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‘Reasonable’ Republicans rebel

A new PAC aims to boost candidates from GOP’s Main Street business tradition.

The latest addition to the purge list of North Idaho conservatives is posthumous: Richard Nixon. And it’s not over Watergate. Nixon’s creation of the Environmental Protection Agency makes him persona non grata among the Constitutionals, Libertarians and ultraconservatives that dominate GOP central committees in the five northern counties.

Ten prominent Republicans have had enough. They’ve founded the North Idaho Republican Political Action Committee, aiming to find sensible, business-friendly candidates for the May primary. The PAC includes Sandy Patano, a top aide to former U.S. Sen. Larry Craig; Jim Riley of the Intermountain Forest Industry Association; and Jim Pierce of Washington Trust Bank.

“You can’t be on the Republican Central Committee unless you can look through a keyhole with both eyes at the same time,” said Dean Haagenson, another PAC founder who is CEO of Contractors Northwest and a former lawmaker. “We’re raising money to support candidates that are better than Phil Hart.”

Hart, R-Athol, is the best example of how the North Idaho GOP has veered from its good government, Chamber of Commerce roots. After seven years in the Legislature, Hart owes the Idaho State Tax Commission and IRS more than \$500,000. He pilfered trees from state land to build his house. He’s been elected four times.

Hart says that knowing what he knows now, he couldn’t support Nixon because he expanded government.

Rep. Dick Harwood, R-St. Maries, told the United Conservatives of North Idaho on Monday that he’s taking on Nixon’s legacy with a bill banning the EPA from Idaho. “I’m talking about kicking them out,” Harwood told me. Brad Corkill, a former Kootenai County GOP chairman, is spokesman for the new PAC. He didn’t want to talk about Hart — saying the group wasn’t formed to target particular lawmakers — and waves off the “moderate” label.

“We call ourselves ‘reasonable,’” said Corkill, of Cataldo. “We’re going to be a pro-business, low-tax PAC. We’re just a group of businessmen and women, civic-minded people.”

“Reasonable,” it turns out, is just as dirty a word as “moderate.”

“If I wanted a reasonable Republican, I’d vote for a Democrat,” Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, told the United Conservatives. “That’s just off the wall,” counters Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde, R-Coeur d’Alene, who welcomes the PAC.

All 15 North Idaho legislators are Republicans. Twenty years ago, they had just one seat. But good candidates, Democratic missteps, and economic and demographic changes have made the GOP dominant. With Republicans closing the primary to independents and the “fractured” party apparatus, Goedde fears they’re ignoring Ronald Reagan’s advice to put winning ahead of ideological purity.

“It appears that the stakes are coming out of the Big Tent,” Goedde said, citing the GOP loss of a Senate seat in Latah County in 2010. “That’s a good indicator of what happens when you run people from the far right.”

Goedde says Main Street Republicans have become complacent. He hopes the new PAC, which has raised \$10,000 since June, will spark a revival.

“This might be a way, to use Corkill’s words, for ‘reasonable’ Republicans to remain active,” he said. “It might be the basis for them to get better organized and get some of those central committee seats back.”

Harwood said Corkill, whom he considers a friend, tried to talk him out of speaking to the United Conservatives. “He just didn’t think I need to be hooked up with that group, but I don’t have a problem with them. It’s just like a family feud.”

Hart welcomes the fight. You might think a candidate would omit “Tax Dodger” from his resume, but Hart says voters admire his pluck. “I’ll fight publicly for what I think is right,” he said, “where maybe the next guy who kinda got caught in some sort of situation might settle out of court.”

Goedde, an insurance salesman, was a key backer of 2011’s school reforms. His conservative credentials are impeccable. Still, he expects a challenge from the right, hurling its favorite epithet: “Republican in Name Only.”

Goedde deftly throws the moniker back. “We’ve got Constitutionalists and Libertarians that have cloaked themselves as Republicans. I contend that RINOs can come from either side.”