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# Red Tide Rising: Fears from the 1950s Haunt Obama in 2012

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Fears from the 1950s Haunt Obama in 2012



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On August 20, 1952 over the cheers of 19,000 people at the foot of the Idaho Statehouse steps, Republican presidential nominee Dwight Eisenhower tarred the party of Harry Truman with an attack that haunts Democrats to this day.

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“For every evil of government, they [the Truman Democrats] propose more government,” said Ike, launching his post-convention campaign in Boise. “To reach every social goal, they know only one means: a newer, bigger, more highly centralized bureau in Washington.” That “false road” would lead to a West remade as the tenant of an absentee landlord. Big government would remake the region a “federal province,” its states “economic dependents,” its citizens “governed by remote control.”

The warning, with its Cold War language, hit cultural nerves across Idaho. Animosity toward Big Brother federalism, and with it, the fear of big city moral corruption, played well in the shadow of the Northern Rockies where rural small-town voters considered themselves outsiders. Proudly independent, they were voters prone to support renegades with colorful nicknames: Senator William “Lion of Idaho” Borah, Senator Glen “The Singing Cowboy” Taylor, Governor C. Ben “Cowboy” Ross—all mavericks who crossed party lines. “Individualistic” is how author Robert Blank described their core supporters. Add stubborn. Add defiant and iconoclastic. “I came here to spit in the wind,” said one Idahoan at a Clinton-era wilderness hearing covered by *The New York Times*.

How spitting into the wind came to be an Idaho impulse is a geopolitical story larger than any one seismic event. Historians trace it back to the Civil War when Boise was a Dixie stronghold. In 1892, the Gem State endorsed a third-party Populist in its first presidential election. Third parties continued to flourish with Bull Moose Progressive Theodore Roosevelt (24 percent of the Idaho vote in

James Weaver, was his name. The Populist Party advocated the free coinage of silver, which excited the silver miners. Also, the Populists wanted public utilities, public control of railroads, and other anti-corporate, anti-trust reforms that were radical in the day.

Anti-black as well. The John Birch Society associated liberalism with treason. It was really about the fear of atheistic communism, and that is why it played well in the Mormon precincts where people were always suspicious that big-city liberalism would corrupt the sanctuary of Zion.

1912), pro-labor Progressive Robert La Follette (37 percent in 1924), American Independent George Wallace (13 percent in 1968) and Reformist Ross Perot (27 percent in percent in 1992; 12 percent in 1996). Idaho’s socialist Nonpartisan League grew strong enough to compel the repeal, in 1919, of state law that had allowed popular voting in direct primaries. Meanwhile, in the St. Joe’s River basin and blue-collar Pocatello, Scandinavians organized railroad and timber workers into an active wing of the American Communist Party. Thundering from the opposite end of Idaho’s political spectrum were ultraconservative “Christian Constitutionalists” who clustered in Canyon County. Fellow conservatives in the Mormon precincts sheltered the anti-communist, anti-secular John Birch Society. In 1972, when Bircher John Schmitz broke with the Republican Party to challenge Richard Nixon, he took a fourth of the vote in Jefferson County, polling better in Idaho than anywhere else.

It is easy now to forget that Idaho’s rural precincts leaned blue before turning red. New Deal Democrat Franklin Roosevelt took Idaho majorities in all four presidential elections. Again in 1948, when Harry Truman veered to the right through a fog of McCarthyism, Idaho Democrats held the center as champions of rural electrification and federal hydro dams. Democrat Gracie Pfof from the First Congressional District earned the nickname “Hells Belle” for her defense of the federal plan to dam the Snake River in Hells Canyon. Eisenhower damned the project, calling it socialism. “Socialist wolves,” said Ike, had conspired with “power zealots” to trample the entrepreneurial spirit and trespass on community rights. Cold War anticommunist fear of the feds inverted the two-party system. The Democrats—still the party of blacks, Jews, Latinos and big-city Irish Catholics, still the party of Jim Crow in the South—lost Western electoral clout with technocratic appeals for big-dam collectivism. Eisenhower fed the angst with the rhetoric of local control. Linking Washington to tyranny and technocracy to what Republicans called “creeping socialism,” Eisenhower-Nixon swept every state but nine in the Jim Crow South. Republicans in Idaho took two of every three votes.



Photo illustration by Center for Idaho History and Politics and Albertsons Library, Boise State University.

The Cold War’s Republican tide was not yet a tsunami: It did not stop “Hells Belle” from serving five terms in Congress, nor did it prevent the Democrats from splitting the Senate delegation with the affable young Frank Church. Ike’s victory, nevertheless, remade the political landscape. “The question that obsessed,” wrote historian Robert Kelley of the 1950s, “was no longer economic; it was deeply and fundamentally cultural. Was [the nation] being destroyed from within by Communism? Had that ungodly force actually taken over the schools and the churches, the State Department and the army? When cultural fears predominate, Republicans traditionally benefit; as the party of the host WASP culture they seem to be the

possessors of all that is essentially American.”

According to journalist Oliver Burkemann's June 2006 report "Journey to the heart of Bushlandia," published in *The Guardian*: The name "Bushlandia" came to refer to Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho, where Bush remained relatively popular. Burkemann reported: "According to the latest polls, Idaho tops the league at 52%, with neighbours Utah and Wyoming on 51% and 50%, making Mr Risch the de facto leader of this nation-within-a-nation."

And so it remains in the 43<sup>rd</sup> state. The immediacy of a five-star fiscal crisis can sometimes dislodge WASP tribalism long enough to reward a moderate blue dog. A Cecil Andrus or Walter Minnick can sometimes lure voters across the divide with farm subsidies, environmental protection and the promise of tax reform. On the national stage, however, the centrists can seldom compete. Only once since Ike campaigned in Boise has the Gem State rebounded to the party of Truman and FDR. The exception, in 1964, was Democrat Lyndon Johnson's landslide over the Republican Barry Goldwater. Thereafter, in 11 presidential elections, Idahoans have favored Republicans, on average, by 31 percent. Reagan in 1980 took 66 percent of the Idaho vote with coattails long enough to depose Frank Church from the U.S. Senate. In 2006, during the darkest days of the George W. Bush administration, Idaho was the reddest of reds—with higher approval ratings for Bush than any state in the Union, redder even than Utah. Republican Governor Jim Risch was dubbed "the King of Bushlandia," by a British newspaper. In 2008, Republican John McCain swept 41 of 44 Idaho counties. In 2012, *The New York Times* has estimated Barack Obama's chances of an Idaho upset are zero percent.

Few watched the reddening tide more closely than the last Idaho Democrat thrice re-elected to a national office. Congressman Richard Stallings—pro-life and LDS, formerly a Ricks College history professor—served four terms in the U.S. House for Idaho's Second District, 1984 to 1992. Stallings' first electoral upset can be credited to the deceit of Republican George Hansen, the House incumbent, who ran his 1984 campaign en route to 15 months in a federal penitentiary for congressional financial disclosure fraud. Even then, the election was close enough for a recount. The most heavily Mormon counties stayed true to Hansen. "The feeling was you could not be a good Mormon and a Democrat," Stallings explains. His memory pinpoints the time when red-meat social issues obliterated Idaho's bipartisan ground. "It was 1972 at the [state] Democratic Convention. In Sun Valley ..." Stallings recalls. There, at the zenith of the youth rebellion, the strident, young, pro-choice George McGovern supporters outraged the LDS delegation. Social conservatives bolted the party en masse. "The party turned left," Stallings remembers. "It wasn't the Mormons who left the party. The party left them."

To the west and north of the Salmon in the First Congressional District, the party of the corporate boardroom had also been radicalized. Once, North Idaho was a union stronghold. Before decline in mining and lumber paralyzed organized labor, Bunker Hill Mine and Smelter in Kellogg had been Idaho's second largest employer. By 1986, with the plunge in silver prices, fewer than 400 workers were employed in the Kellogg mines. Statewide union membership tanked below 7 percent. From 1990 to 1998, Democratic Party affiliation fell from an even split in 1990 to about 30 percent.

Meanwhile, the whitest state in the West lured a white-flight in-migration that intensified the shade of Idaho's red. Democratic challenger Dan Williams of Boise, having twice been defeated for Congress, conducted a post-election poll that showed the most recent Idahoans were the least likely to vote Democratic. "In the 1960s and 70s, white flight was from city to suburbs," Williams explains. "In the 1990s, it crossed state lines."

For Bill Hall of the *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, the root cause of the rising GOP tide was more about Californians in flight from property taxes. "Frankly, they are too much of a good thing," wrote Hall in a 1988 essay. "They bring harsh remedies

to Idaho . . . [They] flood into Idaho evangelically determined to cure us of the California impulses we have never had.”

On the eve of the 2012 election, the fire and brimstone of home-rule isolation stirs Idaho votes as viscerally as ever before. Not since Ike spoke at the Statehouse has the narrative circled so neatly back to the Cold War themes of morality and socialism. Whether or not, bye and bye, that circle remains unbroken is a deeply cultural question that neither brute economics nor brute electioneering will penetrate any time soon.

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The views and opinions expressed here are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of Boise State University or the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs.