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Commentary

## Jim Jones: Idaho desperately needs a healthy two-party system

**JIM JONES**

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**B**ack in the 1980s, during my Attorney General days, Idaho had a healthy two-party system. There were about equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature. While legislators of either party advanced competing policies, they were willing to work across the aisle to move the State forward. Compromise was not a forbidden word. Extremism rarely raised its ugly head.

What a difference several decades can make. Now, we have very few Democrats in the Legislature and, consequently, no check on unbridled extremism. The lop-sided Republican majority is loosely divided into two warring factions. On the one side are the extreme right-wing Republicans, who thrive on meaningless culture-war issues. On the other side are traditional Republicans, who try to address the State's real-world issues.

I served with two Democrat Governors and, while there were occasional disagreements on the correct interpretation of various laws, we worked cooperatively. Back then, a Democrat had a fighting chance of winning a statewide office. It is a remote possibility at present.

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There are a number of reasons why Democrats have had difficulties at the ballot box in Idaho in recent years, but one that stands out is a failure to regularly field quality candidates for important offices. I realize there is a strong disincentive for Democrats to throw their hat in the ring for every office in a one-party state, but you have to start somewhere. It's kind of like the lottery—you can't expect to win if you don't buy a ticket.

I am familiar with several Democrats currently vying for high office who have the qualities necessary to run a strong race. Terri Pickens Manweiler, running for Lieutenant Governor, is an accomplished attorney who impressed me during several appearances before the Idaho Supreme Court. State School Superintendent candidate Terry Gilbert is a qualified educator who understands the danger that school voucher programs pose to public school funding. Kaylee Peterson, challenging Congressman Fulcher, is an engaging, common-sense candidate.

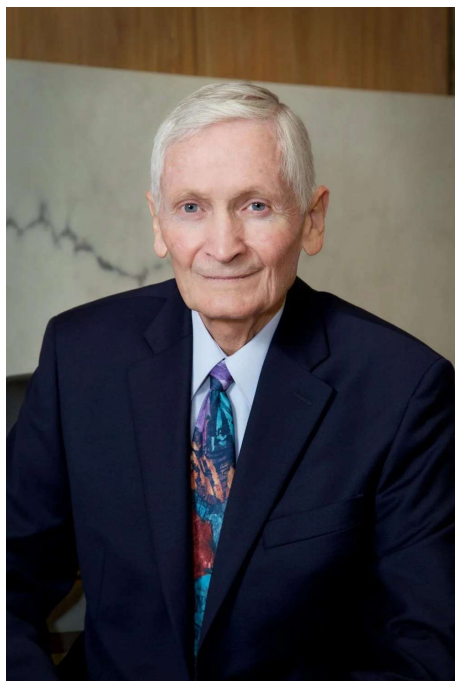
What mystifies me is why the Democrats have not fielded a candidate for the important position of Attorney General. I hired attorney Steve Scanlin to serve in the office during my tenure, but he is just a placeholder on the Democrat ticket — to give the Party an opportunity to replace him on the ticket in case AG Wasden did not survive the GOP primary. The Democrats need to run a strong candidate for Attorney General in order to preserve their claim to be a viable political party in Idaho.

That is not to imply that the Attorney General's office is a political office. It is a legal office, charged with providing politics-free advice and representation to State agencies. Politics can only corrupt and cheapen the office. In a perfect world, the AG would run on a non-partisan ticket, as district and appellate judges do in Idaho.

The Republican candidate, Raul Labrador, has vowed to run the office in a political fashion. That would be an insult to the rule of law and would be costly for the State. In my estimation, Labrador disqualified himself for the office when he proudly announced that he would have supported the ill-fated Texas lawsuit that sought to overturn the 2020 Presidential election. The suit was bogus, having no support in either the facts or the law. The Texas Attorney General, who dreamed up the suit as a publicity stunt, is now being sued by the Texas Bar Association for misconduct. He, and all those who supported the suit, displayed utter contempt for the U.S. Constitution and the rule of law in America.

A Democrat candidate for Idaho Attorney General could bring out sharp contrasts with candidate Labrador. A candidate with broad experience and a fine reputation in the legal community would stand out against Labrador's narrow experience and unenviable legal reputation. Devoted party loyalty is not a prerequisite for the job. A candidate from anywhere across the legal spectrum would be well qualified, so long as the person is dedicated to giving bias-free legal advice and assistance—something people demand of their attorney in their private lives and business affairs.

Democrats owe it to the people of Idaho to find a candidate to fill their Attorney General slot on the November ballot. It will be a step toward rebuilding the Party and helping to restore a healthy two-party system in the Gem State.



Jones

COURTESY OF JIM JONES

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Jim Jones is a Vietnam combat veteran who served eight years as Idaho attorney general (1983-1991) and 12 years as justice of the Idaho Supreme Court (2005-2017). He is currently a regular contributor to The Hill online news. He blogs at JJCommonTater.