

Regional Political Anecdotes, Part 1



First, an apology to my readers for not putting out a column last week. I had a very busy seven days that began in Las Vegas with my brother (where we celebrated his turning of a half-century old), and ended in southeastern New Jersey for a Daly family reunion with over 20 relatives (many of whom I hadn't seen since childhood, if ever). So, I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to the national news cycle.

That was fine with me. It's good to take a break from time to time, and as I've written in the past, I honestly don't even like discussing politics outside of my writing.

Still, with America as divided as it is, everything seemingly politicized, and people perhaps more willing than ever to make their voices heard on such topics, politics managed to find their way to me anyway.

Today, I'll be describing a couple of those instances. And in my next column (which I *hope* to get out later this week), I'll

be discussing another.

We'll start with Vegas.

Again, politics was the last thing on my mind at the start of the birthday weekend. I just wanted to get to our hotel, get ready for dinner at Battista's Hole in the Wall, and then head over to the Foundation Room at the top of Mandalay Bay for some VIP treatment (courtesy of the hilarious and very generous John Di Domenico). But just minutes after my brother and I left McCarran International, our cab driver started right in.

"Dammit!" he abruptly shouted, his head flipping back and forth between the road and his side window. I figured the 50-something fellow had simply missed a turn, but then he pointed out his window and added, "Those clouds are fake!"

At first, I thought I had heard him wrong, perhaps because of his European accent. There were some clouds still hovering above from a rain storm that had recently passed through (the storm had actually delayed my plane's landing), and this guy was clearly worked up about them. He soon explained why, and shortly afterwards, I tweeted about what he told me. To my surprise, the tweet went kind of viral:

Cab driver just told me all about how Bill Gates and Dr. Fauci are producing fake clouds to block out the sun.

– John A. Daly (@JohnDalyBooks) September 11, 2021

I wish I was joking, but I'm not. The driver was genuinely convinced that Bill Gates and Dr. Anthony Fauci of all people (he later added George Soros to the mix) were masterminding an operation that was creating "fake clouds" in the sky (including those above us at that very moment), and he wasn't going to sit quietly by as it happened. He angrily called the men (all considered villains by much of the political right)

“bastards” and “human cockroaches,” and he responded to the Daly brothers’ glazed-over silence by repeatedly (and aggressively) asking, “Do you not believe me?”

Being that my brother and I are both fairly sane, we of course didn’t believe him. They were just – you know – clouds. And honestly, I don’t even know how Dr. Fauci could find the time for meteorological side-projects with all of those pandemic-related television appearances he does. But while I’m generally more than happy to shoot down zany conspiracy theories, it’s a bit of a unique situation when the guy spewing them is driving you around in a car (with your life in his hands and your luggage in his trunk). We were almost to the hotel anyway, so I just shook my head and bit my tongue.

My brother, on the other hand, felt inclined to try and smooth things out. “Damn one-percenters,” he said, nodding his head in faux populist solidarity.

“Exactly!” the cab driver shouted back. “Exactly!” The guy believed he had found an ally. Mission accomplished, I suppose.

Well, we soon made it to the hotel, and after the cabbie took off, I snapped a picture of the Gates/Fauci/Soros clouds. They were actually quite pretty, so nice work guys!



But seriously, while this was just one anecdote and one person, I do think it's indicative of the cultural and political landscape we've found ourselves in as a country. While some would dismiss this fellow as a crackpot, what he said wasn't as outlandish or exceptionally hostile as it should be, being that we live in an era when political-based conspiracy theories run rampant and find large audiences – not just through dark corners of the web, but also through major media organizations and mainstream political constituencies. Unfortunately, all that's required for a large number of people to buy into them (entirely) is a preconceived notion or the tiniest grain of truth.

For example, earlier this week, Tucker Carlson told his millions of viewers that President Biden's mandate of the COVID-19 vaccine for U.S. Military personnel was *not* employed for the purpose of troop health and readiness (the reason that our soldiers have long been required to get vaccinated against serious diseases).

No, according to Carlson, "The point of mandatory vaccinations

is to identify the sincere Christians in the ranks, the freethinkers, the men with high testosterone levels, and anybody else who doesn't love Joe Biden and make them leave immediately. It's a takeover of the U.S. military!"

This should strike any reasonable person as patently absurd (as should other vaccine conspiracies that Carlson has shamelessly peddled), especially in the context of a global pandemic that has killed close to 700,000 Americans, hospitalized many more, and caused an extraordinary amount of societal, cultural, and economic strain. And of course, what he said doesn't even make rhetorical sense. How does getting vaccinated against a deadly virus make someone less of a Christian or less of a free thinker? How does it amount to low testosterone, or having a crush on Joe Biden? The obvious answer is that it doesn't.

But because the type of people who watch Carlson's show tend to view Democrats in the same light that Carlson described (godless, bubble-dwelling weaklings), nothing else is necessary to bolster the narrative, get people to defend it, and keep them tuning back in for more. The same has been true of Donald Trump's continued insistence that he won the 2020 election. Despite overwhelming factual evidence thoroughly debunking his claim, many on the right will forever believe him. Why? Part of it is because they adore Trump, but it's also because they view Democrats as morally and institutionally corrupt enough to pull off such a sham.

Heck, even the "fake cloud" theory didn't formulate completely out of thin air (no pun intended). As a surprising number of people who responded to my tweet pointed out, Bill Gates has granted money to a geoengineering study at Harvard having to do with reducing climate change. Part of that study proposes launching a high-altitude balloon 12 miles into the air to release a limited amount of non-toxic dust into the atmosphere, in order to measure its sun-reflecting effectiveness.

I'm not sure exactly how Dr. Fauci and George Soros are supposed to play into this, or how a proposal to release dust 12 miles up equates to an active and flourishing "fake cloud" program above Sin City, but a number of Twitter folks believed that the mere existence of the study, and Gates' partial funding of it, conclusively vindicated the cab driver. Some even decided that I owed the cabbie an apology (for what, I'm not really sure).

But sadly, that's where we're at right now. Virtually anything can be presented, justified, and absorbed as fact... as long as it's rooted in a desired political narrative or preconception. And because of our societal willingness (and even eagerness) to politicize each and every thing, fewer and fewer people have reservations about injecting such themes into our public discourse. It's no longer taboo.

The very next night, after my brother and I enjoyed the lights on Fremont Street, another cab driver also engaged us in politics. He too was an immigrant in his 50s, but New Zealand was his home country. He was much more pleasant than the first guy – jolly, in fact. But when he asked what we did, and learned that I'm a writer and my brother is a news producer, he jokingly called us "the enemy," and then got down to business.

"Is your news company right or left?" he bluntly asked my brother.

"Well, we like to think we're right down the center," my brother answered.

It wasn't just a diplomatic response but likely an accurate one. My brother works for a local-news network, producing the local nightly news in a red-leaning region of a blue-leaning state. He's one of the least ideological people I know, and the stories covered often have little or nothing to do with politics.

But the cab driver wasn't buying it. "Yeah, right," he said. "Do you work for Fox or CNN or what?"

My brother briefly explained his job, and the scope of the reporting he does. I'm not sure if any of it sunk in, but the moment he mentioned that his station is a Fox affiliate (it's also a CBS affiliate, but he wasn't given a chance to spit that part out), the cab driver said, "So 'right' then! You guys are on the right!"

It was pretty amusing. The guy certainly meant no ill-will, and he kept things light and comical, but it was interesting that he wouldn't leave even a little room for the premise of an unbiased news source in this country. I suppose, based on the direction of journalism over the last few decades, I can't blame him. In fact, one could argue that he has a clearer picture of the modern news landscape in this country than a lot of journalists.

I think his perspective also says something about tribalism, in how the great divide in this country, along with how people choose to identify themselves and others, really does fall along political lines.

The guy had some other interesting insights as well, including how he viewed the United States as 50 separate countries rather than one. The concept of state governments fascinated him, which makes sense being that there isn't anything comparable in his home country.

All in all, it was a fun ride. But again, it was further proof that politics have become a default topic of impromptu conversation in this country, perhaps even to the same extent as the weather (though the first cabbie managed to combine both).

In my next column, I'll be looking at my east coast experience and how it too brought with it a political dynamic.

Stay tuned.

Sean Coleman is back in John A. Daly's upcoming thriller novel, "Restitution." [Click here to pre-order.](#)