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Idaho needs its own 'McCain moment'

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Idaho's political leadership rightly has condemned fringe gubernatorial candidate Rex Rammell for saying he'd purchase a hunting tag for President Obama.

Rammell was attending a rally at Twin Falls last week when a woman asked about "Obama tags." Responded Rammell, "The Obama tags. We'd buy some of those."

It was a stupid, reckless, possibly even criminal comment. It plays to the worst in American history. Of the 44 people who have served as president, four have been assassinated in office and at least six more escaped being murdered.

The idea of issuing a hunting tag for the nation's first black president conjures up the worst of the Jim Crow era.

All of which Rammell has compounded by insensitivity and pig-headedness.

First he shrugged it off as a joke: "Anyone who understands the law knows I was just joking because Idaho has no jurisdiction to issue hunting tags in Washington, D.C."

Then he fired back at some of his Republican critics, blasting former Gov. Phil Batt for somehow allowing the 1995 wolf reintroduction by federal authorities - he didn't - and Sen. Mike Crapo for crafting the Owyhee Wilderness package.

Now he's firing at the Democrats: "The Democrats are really sensitive," Rammell said. "They are on the defense if you even breathe something about Obama. If they can't take a joke - that's their problem, not mine."

By now, it ought to be clear that Rammell is a buffoon. He's also an easy target for past foes, such as Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, and current opponents such as Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter.

But what about the woman in Twin Falls whose "Obama tag" comment provoked Rammell's idiotic response?

Where's the public condemnation for that?

Was there sweeping criticism of a northern Idaho man who put up a sign "free public hanging" after Obama had been elected?

Better handled was the incident in which grade-school children in eastern Idaho chanted "assassinate Obama," but there was virtually nothing said about a public school teacher who declared Obama's election

signaled the death of democracy in this country. Nor has there been much said about those who have waded into the waters of linking Obama's programs with Hitler's Germany or TEA Party activists who produced a Fourth of July Parade float displaying a tree of liberty with an ax nearby. Depicted on its blade was the name of the 44th president of the United States.

However tempting it may be to dismiss these as the acts of a fringe element - or even to say what's happened here is no worse than in other states - this ignores Idaho's troubled history. Fairly or not, this is a state that has been tainted by the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the Aryan Nations of the 1980s and 1990s.

To leave these latest statements unchallenged reduces the shock value. If someone can "joke" about Obama tags this week, what will next week bring? Any person, any group can be dehumanized. And if it's OK to treat a Democratic president this way today, what precedent will the critics of the next Republican president follow?

Look no farther than Republican presidential nominee John McCain . At a campaign rally last fall, a McCain supporter said: "I don't trust Obama ... He's an Arab."

"No, ma'am," McCain said. "He's a decent, family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with."

When will Idaho's political leadership have its McCain moment? - M.T.