

Regional Political Anecdotes, Part 2



In my last column, I described how politics had found their way into back-to-back trips I took earlier this month, the first being to Las Vegas. There, my brother and I celebrated his 50th birthday with some sight-seeing and shows, and picked up some interesting theories and media philosophies from a couple of local cabbies. Today, I'll be writing about the other trip, which included what I thought was a really good conversation with a distant family member who holds political views that are quite a bit different than mine.

It came in Port Republic, New Jersey during a Daly family reunion with over 20 relatives. I flew out there with my father just a couple days after returning from Vegas.

My dad had been looking forward to the event for quite a while. No one on his side of the family lives anywhere close to our home-state of Colorado; they all reside in the eastern half of the country, and have most of their lives. So, he hadn't seen his brothers, his sister, and their families for

quite some time.

It had been *much* longer for me. I hadn't shared space with any of my *Daly* uncles since my wedding day nearly 20 years earlier. And believe it or not, it had been almost 40 years for most of my cousins. My last memory of them was when we were children, playing croquet and jarring up lighting bugs in my Grandma Daly's front yard in a little-known Ohio village (where my father and his siblings all grew up). I was eager to catch up with everyone.

We hung out on an uncle's and aunt's porch for most of our three-day stay, telling old stories and talking about our families and careers. I had a lot of fun, and it was neat to discover some unexpected parallels with some of my cousins. Again, regrettably, most of these people were virtual strangers to me – and I them.

One thing I did know about the eastern Daly contingent was that they're all true-blue, liberal Democrats. I'd gathered this from offhanded comments my parents had made over the years (not in a disparagingly way, but rather as a simple matter of fact). And it had been confirmed through the occasional Christmas letter or social media post.

Of course, stuff like that makes no difference to me. As I've written in the past, I may be a small-government conservative, but my friends run the political and ideological spectrum. In fact, some of my favorite people happen to be liberals. Frankly, when it comes to what intrigues me about an individual, their personal politics rank pretty much near the bottom. I'm much more interested in who people are than how they identify.

I don't think that's a popular philosophy these days. We're so divided and tribal as a country, and so inclined to judge the "other side" by its worst examples, that political tolerance just isn't as easy or as natural as it once was. Sadly, lots

of families have been torn apart by this division in recent years, and a lot of it has to do with sharply conflicting feelings toward a single individual: Donald J. Trump.

Well, it was a cinch that Trump wasn't going to be a major point of contention at the Daly family reunion. As I'm sure you've all gathered from my writing, I'm no more inclined to defend Trump's honor than I am President Biden's. What was interesting, however, was that very few people on that porch even knew where I stood politically, nor were they aware that I've been writing political commentary for national platforms for the last decade. That was fine with me. I don't normally like discussing politics outside of my writing anyway.

But in today's environment, when you're gabbing in a big circle for hours on end, politics are inevitably going to come up. And they certainly did over those three days, including lots of talk about climate change, corporate greed, Trump's continued influence over the GOP and its base, Fox News pundits' bizarre pandering to the anti-vaccine crowd, and the January 6th solidarity march that was slated for that weekend in Washington (I hadn't even heard of it until others brought it up).

I eventually did weigh in on some of the talk, explaining that I'm a former Republican but enduring conservative who left the GOP back in 2016 over the party's embrace of Trump. I spoke of how much the base and platform had changed from when I'd joined the party at the turn of the century. But it was on our last night in town, in the back of a restaurant, that I got into that pretty meaty political discussion. One of my cousins, an accomplished doctor who had missed my earlier ideological reveal, found out that I was a conservative political writer. And over dinner at our table in the back corner, she had *lots* of questions for me.

She admitted to being quite liberal herself – an Elizabeth Warren and MSNBC fan. And she was sort of fascinated to learn

that within her large, extended family of committed, life-long Democrats, there was an unapologetic conservative outlier.

(To be clear, my parents and brother aren't Democrats either, but I'm the only one among us with any history with the Republican party and conservative movement, and I'm by far the most politically engaged.)

Of course, political views and political identity aren't genetic. They come from experiences. Many people's politics are ingrained in them early in life from sensibilities picked up from their parents. In other cases, they're developed through events and life lessons in adulthood. It's usually a combination of both.

So, in that regard, it shouldn't be all that surprising that I'm the oddball. My father is a bit of an oddball himself.

A multi-sport athlete in his youth, my dad's last stint with academia was his senior year of high school. He then headed off to the U.S. Navy for four years, and when he returned from traveling the world aboard ships, he went into construction. He eventually started a family, and moved them west to the mountains of Colorado. There, he worked as a pipe-fitter at a large brewery, making a modest wage from crawling through metal ducts, welding alongside guys with names like "Mongo" and "Snake," and coming home every night smelling like yeast and sweat. He did that all the way until retirement – a blue-collar man his entire life.

And to an extent, I'm a product of that life.

My father's siblings went a different route. They all went to college, earned postgraduate degrees, and had highly impressive careers. A lawyer. An engineer. Two university professors. A renowned laser scientist! And my dad couldn't be prouder of them all.

I'm only describing this to make the point that with different

experiences come different perspectives. In a number of ways, I grew up much differently than my cousins.

Anyway, the doctor cousin was genuinely interested in exploring the mindset of the modern right. A lot of it didn't make sense to her, from the persistent devotion to Donald Trump (even in failure), to the refusal to accept the results of the last election, to the hostility toward the COVID-19 vaccines and Dr. Fauci.

She also wondered whether or not the talking heads on Fox News, and a number of Republican leaders who regularly appear on their shows, actually believe what they're saying when they fuel such sentiment.

"Do they know better?" she bluntly asked me.

That particular question was an easy one to answer. "Yes," I told her. "They *do* know better. What they're doing is pandering to viewers and constituents for ratings and votes."

I've written a lot about this topic over the years, but I think my most effective piece was the one in which I compared today's cable news industry to yesterday's pro-wrestling industry. As I told my cousin, "cable-news is to news what professional wrestling is to sports."

There may be a Venn diagram of common attributes, and not *everyone* on those networks is a phony, but for the most part, the sentiments are scripted and the pundits are simply performers playing a part. And though Fox News is as guilty of it as anyone, they're far from the only culprit.

Case in point, in a recent spot on Jonah Goldberg's podcast, conservative writer Kevin Williamson told a story about the guest appearances he used to do with Howard Dean on Larry Kudlow's old CNBC show.

"He's a really smart, interesting guy," Williamson said of

Dean. "He's kind of been around, and knows everything, and had really interesting political insights... *in the green room*. And then, the little red light comes on, and he calls you a Nazi for two minutes. And the light goes off. And he literally said to me [after a segment], 'Do you believe the shit that just came out of my mouth?'"

Goldberg revealed that he'd had similar experiences with Democratic strategist, Lanny Davis, who'd express certain views off-camera, and then do a condescending 180 once things got rolling.

I've personally come to know a number of Fox News commentators over the years (current and former), and I've heard some of them tell very similar stories (both publicly and privately) that went on behind the scenes in 2016, once their colleagues at the network figured out that Trumpism had become the new direction of the Republican Party.

Off-air, these co-workers would describe how abhorrent and destructive they found Trump; they viewed him as a cancer to the Republican party. But the moment the cameras flipped on, they would transform into unabashed defenders of the man, and even go as far as trashing his conservative critics as "RINOs" and "elitist" members of "the establishment." Once the segment would end, and the cameras were off, these people would sometimes hang their heads in shame, with one even saying, "I need to take a shower now."

Williamson explained the phenomenon: "That paycheck and that camera, and the power that comes from being a celebrity is really enormously influential, and in many cases a destructive thing in our politics."

To this day, I don't think a lot of people fully realize just how horrified many in the world of professional conservative commentary felt by mid 2016, having witnessed the audience they had long written for, spoken to, and thought they

understood, pulled right out from under them by Donald Trump and his cult of personality. In no time at all, much of the conservative base had abandoned the issues and principles they had loudly championed for years, and had no tolerance left for people on their “side” who held critical (or even skeptical) views of Trump.

Those who hopped aboard the Trump Train saw their ratings, readership, and listenership jump. Those who didn't watched them steadily decline. And if they were network contributors (as opposed to hosts), their invitations to appear on various shows became less and less frequent. The message was clear: *Get with the new program, or else...*

While I'm sure some of the less scrupulous pundits saw the sea change as a rebranding opportunity to increase their celebrity profile, I think most who eventually sold out (including some older, established names) were just trying to hang onto their jobs.

Not everyone played ball, of course. Some stuck to their principles, and remained intellectually honest and consistent in their commentary. By doing that, they ran a very real risk of committing career suicide, and unfortunately, a number of them suffered that very fate. Others managed to hang in there, and continue to contribute – what is in my view – some of the best political content out there. My cousin was interested in hearing from such people to better understand principled conservative arguments (since they're much harder to find than they used to be), and I was happy to pass some names along.

My cousin did push back a bit on my broad assertion of cable-news disingenuousness, arguing that she enjoys Rachel Maddow and Joy Reid, and believes (even if people disagree with them) that they're expressing they're honest views.

She may be right, but I think Reid in particular is such a bomb-thrower and so hopelessly partisan that I'm not sure it

matters. Controversy grabs attention. Attention drives ratings. And ratings – not journalism – are what the cable-news model lives and breathes for.

Another question from cousin: What happened to all of the “smart” Republicans?

“Dick Cheney may have been evil, but he was smart,” she said. She added John McCain and Steve Schmidt to the “smart” list, the latter of which drew a cringe from me.

To be clear, I think all three of those men are/were indeed smart. But I don’t think Cheney is evil, and I don’t think very highly of Schmidt, mostly for reasons described by my friend, Jay Caruso. I suspect Schmidt came to my cousin’s mind because he used to be a regular on MSNBC where he’d routinely bash not only Donald Trump, but pretty much every other “fellow Republican” who wasn’t part of his Lincoln Project.

Still, I understood her larger point, and I used to dwell on the same thing in regard to Democratic leaders and supposed liberal-media intellectuals. I even wrote a column on the topic back in 2013.

“I think liberals sometimes have some interesting points to make when it comes to social issues,” I said at the time, “but when the topic is the economy, federal spending, foreign policy, energy, or any other of the major challenges our country faces, it’s an entirely different story. There is an inexplicable, intellectual laziness on the left that seems to prevent these people from identifying the very real costs associated with any benefit.”

I generally still believe that, and there’s been ample evidence – especially lately – to support that thesis, from the unforced crises in Afghanistan and at the Mexican border, to the insanely-sized spending bills that Democrats keep trying to push through (even as our national debt races toward \$29 trillion). The Republicans have unfortunately followed a

similar path in recent years, but prior to the Trump era, I still took a certain amount of pride in my side's group of thinkers.

In that 2013 piece, I added, "I realize that there are several one-dimensional hacks in the conservative media as well, but there is also a surplus of brilliant, independent-minded voices from the right who seem to have no liberal counterparts." I pointed to people like Charles Krauthammer, George Will, and Thomas Sowell (which may have been a bit unfair to the left, being that those three really were the cream of the crop).

But truth be told, I felt that most Republican leaders in Washington were also pretty smart, and believe it or not, I think the same is true today. The difference now is that many of them pretend not to be. The reason goes back to that need for celebrity, and the job security that comes with exciting the base.

In lots of states and congressional districts, the big election battles are no longer in November, but rather weeks earlier in the primaries. The political tilt in many constituencies is significant enough that if a candidate wins his or her party's primary, he or she is pretty much a shoo-in to also win the general. So, dazzling the base has become job one, and what dazzles today's Republicans aren't the things that used to do the trick: fiscal responsibility, limited government, free markets and free trade, "peace through strength" foreign policy, etc. Not even traditional social stances like a pro-life position are regarded in the way they once were.

What now gets the base excited are social grievances, rhetorical culture battles, a "fighting" spirit, and unconditional loyalty to one Donald J. Trump (who they believe is the ultimate champion of those first three items).

A platform of that depth doesn't exactly lend itself to high-end intellectual discourse. It's why performative clowns like Marjorie Taylor Greene bring in more donor money than just about anyone else in her party, despite not having any legislative achievements to speak of. It's why so many Republican leaders tried to stop the November election from being certified, and still dance around conceding that Biden lawfully won. It's why Ohio Republican Senate candidates Josh Mandel and J.D. Vance spend an inordinate amount of time on Twitter trying to figure out which one of them can sound more like he belongs on an FBI watch-list.

These people aren't stupid (well, Greene might be)... They just know what sells with today's base. And again, the same is true of a number of people on the left. It wasn't so long ago, after all, that President Biden himself was shamelessly labeling relatively mundane voter restrictions "Jim Crow."

As one would expect, President Biden also became a topic of the dinner conversation. I was curious if my cousin believed, as many liberals do, that Biden has governed like the moderate he ran as. She did (I think to her frustration), and I explained that I didn't feel that way at all. I pointed to the obscene spending initiatives and the debacle in Afghanistan, and was surprised to learn that she put stock in Biden's excuse that he had been left with no other choice but to honor the withdrawal deal his predecessor had made with the Taliban.

The truth is that he was under no such obligation. Biden has overturned all kinds of Trump's executive decisions since taking office, and he could have scrapped the Taliban "deal" just as easily. Heck, the Taliban wasn't even upholding their end of that deal – a tidbit that didn't seem to matter to either Trump or Biden. I explained this, as well as my belief that we should have just kept our limited deployment of troops there (altering the number if necessary) to maintain a status quo that had been beneficial to both America and the Afghanistan citizens.

My cousin's husband wondered if I thought, as he did, that Trump will run again in 2024. At this point, I think he probably will. And if that happens, I suspect he'll win the GOP primary (pretty easily) and lose again in the general election (for the same reasons he lost last time). I explained that, contrary to popular believe, there are a number of Republican hopefuls that would make a good president. The problem is that they don't stand a chance of getting the party's nomination with Trump still so controlling of the base and party establishment.

What I surprised them with, however, was my prediction that Joe Biden will not be the Democratic nominee. I don't think he's going to run again, and as I said to them, I think Biden is already pretty much "checked out."

"You think Kamala Harris, then?" one of them asked.

My answer was no, and I explained that I don't think she's a strong enough candidate to win the Democratic primary (as was the case last time).

What I particularly enjoyed about the conversation is that we were able to talk and listen to each other, in a respectful, productive manner. We weren't talking *over* each other with political slogans, and ignoring what the other was saying (which is pretty much today's default approach). There was a genuine curiosity and exchange of perspectives. Sure, it helped that we're family (not everyone coming into a political discussion carries that level of affection), but it also helps to be able to concede that our "side" isn't always worthy of a defense.

Blind partisanship and tribalism have become downright poisonous to our politics, so being able to set them aside is always going to open the door for a more honest and productive discussion.

And I was thankful to be able to have one that day.

Next week, I'll get back to my regular format of writing about things going on in the news. I hope some of you enjoyed this little two-week diversion.

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