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Playing Dixie: Idaho's States' Rights Alliance and the 1964 Civil Rights Act

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Cecil Stoughton, White House Press Office

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act in 1964 with members of Congress and civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. looking on.

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Idaho’s racial reputation predates Aryans’ arrival



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Aspirational slogans such as “Idaho is Too Great to Hate” and “Idaho: the Human Rights State” emerged over the past three decades as local human rights activists battled white supremacists and the image problems they brought to the state. The sad reality, however, is that Idahoans have long sung variations of “Dixie” in states’ rights harmony with white Southerners on race. But Idaho residents are loath to admit this: “We’ve had no serious problem with racism here,” they argue, defensively. “The Hayden Lake white supremacists were outside agitators from California.” “East Coast newspapers gave us an unfair reputation.”

TBR Research presents insights and excerpts from peer-reviewed scholarship.

These common refrains paint an attractive narrative that locates Idaho’s image problem outside its borders—Idaho shares no complicity in this tale; the state is simply the victim of libel.

There is truth to Idaho’s claim that many neo-Nazis transplanted to the Panhandle from other places. California emigrant Richard Butler arrived in 1974, drawn by cheap land, open gun laws, mountainous isolation and the whiteness of the population. He founded the Aryan Nations in 1977, courted the media and turned his compound into a racists’ retreat and operations center. As a result, newspapers did tie Idaho to Aryan activism in readers’ minds. The work of local human rights heroes, who helped bankrupt Butler’s organization in 2000, received less attention than they deserved.



Most black migrants into Idaho also had southern roots.



And yet, the reigning narrative suffers from a major historical omission—one that fuels false innocence and perpetuates legislative apathy on human rights. Prior to Butler’s arrival, Idaho possessed Southern ties and already had a racist reputation. White Southerners long populated the state, with an early wave of Confederates who dominated Idaho politics in the 1860s and ’70s and, later, Okies who fled dust and depression to work its fields in the 1930s. But Idaho’s elected officials really solidified an Idaho-Dixie axis on race during battles over federal anti-lynching bills. From 1922 until his death in 1940, Senator William Borah, R-ID, led the states’ rights fight against them. He won the appreciative affection of Dixiecrats (the Southern pro-segregation wing of the Democratic Party) and the hope of their electoral votes should he run for president.

On the other hand, in 1944, Idahoans elected Glen H. Taylor to the Senate — a man considered perhaps the most liberal official ever elected in the state. He was unabashedly pro-civil rights, and was once arrested by Bull Connor’s police for violating Alabama’s segregation laws.



Idaho’s reputation as a fellow foe of federal civil rights legislation did not die with Borah. Dixiecrats again sought allies when President John F. Kennedy called for a civil rights bill in June 1963 that would ban racial discrimination in public accommodations and employment. Not surprisingly, Southerners turned again to conservative, Western, states-rights’ bastions like Idaho to help fight this congressional effort. The alliance was especially critical, given that churches were effectively stirring Midwestern Republicans to support the bill.



Dixiecrat senators mailed their arguments opposing the Civil Rights Act directly to Idaho voters, misusing franking privileges (intended to help legislators communicate with their own constituents). Segregationists also created powerful lobbying groups to battle the bill, which invested heavily in Idaho-bound literature. The greatest volume came from The Coordinating Committee for Fundamental American Freedoms. Though boasting a Washington, D.C., address, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission gave it life, and that state’s taxpayers supplied its operating budget. John C. Satterfield, counsel for Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett (D), and the man Time magazine once dubbed “the most prominent segregationist lawyer in the country,” penned most of its pieces.

This state-funded organization, dedicated to segregation, had ties to the Ku Klux Klan and was implicated in the murder of three civil rights workers in the summer of 1964.



These organizations peppered Idaho towns with newspaper ads while sending pamphlets to people on conservative mailing lists. They urged Idahoans to write their representatives in opposition to the bill. By creating a false panic over a so-called totalitarian plot, the lobbyists tailored their appeals to Westerners who kept count of their own historical reasons for distrusting the feds and were equally quick to equate social activism with communism. Satterfield’s pamphlet, “Blueprint for Total Federal Regimentation, an Analysis of ‘The Civil Rights Act 1963,’” was perhaps the most widely quoted in Idaho, especially the line which claimed “[the bill] is 10% civil rights and 90% extension of Federal executive power.” The bill’s real intent, it warned, was to destroy constitutional checks and balances, free enterprise and white people’s freedom of association, all under the fake “cloak” of minority rights.

From the Blueprint: “The ‘civil rights’ aspect of this legislation is but a cloak; uncontrolled Federal Executive power is the body.”



For a state that usually disdained outside pressure, and had one of the smallest black populations in the West at 0.2 percent, it is surprising how zealously Idahoans responded to the Southern call. Each member of Idaho’s four-man

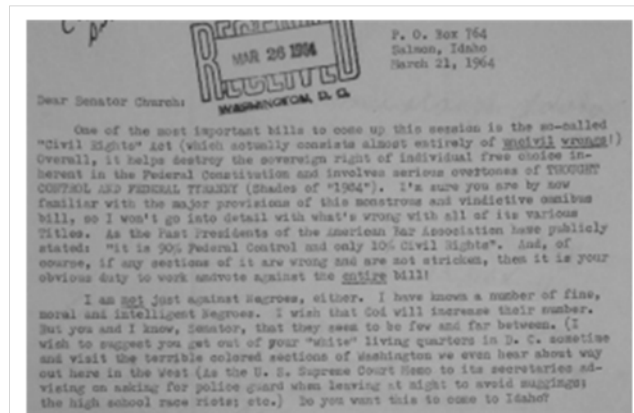
congressional delegation amassed files bursting with constituent mail. For Idaho Democratic Reps. Compton White, Jr. and Ralph Harding, as well Idaho Sens. Frank Church (D) and Len Jordan (R), the letters ran overwhelmingly opposed. Sen. Church once claimed the count to be 10 to 1 against, though a sampling of Rep. White’s mail put his at around 71 percent opposed to 29 percent in favor.

The Sandpoint, Kimberly and Hailey chambers of commerce each came out publicly against the civil rights bill. So, too, did the Idaho Farm Bureau, which sponsored an aggressive letter-writing campaign of its own. “Vote No!” appeals also arrived under the names of the Canyon County Republican Booster Club, the Idaho Women’s Christian Temperance Union, an American Legion Auxiliary in Lewiston, the Sun Valley Business and Professional Women’s Club, the Gooding Jaycees, the city of Glens Ferry and a Ricks College Sunday School class. They appeared on stationery from law and doctors’ offices, as well as from lifelong Democrats and union workers. Spanning the state, postmarks denoted large cities and tiny towns.

Hailey Chamber president to Sen. Church: “We had not thought it necessary to choose sides in this matter; but if you insist that we should, at the present time we would be inclined to cast our lot with the Dixiecrats rather than with the bureaucrats.”



Idahoans’ impassioned push against federal civil rights legislation didn’t stem simply from Dixie’s urging. A critical mass seemed primed to oppose it even before Southerners came courting. Many already agreed with Southerners’ reasoning and accepted their problematic propaganda as fact. Additionally, Idahoans often blended a states’ and property rights position with explicit racial prejudices. Some even asserted confidently that God had cursed blacks, opposed civil rights legislation and would smite race mixers.



Boise State Special Collections

Sen. Church letter from constituent in Salmon: “I am not just against negroes.”

For example, farmers in Hazelton renamed their local organization the First Segregation Farm Bureau in reaction to the bill, revealing racial animus as well as fears of federal control. A woman from Coeur d’Alene claimed the bill aimed to “create a Police State to mix the races” then cited “bayonets in the backs of school children” to force school integration. Though Idaho’s schools had accepted all races since 1873, a Parma man told Rep. White, “I am completely against having negroes forced in with our white children [sic]” before arguing against federal interference in hiring. “This bill . . . would be a gross discrimination against the white race,” a couple in Nampa added. “[A]ny person who tried to better himself could do so if he used some of his own initiative...Charity has to stop somewhere.” As one Idahoan affirmed to Sen. Church, the “civil rights crisis” was an issue where Western and Southern “interests coincided.”

16 black people live in Hazelton, Idaho according to the 2009 U.S. Census.

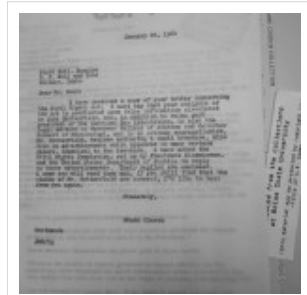


Many letters echoed verbatim the talking points in Mississippi-funded literature. Even Sen. Church worried about how easily and forcefully Idahoans parroted Mississippi materials. His team rebutted false assertions in return correspondence. Church also emphasized that because Idaho was one of about 28 non-Southern states that already had its own civil rights law—passed quietly in 1961—federal legislation would have little effect on Idahoans. In fact, the public accommodations aspect of Idaho’s law was technically broader than the federal one under consideration.



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Church Rebuttal Letter 1: “My conscience is telling me to allow all Americans to be treated equally...”

Many Idahoans either didn’t realize a stronger state law already sat on the books, or they rightly feared the feds would enforce theirs more fully, for their letters reflected anxiety about losing the freedom of association they then enjoyed. Put more directly, they resisted being compelled by the government to deal with blacks in a



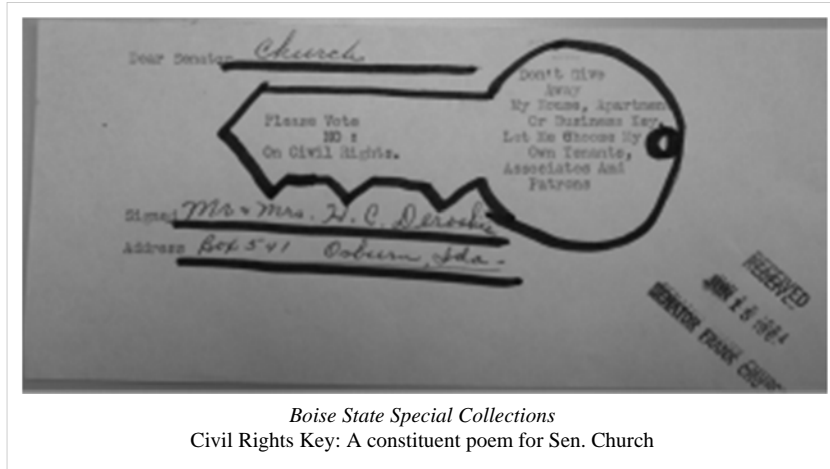
Boise State Special Collections
Church Rebuttal Letter 2: “I must say that your analysis of the Act is predicated upon false information...”

nondiscriminatory manner. Equality of opportunity had to be earned, many presumed, and blacks hadn’t done so. As the owner of Hill Milling Company in Terreton wrote, “The standard of the colored peoples performance and social living must be brought up to the white mans [sic] standard and then there will be acceptance and brotherly love.” Providing blacks with equal education was fine, but protecting the right of whites to live in white-only neighborhoods remained vital to him and his neighbors. He then warned Church, “We expect you to vote for the good of the country and not in a manner to sooth [sic] the minorities.” A farmer in Hazelton echoed that, while allowing blacks to vote and attend school was fine, “they should earn the right to integrate as other groups have.” Several writers were angry that blacks had begun demanding rights on a national stage rather than patiently awaiting incremental progress. And yet many also trumpeted how their white forebears forcefully protected their own liberties.

Woman from Kellogg to Rep. White: “This freedom would be completely destroyed if one citizen is compelled to share these rights with another race at the same time and place, even though the other race enjoys the same legal rights. / What are they attempting to do to this wonderful land of ours in trying to blend the races into a homogenous society? Isn’t that just what the Communists desire?”



A few letters favored full civil rights for blacks, just not via the federal government. In other words, they explicitly and effectively disengaged states’ rights values from the race issue. But most failed to do so, lacing their letters with fears of lost advantages. The employees of Scott’s Refrigeration in Twin Falls protested that rights were being stripped from whites in order to give them to blacks. A Weiser man likewise stressed, “If [the bill] was designed to help the negro, he doesn’t need it if it takes away so many of our liberties and makes it impossible to conduct our own private affairs as freely as we have done in the past.” As a woman from Twin Falls insisted, “Negro leaders are not demanding civil rights. They are demanding special privileges.” Even students from a “Youth and Democracy Class” in Notus echoed, “The Negro must learn to help himself. ... We don’t believe any race minority should be given special privileges. The jobs are there if the Negroes would take advantage of them.” A couple from Jerome added in exaggerated fashion, “Unless we are negroes we haven’t any rights at all.”



Boise State Special Collections
Civil Rights Key: A constituent poem for Sen. Church

Letter to Church: "This lifelong Democrat will beat the bushes to beat you if you abet Civil Rights."

Specifically, they wanted to preserve their prerogative to exclude blacks—even though very few lived in Idaho, and many rural areas had none. A lifelong union Democrat from Pocatello stated outright that whites would lose home value if they could not discriminate racially when selling or renting. A Presbyterian leader in Wendell wrote that rumors of forced neighborhood race mixing had sent her community into "a near panic." Both Democrats and Republicans threatened to vote against their elected officials if they supported civil rights legislation.

Idaho and Mississippi

Idaho and Mississippi often rank together near the bottom nationally with respect to human rights-related issues, such as education and income. For example:

- Mississippi ranked 48th and Idaho 49th in educational performance and programs in January 2013.
- In 2012 Idaho ranked 49th and Mississippi 50th in per capital personal income.

By December, the flood of negative letters was so overwhelming that Sen. Church began appealing to organizations within Idaho to help counter the tide: "There is no voice in Idaho to present the facts, let alone to try to convince people to take a strong stand on civil rights." He directed his plea to the League of Women Voters, Idaho's Advisory Committee to the U.S Commission on Civil Rights and various mainline Protestant churches, which, along with students, already generated the bulk of positive letters that arrived. Though it took months to see significant results, by May 1964, more neutral and affirmative letters were reaching his desk.

Liberal Republican legislator Perry Swisher encouraged Church to view neutral letters as ones that allowed him to vote his conscience (i.e. in favor).

- Both Idaho and Mississippi have rejected expanding Medicare for their poorest citizens, even through it would save those states money.
- Ironically, Mississippi does far better than Idaho in requiring educators to teach the civil rights movement in public schools.

In the end, Idaho's congressional delegation voted solidly in favor of the bill, resisting fierce pressure from constituents to do otherwise. While valuing states' rights, these lawmakers embraced the federal government's responsibility to protect human rights when states coddled lynchers, legalized exploitation and flouted the Constitution. This gutsy shift away from Borah's legacy put Idaho publicly on the right side of history. The Civil Rights Act became law in July 1964. But private constituent mail revealed another reality that would take shape in the next election cycle. In 1966, voters replaced Democrats Ralph Harding and Compton White, Jr. with conservative Republicans George Hansen and James McClure, who fiercely opposed federal civil rights legislation. Both gave voice to constituents who dislike Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Fair

Interestingly, Sen. Borah was Sen. Church's boyhood hero. Church was a co-sponsor of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

- Mississippi ranked 48th and Idaho 49th in educational performance and programs in January 2013. Both Mississippi and Idaho treat GBLT persons similarly with respect to the law.

After King's assassination, black leaders in Boise organized a mass demonstration on the Capitol steps to protest "racial indifference in Idaho." They read a list of complaints. These included, "Votes against open housing legislation by Idaho representatives James McClure and George Hansen" and "Injustice of Rep. George Hansen in joining Southern racists in condemning Martin Luther King as a man of violence."

Neither includes sexual orientation or gender identity in their state hate crimes law or in their antidiscrimination statutes; neither allows or recognizes gay marriage; neither permits gay couples to adopt children.

- According to the Cato Institute, Idaho ranks 50th and Mississippi 49th in the dollar value of state welfare benefits.

Housing Act of 1968, when again Idahoans' letters against that legislation far outnumbered those in favor. Passionate resistance to fair housing laws swelled across a state whose tiny black population clustered in segregated sections of Boise and Pocatello. That same year, Idaho gave the racist Alabaman George Wallace the second highest percentage of votes for president that he received from any Western state (12.55 percent).

The tide of national events—and, particularly, mushrooming grassroots anger at Idaho's reluctance to lower its flag to half mast after King's assassination—eventually compelled the state to pass a stronger human rights law in 1969. This

measure also created the Idaho Human Rights Commission to help enforce it—at least in theory. Conservative Idaho Gov. Don Samuelson and his legislative allies severely weakened the Commission's structure, leaving it without subpoena power, dedicated paid staff, sufficient operating funds or authority to seek injunctive relief for victims. As a result, it could do little good until elected officials parceled out a few more resources and tools in the mid 1970s.

By then, Butler was in the state. He and his wife Betty had vacationed in Idaho for years before buying property for a compound. They had watched Idaho and interacted with locals. Like the flood of white-flighters who followed, Butler felt confident that Idaho was a good fit for him. If Idahoans lacked his extreme religious views and penchant for racial violence, many still talked privately as if they sat on his side of middle.

Idahoans would reject the gang-like criminality of Butler's cohorts and grow resentful of the negative reputation he gave their state. By the 1980s, blatant racism had become bad for business, tourism and universities. Despite this, Idaho—in 1990—was among the last five states to create a paid Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. The main impetus was not admiration for King among legislators, but desperation to dispel Idaho's damaged image. Ironically, the Aryans empowered human rights activists, while also highlighting the region's growing appeal to conservative Californians seeking to relocate. The latter helped make Idaho one of the reddest states in the nation.

Hofstra University law professor Leon Friedman in the *Huffington Post*: "For most of our history, the federal government has been the progressive force in our society, passing voting rights and civil rights acts and other laws regulating the worst excesses of the business community. ... On the other hand, the States have not been the great protectors of liberty, but they have been the instruments of repression in our history."

Because Idahoans still fixate on Butler and white supremacists when discussing their racial woes, rather than contemplate and face their home-grown problems, many state officials seem content making only superficial gestures of respect for minority rights and cultural diversity. With Butler gone, they often act as if no injustices exist in Idaho that need rectifying. The self-protective narrative of being done wrong by a violent misfit from California and the historical omissions within it, blind the state to its racist past and present, while reinforcing legislative complacency on human rights.

Actions could speak louder than words, but Idaho's lawmakers continue to champion states' rights over human rights — most recently with respect to Medicaid expansion and protections for gay and transgender residents. They hoist states' rights up like an untarnished idol while stereotyping the sufferers, shouting "reverse discrimination," citing God and denying systemic inequities. Meanwhile Idaho's reputation as Mississippi's northern counterpart persists—perhaps because in some measure it still fits.

*Jill K. Gill, professor of history at Boise State University, specializes in race, rights, and religion in U.S. history. Her book *Embattled Ecumenism: the National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2011) explores the anti-Vietnam War efforts of ecumenical Protestants and helps explain the Protestant left's decline in cultural and political influence. Her current book project focuses on the history of black/white dynamics in Idaho.*

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