?

After all, there are those who maintain that religious conservatives have rendered themselves ineffective — or at least of limited influence — in Idaho’s political arena because the state’s lawmakers and electorate alike have grown weary of the right’s rhetoric and tactics.

“The religious right is a political force in Idaho,” says Boise State graduate Mark Warbis, a political reporter for the Associated Press’ Boise bureau. “But their effectiveness has been limited by their tendency to try and bully [state lawmakers] on the political issues.”

Despite these disparate views, most would agree that Idaho’s religious and political landscape has long been considered fertile ground for the ideological underpinnings for movements such as the religious right. Look no further than the 1994 election with the state’s voters sending ultraconservative Republican Helen Chenoweth to Congress and nearly passing a ballot measure — missing by a mere 3,098 votes — that would have restricted gay rights.

“The religious right’s strategy to achieve political power here and elsewhere has been to organize and politically activate people who subscribe to a more fundamentalist Christian tradition,” says Jim Hansen, a former state legislator and executive director of United Vision for Idaho, a non-partisan political watchdog group. “To do that, they’ve gotten into the GOP.”

With the dominance of one political party along with “low voter participation and deep cynicism, Idaho is very ripe for such groups to gain a disproportionate amount of influence,” adds Hansen, former director of BSU’s Office of Conflict Management.

But does the religious right have the same leverage that it apparently had as recently as 1994?

Andrew Arulanandam, executive director of the Idaho Republican Party, says the Christian right has not — and in reality cannot — tip the scales within the GOP to suit its own political agenda. “Yes, the religious right is a player within our party,” says Arulanandam, who graduated from Boise State in 1992 with a communication degree. “They have influence not only in Idaho’s Republican Party, but also in national politics and society in general. But there are



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*Coalition leader Nancy Bloomer says the nation is best served by biblical principles.*

other players within our party. We are a broad-based party that draws strength from the diversity of our members.”

“All we’re saying is that we want a place at the table of political debate,” says Nancy Bloomer, executive director of the Idaho Christian Coalition. “We are simply people who believe in the Bible and that this country is best served by biblical principles.”

In addition to attempts to restrict gay rights, the religious right’s agenda has included efforts to end no-fault divorce and to provide tuition tax breaks for parents who send their kids to private schools. A more

**‘Idaho is ripe for such groups to gain a disproportionate amount of influence.’**

recent — and emotional — issue was the acrimonious abortion debate, and the role played by Dennis Mansfield, director of the Idaho Family Forum, during this year’s legislative session.

Mansfield spearheaded the lobbying efforts by religious conservatives — including the IFF, the Idaho Christian Coalition and Right to Life of Idaho — to urge the Legislature to pass a parental-consent bill, which would have required minors to get the permission of their parents or a judge to have an abortion. In his zeal to see the legislation

passed, Mansfield proceeded to do considerable arm-twisting. But some — including Senate President Pro Tem Jerry Twigg and House Speaker Mike Simpson, the Legislature’s top leaders — considered his style overbearing and overly aggressive. Even though he may have agreed with Mansfield on the issue, Twigg called the IFF leader’s tactics “heavy-handed, sometimes deceitful and bullying” in an *Idaho Statesman* article.

Gov. Phil Batt, who labels himself pro-life, eventually vetoed an amended bill, saying it was “doubtful that this legislation would withstand constitutional scrutiny.” Another law banning what is called partial-birth abortions was also championed by Mansfield and other pro-life lobbyists during the 1998 Legislature. It was signed by Batt but is indefinitely tied up in federal court.

Many political observers agreed that the final version of the parental-consent bill was a flawed piece of legislation with too many red flags. But Mansfield and his allies disagreed. And it’s the manner in which Mansfield voiced his displeasure — stating that Batt’s legacy “will be the blood that dripped off his elbow as he vetoed that bill” — that angered some.

Mansfield’s hyperbole is an example of the religious right “shooting itself in the foot” with overzealous lobbying, says state Sen. Sheila Sorensen, R-Boise. “The abortion issue created a lot of bad feelings with [Mansfield’s] bullying tactics. [Politicians] in Washington may be used to such treatment, but I don’t think it goes over very well here.”

That still didn’t stop the religious right from angering some people even more when

# Ex-Prof Tries Politics

By Bob Evancho

**A**lthough he's a relative newcomer to the Idaho Legislature, state Rep. Pat Bieter isn't worried about making his voice heard.

That's because the former Boise State education professor is the antithesis of a shrinking violet. Throughout his life, Bieter, D-Boise, has articulated his points and asserted his opinions with both a booming voice and a wealth of knowledge on a variety of subjects.

Those qualities have served him well not only during his 40-year career as an educator, but also in his inaugural term in Idaho's House of Representatives, which he began after winning the House District 19 seat in 1996, the year after he retired from Boise State.

Now 68, Bieter is running unopposed for reelection this November. "I don't know if no one is running against me because they figure I can't do anybody any harm or they don't think they can beat me," says Bieter with a laugh.

Bieter says he knew he was in for an education when he began his first term in the GOP-dominated Legislature. "I knew I would be in a minority position," he says, "but I didn't realize the extent to which the rural areas of the state control the agenda of the Legislature and how little of what goes on is partisan.

"Sure, there are some things that are strictly Democrats vs. Republicans, which the Democrats lose, but damn few. Most of the issues are urban vs. rural and conservative vs. moderate. I knew I would run into that, so I didn't have any great expectations that I would shake things up."

So while he isn't in a position to push his own agenda, Bieter has tried to "put a holding action to keep some of the worst [legislation] from happening, and then promote some of the things I like — things like funding for higher education and public schools."

Given his teaching background in both higher education and public schools, Bieter's interest in education is understandable. His career as a Boise educator began in 1956 when he started teaching English at North Junior High — moving on to Boise High School in 1958 and eventually to Boise State College in 1969.

But now his focus is on his new career as a state lawmaker. "Although I'm learning about the day-to-day operations of the Legislature, I think my background in education and interest in history has helped bring a little more context to the discussion on issues like taxes and funding for public education. As a teacher, I feel I'm well-prepared for the communication that's necessary in politics. I'm not intimidated when it comes to talking to people."

While the '96 election was his initial venture as a political candidate, Bieter considered running for a seat in the House as far back as 20 years ago. "But I couldn't afford it because the

amount of my salary that would have been withheld at the university would have amounted to close to half of my annual salary," he recalls.

Despite his relatively late start as a lawmaker, Bieter is no



*A newcomer to the Legislature, Pat Bieter, right, is no stranger to Idaho politics.*

stranger to Idaho politics. In addition to working on campaigns for Democratic stalwarts Cecil Andrus and Larry LaRocco, Bieter served as a delegate to the Democratic state convention and as the party's Ada County chairman.

Bieter cut his political teeth in 1948 while he was a freshman at the College of St. Thomas in his native Minnesota. His sociology professor that year was a budding politician by the name of Eugene McCarthy, who was running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Bieter joined McCarthy's campaign, "and that's what got me hooked," he says.

Little did Bieter know that his interest in politics would begin while working for a future U.S. Senator who forged a reputation as a political intellectual and would challenge for the Democratic presidential nomination 20 years later.

As for his future in politics, Bieter says he'll play it by ear. "If I'm still in good health and feel I'm doing some good, I might run again in 2000. If not, I'd still like to teach."

Either way, Bieter will be right at home. □

CHELSEA SCHEER PHOTO

it targeted eight Republican incumbents in the May primary — two in northern Idaho, three in the Boise area, one in the Magic Valley and two, including Twiggs, in the eastern part of the state — who voted against the parental-consent bill four months earlier. All eight challengers were outspen by the incumbents, who were supported by business, and all eight lost.

Sorensen was one of those who found herself in the religious right's cross hairs. She was opposed by Baumann, who was backed by Right to Life of Idaho.

"If you have people who don't like your philosophy, that's their right to try to remove you from office," Sorensen says. "What I didn't appreciate was the letters they wrote against me to my constituents regarding the role I played in the defeat of the bill. They weren't factual and made accusations that weren't true. Of course they have the protection of freedom of speech. You just need to be aware of these encounters and hope the voters will let your record stand for itself."

Baumann, who represented Boise's District 13 after winning the 1994 election, says he was approached by Right to Life of Idaho and asked to challenge Sorensen in the primary "basically to make a point."

Arulanandam acknowledges that the abortion debate was a hot-button issue that caused some ill will within the ranks. But any dam-

age, he adds, was minimal. "The Republican Party is a pro-life party, and I don't see any shift in our stand on that issue," he remarks. "However, we are not a single-issue organization, and there are going to be differences. It's all part of the political process."

But Warbis isn't so sure that everyone will forgive and forget so easily — especially if the religious right can't throw its political weight around like it did in 1994. "This year's primary results tell me that they can't deliver on their threats," he says. "And to make threats with impunity to people like Twiggs, Sorensen and Simpson doesn't sit well with a lot of Idaho legislators."

Another criticism is that religious conservatives are trying to foist their beliefs on the rest of the state. Mansfield declined to be interviewed for this article, and three phone calls requesting an interview with Barry Peters, Idaho Family Forum board vice president, were not returned. However, other leaders were willing to respond.

The Idaho Christian Coalition's Bloomer scoffs at the notion that the religious right is the only faction in Idaho's political arena that tries to legislate morality. "There isn't one piece of legislation that doesn't legislate somebody's morality," she says. "I don't care if it's a tax issue, an education or an abortion issue. Everything comes down to a moral basis."

Kelly Walton, president of the Idaho Christian Coalition, echoes those sentiments. "Every bill contains somebody's agenda or morality," he says, "and every time a bill is passed, somebody's morality is being imposed on the rest of us."

But have overzealous lobbying and attempts to unseat lawmakers such as Twiggs and Sorensen alienated too many people? Has the religious right burned too many bridges in Idaho?

"Look at it this way," replies Walton. "When I first came here in 1993 and worked [as a lobbyist] during the legislative session, we weren't given the time of day. Then we got [the anti-gay rights] Proposition One on the ballot in '94 and lost by the slimmest of margins."

"In the next session we got a law passed that prevents Idaho from recognizing same-sex marriages. We were looking for standards that would not honor this lifestyle, and that's exactly what the Legislature did."

"We began to see that our relative strength was in focusing our efforts in the Legislature rather than the initiative format," Walton continues. "Many legislators are very supportive of what we're doing. Like I said, when I first started I knew only a couple of legislators. Now I consider myself friends with over half the Legislature."

"We plan on being here for decades." □



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