Territorial

In Idaho, 'Home Sweet Home' has more than a sentimental meaning.

By Larry Burke

- “As long as we’ve got everything based in the great state of Boise, we’ll never raise enough money to get the same amount of service they’ve got here.”

- “Those of us in the north are getting downright surly and insolent. You all oughta just kick us out of the state. We deserve it and so do you.”

- “Ada County against the world has failed.”
  Sen. Phil Batt, R-Wilder, commenting on move to purchase Campus School for BSU.

- “JFAC (Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee) finished today. The north was mad at the south, folks at Pocatello felt threatened, people at Boise had been threatened, everybody was mad at Boise, and Boise was mad at everybody.”
  Sen. Ron Beitelspacher, D-Grangeville, writing his column for the Lewiston Morning Tribune.

The sounds of a state working together? Or the sounds of Idaho being itself? You be the judge.

Even before statehood, Idahoans developed highly sensitive territorial instincts. Divided in so many ways – geographically, culturally and economically — we almost seem genetically programmed to circle our wagons at the slightest provocation from another part of the state.

Gary Moncrief, chairman of Boise State’s political science department, wrote in the book Interest Group Politics in the American
Ida Who?
One State: 3 Capitals
West that, “Sectionalism is the fundamental truth of Idaho politics.”

Whether it’s higher education, the public school formula, highway funding, public television, state buildings or just about anything else, Idahoans are: (a) feeling persecuted, (b) persecuting each other, or (c) both.

The debate grabs headlines each winter when representatives of Idaho’s competing interests are thrown together for a three-month legislative session.

On the surface, the rhetoric often seems to resemble school-yard bickering. But the consequences are serious: In an era when we should be thinking on global terms, we spend a great deal of time and energy defending parochial interests within the state’s boundaries.

“There may be another state that has a more serious regional problem than Idaho, but I’m not aware of it... sectionalism in Idaho is almost as bad as it gets,” says Moncrief.

Legislators themselves admit to the problem.

“The way social groups are made up and the way the state is divided geographically, that some regionalism is inherent is the nature of the beast — and we’ve got to come to understand that, not misunderstand it,” comments Rep. Ed Brown, former mayor of Pocatello.

“I think it hurts a lot... you can see the tempers flare,” adds Rep. Kitty Gurnsey, who has seen her share of regional squabbles as co-chair of the Legislature’s budget-setting committee.

Why does sectionalism seem to be a fixture on the state’s political landscape?

In Idaho, centrifugal forces split the state in several ways. For starters, Idahoans don’t know one other very well. Literally and figuratively, it is a long way from the Canadian to the Utah border. Aside from athletic events and family reunions, there are few occasions when we travel outside our regions, and rarely does anyone make the trip from top to bottom.

Boise State President John Kelser says Idahoans could get to know each other better. “There’s not enough encouraged interaction. We haven’t had to because it is possible to non-associate because of the long distances,” he says.

Speaker of the House Tom Boyd, R-Geneseo, explains a simple truth. “There is a good number of people from the north who have never been to south Idaho... and probably have no desire to come.”

One reason for that reluctance is Idaho’s major population centers in the north and south are divided by some of the most rugged mountains in the nation and linked only by a twisting Highway 95 that Gov. Cecil Andrus once called a “goat trail.”

If Idaho were to have a Mason-Dixon Line, it would be Whitebird Pass, just below Grangeville on that highway, and the transportation and communication watershed between north and south.

The relative isolation of the state’s three corners has led to the cliche about Idaho having three capital cities — two of them out-of-state. Spokane in the north and Salt Lake City in the southeast tug at either end of Idaho, providing those regions with cultural, communications, and commercial services. Southwestern Idaho is the only portion of the state that looks toward Boise for those things.

But Idaho’s sectional nature can’t be explained by geography alone.

Moncrief says several influences combine with geography to reinforce each other.

For example, the north is heavily Democratic, while the south is heavily Republican, with the exception of Bannock County. Likewise, religious and cultural differences reinforce the north-south split, with the conservative LDS influence more dominant in southern Idaho than it is in the north.

Economically, there are characteristics that lead to different sets of regional priorities. The northern economy is based on timber, mining and dryland farming, while the southeast is based on ranching, irrigated farming and the federal government. Southwestern Idaho is more mixed, with a combination of state government, irrigated farming, and large businesses and banks.

“Cleavages in Idaho tend to reinforce each other. It’s not just north vs. south. It’s Democrat vs. Republican, moderate vs. conservative, urban vs. rural. All of those things tend to confirm one another and the conflicts are stronger and deeper than they are in a lot of places. A lot more issues get defined as regional issues in Idaho than they do in other states,” Moncrief explains.

Few legislative sessions have gone by without complaints of neglect from north

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Boise: In the eyes of the beholder

Boise bashing is not a new sport in Idaho. It’s been going on at least since the controversial move of the state capital from Lewiston to Boise in 1864.

Thus, legislators, representing the sentiments of their constituency, are carrying out a tradition that is as old as Idaho itself. Here is what some of them have to say in 1988:

—— “It seems like so much that goes through here is for the benefit of the Boise community and it has no effect on the rest of the state. People who represent Boise feel like economic times throughout the state are the same as they are here — and they’re not. They have very little feeling or compassion for what the rest of us go through. If you look at the legislation that has a lot of economic impact, most of it settles right here in this valley.”

Rep. Mack Neibaur (R-Paul)

—— “That’s what creates regionalism in our state — the fact that Boise gets everything that’s any good, that’s economically advantageous. That’s what is perceived, and it’s not without foundation in the eyes of nearly all of us who don’t live in this Boise area. Boise looks like boomtown. It seems like the rest of the state has to figure into the prosperity that seems peculiar to the Boise area.”

Sen. Chick Billey (D-Pocatello)

—— “There’s a general attitude over there... it’s called Portneuf Paranoia. We see Boise State as a threat; we see the fact that you have to sacrifice a whole day or two to come over here and lobby the Legislature as a real detriment to communication. We’re at a tremendous disadvantage to get our views across.”

Rep. Ed Brown (R-Pocatello)

—— “They see the largest percentage of our budget going to someplace in Boise. They feel very strongly that Boise gets everything. They also gang up against us and we end up with the net effect that Boise gets nothing, and that’s what bothers me. That was certainly displayed on the pork barrel to buy Campus School. The north and south ganged up on us and we got nothing... zilch. We just haven’t gotten any bucks in this part of the state for anything.”

Rep. Kitty Gurnsey (R-Boise)
Idaho's northern and southern regions are separated by a 'goat trail.'

Idaho.

"People feel very definitely that the north gets the short end — that everything revolves around Boise and we've ended up here in southern Canada," explains Sen. Mary Lou Reed, D-Coeur d'Alene.

"We feel very connected to Spokane and Montana — our alliances are more along that highway than they are along the 'goat trail.' Boise seems like a long ways away," she adds.

North and south often clash on so-called "moral issues," where the more populous south is accused of imposing conservative views on the more libertarian north.

"The two ends of the state's philosophy of life are different. The north is more moderate in its thinking as far as state spending is concerned, and we are not in as much of a mood to legislate moral issues," says Boyd.

But Brown feels southeastern Idaho is often misunderstood over the roots of its philosophy on moral issues.

"I think it's much more of a problem in the north, which feels like every time an issue appears to have 'moral' hooked to it, it's voted in a way they don't like to see; they see the Mormons trying to dictate the morality of northern Idaho."

"Even if it's not the case, it is the case in their minds. It's almost a non-issue in southeastern Idaho, but I think it's a big issue with north Idahoans who feel this other block is trying to run their lives," says Brown.

Today's sectional tussles, as pitched as they sometimes seem, pale in comparison to Idaho's formative years when secessionist feelings ran high in northern Idaho.

Prior to Idaho's territorial days, national politicians toyed with different border combinations, finally deciding in the 1860s to draw an awkward looking state whose broad base eventually squeezed into a slender panhandle jutting between Washington and Montana. By 1864, the more populated south had plucked the capital from Lewiston, igniting emotions that found expression more than 20 years later when Congress passed legislation to include north Idaho with Washington. The move was vetoed by President Cleveland, and Idaho's boundaries remained fixed.

In the meantime, the state Legislature did what it could to satisfy the north, most notably by putting the University of Idaho in Moscow. With annexation to Washington a moot point, Idaho got about the business of writing its constitution and preparing for admission to statehood.

Secession is discussed now only in idle barbershop conversations, but the sentiment lingers.

"If this were a perfect world and they could choose, I'm confident the 10 northern counties would be more comfortable with little chunks of Washington and Montana," says Reed.

"That would cause problems of its own, though. Sometimes it's easier to have the source of distrust 400 miles away," she laughs.

If there is one thing that seems to unite Idaho's regions, it is the distrust Reed jokes about ... the belief that Boise is getting all the spoils, often at the expense of less populated regions.

"There is an anti-Ada County attitude, I would say," explains Brown. "It's joked about, but there is a negative feeling."

"I think most of us who represent areas outside of Boise have a feeling that the Boise area is like Rome — all roads and everything that is good leads to Boise. I think that's perceived and I don't think it's without cause," adds Sen. Chick Bilyeu.

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Governors
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experience. Nevada is not developed as a state, simply because Las Vegas and Reno, as two major cities happen to be gambling halls for Los Angeles and San Francisco, and thus, tied in most economic ways to other areas.

ANDRUS: Western and eastern Oregon have got the same problem. Western and eastern Washington, same problem. Northern California vs. southern California. You get below Fresno and they don't even know there's a San Francisco or Humboldt County. I don't think we're any different. We're in better shape in Idaho today than we have ever been at anytime in our history. Everything is going positive for us. We're selling more spuds nationwide. The mines have got some people back working again, that's improving. The red meat prices are improving. Some of our commodity prices in agriculture are going up. We've got Micron that's going to build here. We've got Trus Joist going into Twin Falls. We've got Odmark going in Lewiston. We've got two new businesses, I can't say their names, coming to the Coeur d'Alene area. And we have a new clothing group in the Sandpoint area. There's a plastics plant in Soda Springs. We're doing very, very well. There are 16,314 more people working today than there were a year ago at this time. The average per capita income did increase last year.

Now, we've got some minuses, but we're on a roll. The people feel good about it; I feel good about it. And if you'd give me just six different legislators in each house, I'd be a lot better off. Now, I don't say they all have to be Democrats, but you give me six that think in a positive vein, and we'll really light a fire to its tail.

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ANDRUS: A very independent person... may not always be right, but is seldom in doubt. They love to have the ability to recreate; whether or not they do it in the great outdoors, they don't want anybody telling them how to do it. They are just now moving into what we would call semi-sophistication on an international basis. But an Idahoan is, like I say, an independent person, but warm, compassionate, friendly. Western in nature, always willing to help somebody who truly is in need through no fault of their own, but they wouldn't give a plug nickel for a bum.

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D-Pocatello.

Keiser: "Urban life is different than rural life. People in Boise have certain cosmopolitan interests and backgrounds that not only tend to be different from, but offensive to, some people in other parts of the state.

"There seems to be an attitude that the money and privilege that is focused here is in some way sinful... and there's a good deal of resentment about that."

What may cause some resentment toward Boise is the urban-rural gap that seems to be widening in Idaho. Like many other states before it, Idaho could be undergoing a transformation from a predominantly rural society to an urban one.

"Society is changing," says Brown. "Unfortunately, as the big cities grow, they will become supercompetitors with anybody else around. By virtue of our lack of ability to compete, we'll become less able to compete.

"Boise in and of itself isn't trying to create it, but it will appear to people that way," he adds.

Keiser agrees. "Urbanization is a relatively new phenomenon in Idaho, and therefore the effect is going to be felt a little more strongly. To stand in the way of change that is inevitable could cause a rough period," he says.

Will sectionalism ever end... or even abate? Efforts like the Centennial celebration and the push for economic development have the potential to bring all sections of Idaho together for the common good.

On most issues legislators put aside their regional interests when the good of the whole state is at stake, according to Boyd.

"People stop just short of forgetting that we are a state and remember at the last vestige of time that we better get together. It seems like everybody checks up at about the last second," he laughs.

"I don't think it [sectionalism] is as bad as people think it is. As a whole, we rise above it. Overall, we take a look at what's beneficial to everybody," agrees Neibaur.

"It's not that somebody is trying to get somebody else," adds Brown. "It's just the way things fall out socially and geographically. If we understand that, we can move past our barriers to communication."

But others say there is no end in sight to the deep differences that divide us.

"I don't see any short-term resolution to sectionalism," says Moncrief. "It's something you have to live with as a part of politics in Idaho. Any resolution would require a couple of things — one is some substantial migration pattern changes to alter the mix of cultures that you find in different parts of the state. The other is a general move toward a different economic base in all parts of the state."

With such diversity within the state's boundaries, it isn't easy to define what it means to be an Idahoan. Aside from the state government structure, there isn't much we have in common.

Perhaps the simple fact that Idaho is home is enough for most people. Says Bilyeu, "We love the concept of Idaho — that it's a freewheeling type of individual who loves to live in Idaho. We have an affinity for the outdoors, and that brings us together."

Keiser agrees. "I think the dominant feature in this state is land and natural resources. If there is anything that Idahoans have got to be able to rally behind, it's the natural beauty that they have the good fortune to be supervisors over," he says.

"The recognition of that can be an awfully strong unifying factor — maybe stronger than anything else."

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