

Yesterday's right-wing radical is today's centrist

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

A year ago, it didn't seem possible to find any daylight between the National Rifle Association and Idaho's far-right fringe.

What could be more popular with that crowd than putting concealed weapons into the hands of college students, staff and faculty - even when they never asked? In fact, the NRA's guns on campus bill prevailed against their opposition - along with that of college presidents, the State Board of Education and professional law enforcement officers.

How things can change.

Now the gun rights lobbyist pushing Idaho's political envelope isn't the NRA's Dakota Moore.

It's Greg Pruett with the Idaho Second Amendment Alliance.

For weeks, Pruett has been promoting the idea of getting rid of concealed weapons permits entirely. Unless you want an enhanced permit - which is required to carry concealed firearms in other states - Pruett figured you should go right ahead.

No criminal background checks conducted.

No education in the law required.

No shooting practice needed, either.

When lawmakers such as House State Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, resisted, Pruett's allies - such as the National Association for Gun Rights - unleashed the political dogs of war. Suddenly, lawmakers and their families were getting calls at home.

"I would hope the people of this state recognize that this is not the way to win friends and influence people," Loertscher complained last month.

Monday, it was Moore's turn.

Moore was supporting an alternative to Pruett's bill, one that would retain concealed carry permits within the cities, but eliminate the requirement for them everywhere else. At the same time, it would apply to Idaho's elected officials as well. Since 1909, Idaho has allowed more than 3,000 elected official holders to carry a concealed firearm without any permit or the scrutiny that implies.

It all came to light after Ada County Sheriff Gary Raney revealed former state Rep. Mark Patterson, R-Boise, had failed to disclose his conviction in one rape-related offense in 1974 and

his acquittal of another rape-related allegation in 1977. Until he resigned, Patterson was entitled to carry a concealed weapon, permit or no.

Moore's accustomed to drawing fire from the left - which happened Monday when Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America's Cristina McNeil called the measure a "Wild West approach to gun registration."

Then came Pruett, complaining about the Patterson-related revision: "That moves us in the wrong direction," he said. "We're removing rights, which isn't the direction we need to go."

Just like that, Moore and the NRA were caught in the crossfire.

"I never thought I'd see the day when the Second Amendment Alliance was in agreement with Moms Demand Action," Moore said.

By mid-week, the bill was revamped, retaining privileges for elected officials.

Pruett said that was "definitely a step in the right direction."

That's how politics goes in the Gem State.

One day, you're in right field.

The next thing you know, you've been nudged aside.

Remember when Idaho's right-wing ideologue was none other than Republican C.L. (Butch) Otter? In Congress, Otter famously voted against the post-9/11 Patriot Act and later extending relief to victims of Hurricane Katrina. As governor, Otter preferred to cut school budgets rather than raise taxes during the Great Recession. Later, he chose to cut taxes rather than restore school budgets.

But as soon as Otter championed the idea of enacting a state-based health insurance exchange to implement subsidies under Obamacare, he was branded a RINO and a traitor to the cause. He had to fight off a right-wing primary election challenge from former Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian.

Or take House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley. When he started out, Bedke waged conservative challenges to staid public education dogma. After he ousted former House Speaker - and now Secretary of State - Lawrence (Boss) Denney and whipped support for Otter's health insurance exchange, you'd think Bedke was some kind of wild-eyed progressive.

All of which tells you the far right corner of Idaho's Flat Earth Society is occupied by a bunch of rigid 100 percenters. Disagree with them just once and you're crossed off the list.

With luck, Idaho has reached the outer limits of that corner. If not, we're all destined to fall off it.
- M.T.

