

Idahoans mind their own business

Marty Peterson/Lewiston Tribune

The current concerns expressed by members of Idaho's congressional delegation about potential involvement in Syria are in keeping with a tradition that dates back to Idaho's earliest days.

When Idaho Territory was created on March 4, 1863, the country was in the midst of the Civil War. That same month, the Union government passed its conscription act, making all men ages 20 to 45 liable to be called for military service. About that same time, the Confederate government passed its second conscription act, which applied to all males ages 18-45 beginning July 15, 1863.

The Idaho mines were soon populated with many men seeking the anonymity of Idaho in an effort to avoid conscription. The territorial officials in the executive and judicial branches were Lincoln appointees with strong allegiances to the Union. However, much of the territory's population came from Southern states with strong ties to the Confederacy, reflected in early Idaho place names such as Leesburg, Pittsburg Landing, the Sesech River, Dixie and Atlanta.

While the executive branch was dominated by Union loyalists, the legislative branch was elected by territorial voters who often had a strong distrust of the federal government. During the 1866 legislative session, the executive branch attempted to initiate a regulation that required anyone on the territorial payroll, including legislators, to take an oath of loyalty to the Union. A resulting riot broke out in the legislative chambers, with legislators breaking up furniture and throwing it out through the windows. Gov. David Ballard was forced to bring in troops from Fort Boise to quell the riot.

The bottom line was that much of the territory's population and many legislators were opposed to Union intervention in the South and didn't hesitate to express their concerns.

This concern about governmental intervention continued with the election of William E. Borah to the Senate. Following World War I, President Woodrow Wilson worked with the other allied nations in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles. One of its provisions was a proviso that would provide for military intervention to force compliance with the treaty, as well as to defend the territorial integrity of member states.

Borah became one of the leading opponents to the treaty, stating that "Internationalism absolutely defeats the national spirit and patriotic fervor." He argued that it would commit American armed forces to the protection of every little country that would, in turn, plunge America into the storm center of European politics.

Although Borah supported the country's entry into World War I, he later regretted that support and in 1917 actually announced he would not seek another Senate term in 1919 because of the violation of his conscience.

Borah was also one of only six senators to vote against the Espionage Act, saying it flew in the face of the First Amendment. Decades later, Sen. Frank Church would conduct hearings into the conduct of the U.S. intelligence agencies. Similar concerns would later lead to Congressman C.L. (Butch) Otter being one of only three Republicans to vote against the Patriot Act following the 9/11 attacks. And, in the current era, members of Idaho's congressional delegation have expressed strong concerns about intelligence agencies potentially violating civil liberties.

Concern about the country's incursions into other countries would emerge again in the 1960s with Church's opposition to U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Church saw no defensible reason for the U.S. to be involved in Vietnam, stating "Saigon does not stand guard over Seattle."

In a 1968 Senate speech titled "Torment in the Land," Church insisted that Americans needed to turn their attention to their own country with the war bleeding the economy and throwing the federal budget badly out of balance. He expressed concern that the government was "increasingly immersed in the foolhardy endeavor to bestow liberty abroad instead of ensuring its blessings here at home."

Now, 45 years later, we are hearing these same arguments from the conservative Republican members of Idaho's congressional delegation that were made by Church, a liberal Democrat. With wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is little stomach for U.S. involvement in Syria. Opposition focuses on the high financial cost of such efforts, as well as concerns about the lack of an end-game plan. Syria is in the midst of a civil war and Idaho's delegation sees no reason for U.S. involvement. Just as Church saw no need for involvement in Vietnam's civil war and Borah saw no need to possible U.S. military involvement in the affairs of other nations. And, of course, just like the concerns of many early Idahoans that the U.S. not involve itself in the affairs of the Southern states.

It says much of the world of partisan politics that in a strongly Republican state like Idaho, the actions of Borah and the current congressional delegation received wide acceptance, including within the Republican establishment. But for Church, a Democrat, his actions were viewed by many Republicans as disloyal to the country. Idaho is fortunate that we have had a history of occasional leaders in both political parties who have not hesitated to speak out against concerns with our foreign policies, even when they are clearly in the minority. It is a tradition in which we should all take pride.

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