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Imparted Montana Values and the Election

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

October 23, 2014

Yesterday would've been my father's 95th birthday. On Monday, my mother will be celebrating her 95th with all six of her sons and some of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren with her.

Once before in a Montana Public Radio commentary I reflected upon the values that have sustained me over the years – values which were imparted to me predominately by my parents. And now, as we approach an election, the question of values comes charging to the fore. What values do different candidates represent as they advance themselves to the voters? How do those purported candidate values correlate with our own values?

Both of my parents were raised during the Great Depression – Dad being raised in relative poverty here in Montana and Mom only observing poverty from her homes in Connecticut, New York City and Hollywood. Later as a young Montana couple trying to raise six boys, they directly experienced serious economic challenges. But no matter how bad their circumstances were, they let all of us know that America was and should be an oasis of opportunity for everyone, not just those who already had wealth and power.

We were taught that work was not just necessary, but was honorable. Getting a job and holding a job was a significant personal responsibility. But having a government that was committed to helping every American have a job with an adequate living wage was something that we should not just expect, but demand.

Given the intrinsic value of work there is a commensurate value to the worker. We were taught that workers needed to find a way to have their voice heard, especially because they are often faced with the power of corporate interests dedicated to profit over people. The route to that voice was through workers' ability to organize and speak with one voice, gaining a modicum of economic power in the process – the route was as "organized labor." Unions were the way to get it done.

We were taught that government wasn't the enemy, unless those who were running government wanted it to be so. We were taught the government could serve the needs of regular people; that in the words of Franklin D Roosevelt: "better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference."

We were taught that American spirit was an embodiment of the heart and soul of average American, not in the bank accounts of the wealthy and the large corporations.

Being raised in the mountains near Red Lodge we were taught the value of our beautiful public lands here in Montana and understood that it was the federal government that ensured that pristine character. And living the last 35 years in western Montana on the Butte Hill has brought forth the importance of that same government guaranteeing that our unique public lands be not overrun by the same corporate interests. And has brought front and center the need for the government to insure that the corporate interests who polluted and destroyed our land in the pursuit of profit would be held responsible for the degradation that they caused.

So as we approach the election, I look at candidates through the prism of values that were passed on to me by my parents, values that I believe are similar to those passed on to most Montanans.

Every candidate wants you to believe that they have your best interests at heart. It is up to each and every one of us, as critically-thinking Montanans, to discern the difference between those who just pander for our votes and those who would truly fight for our interests.

Ask yourself which candidates are interested in warmed over, trickle-down economics that benefit the wealthy and the corporations, and which candidates believe in percolate-up economics that benefit the middle class of America and Montana?

Ask yourself which candidates truly support a raise in the minimum-wage and a movement toward living wages for all workers, and which candidates believe in a "market driven" flight to the bottom where workers suffer while profits soar?

Ask yourself which candidates truly support worker rights through unions and collective-bargaining and which candidates want workers' votes without providing for workers' rights?

Ask yourself which candidates trust our government to protect our public lands and access as compared to those who under the guise of so-called better management would dismantle those protections?

In short, which candidates truly reflect your Montana values and which ones reflect the values of big money as it seeks to further tilt the economic playing field to the advantage of the 1%.

If you look closely, the choices are very clear.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking of my parents, the values they imparted and, as the election approaches, the candidates who reflect those values.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.