

Moscow tailgaters to state board: Drink up

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

At some point in the 1930s, French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval suggested the pope would appreciate the Soviet Union not leaning so hard on that country's Roman Catholics.

To which Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin famously replied: "The pope? How many divisions has he got?"

In other words, authority doesn't count for much without the means to insist.

Case in point: Last Thursday's season opener at the University of Idaho's Kibbie Dome.

Outside, Vandal fans continued their practice of tailgating parties with beer, wine and liquor - a tradition 20 years in the making.

The wrinkle in all this was the Idaho State Board of Education's decision last month to, in effect, deny these tailgaters the right to drink booze at the UI's parking lot.

The state board can tell its subordinates at the UI what they can and cannot do. It can tell them to stop selling alcohol. The board can even direct the UI to put up signs prohibiting consumption of alcoholic beverages at its parking lots.

But telling ordinary citizens how to behave?

That's where the state board is at a disadvantage.

It has no police department.

The city of Moscow does.

But Moscow's police department answers to Moscow's prevailing community standards.

In Moscow, the prevailing view holds that the state board's 4-4 deadlock, effectively denying the UI's bid to continue traditional tailgating, is not legitimate.

Not when it reflects the biases of the southern half of the state.

Not when the ban on boozy tailgating had support from all three Mormons on the board - including Andrew Scoggin of Boise, who Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter named to replace Bill Goesling of Moscow.

"Mormons have a lot of seats in the Legislature," Dave Pulis of Coeur d'Alene told the Moscow-Pullman Daily News' Josh Babcock. "That's why there's this rule."

"Frankly, I thought they repealed Prohibition 90 years ago," Bryan Norby told the Lewiston Tribune's Mary Stone. "It's another legislation of morality."

And not when the state board carved out an exemption for deep-pocketed imbibers with the means to beef up endowments.

Then morality takes a back seat to privilege.

Left unscathed by the state board's ban on tailgating as well as its decision to stop UI and Boise State University from selling alcohol at home games were the people with the means to spend \$2,000 on a season ticket and a donation. At the Kibbie Dome, that policy grants them access to the Litehouse Center / Bud and June Ford Club Room - where the booze continues to flow.

So what is a cadre of police officers supposed to do?

Burst into parked RVs and conduct inspections?

Any officer who does so had better prepare himself for one tongue lashing after another from a judge who has even a passing awareness of the Fourth Amendment.

How about spreading far and wide among the crowd? Searching for contraband contained discretely in plastic cups? Spill the beverages onto the ground and start issuing citations?

That's guaranteed to transform a group of good-natured people enjoying themselves into a boozed-up, angry mob. Since when do cops strive to generate instability, putting themselves and ordinary citizens at risk?

So what you got last week was something not dissimilar to Sgt. Schultz exclaiming: "I see nothing. I know nothing" during the 1960s sitcom "Hogan's Heroes."

Somehow, they failed to see the portrait of open defiance Tribune photographer Kyle Mills captured in his Sunday morning front-page picture - a fan taking a shot of liquor, another man holding an amber-colored beverage in a beer glass, surrounded by others sporting the traditional Solo cup.

That's called taking a light touch.

That's called smart. Clearly, cops were taking a lay of the land. That's no certainty they won't lay down the law sometime in the future - especially if they confront underage students who avoided Thursday's parking lot soiree.

But you got the sense that the people of Moscow know something the state board does not: Moscow's police answer to them.

And the state board? How many divisions does it have? - M.T.