

Red Cedar's thoughts re: the evolution of the Far Right in North Idaho – 8.12.14

Actually, yes, that's what I've seen. One upon a time, North Idaho in general, and the Silver Valley in particular were Democratic strongholds. That was when the Democrats were the party of the working man, the Republicans were the party of the rich, and all those loggers, miners, and farmers voted Democrat because the Democrats stood up for the blue-collar workers, for high-paying jobs, and against the monopolies that exploited the workers and the small producers. Today's hot-button issues weren't even visible back then. Both parties, at least in North Idaho, were fine with guns, and neither even mentioned abortion or gay marriage.

But then, long before the Californians arrived, the Democrats abandoned their traditional working-class base to focus on big-city urban values. Rightly or wrongly, the Democratic party was associated with environmentalism, which in turn was blamed for shutting town the mines and the mills and making life very difficult for the farmers. When the party of the working man gets blamed for high unemployment, it's tough for them to recover.

Then came the "Californians" -- the wave of conservative refugees from the big cities that had been taken over by stridently-leftist Democrats. These people, as near as I can tell, came to Idaho and Western Montana not just with money (usually from selling their houses) but with a cowboy-movie fantasy that they were going to find a refuge amongst like-minded folks. The worst of them were the racists who thought that because everyone around them was white, they all wanted a white homeland -- they mistook the traditional North Idaho rural tolerance of weirdos for overt support of their ideology.

Most weren't nearly that bad, but many of the ones I met surely were more religious, more concerned about "moral" issues, and more suspicious of government than the locals. There was almost an element of trauma about many of them, as if they'd escaped from a war zone. It was also comical when some would immediately commence complaining about the government services that weren't provided, about other people's junky-looking houses, and about the lack of big-city amenities like good ethnic restaurants. A large fraction came in during the property boom, and left a few years later.

In terms of impact on politics, though, they definitely took the North Idaho Republicans in a direction more focused on moral issues, at the expense of good governance. It seems like once they raised the issues of abortion and gay marriage, for example, that resonated with locals who hadn't otherwise thought that they could be political issues. Given that the Democrats had already abandoned the area, and had a national platform that was no longer supportive of skilled workers, especially resource workers, the only choice was whether the Republicans would stay moderate or would swing towards the religious right. I think that's where the "Californians" pushed things in a more extreme direction. But that's just my take on it and I haven't been deeply involved in partisan politics.