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Could tax talk fix attention on budget realities?

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She believes Idaho should raise taxes temporarily in order to limit the budgetary damage to public schools, higher education and Medicaid.

Her proposal: Impose a 5 percent income tax surcharge, for Idahoans with a taxable income of more than \$50,000. The surcharge would raise about \$44 million.

The key word is "would," of course, because this idea isn't likely to go anywhere. All tax legislation begins in the House Revenue and Taxation Committee - one of the most conservative committees in a conservative Statehouse. If this idea escapes Rev and Tax, in a recession and an election year, it would be stunning.

So now that I've stated the politically obvious, let me give Ringo some credit. Suggesting a DOA tax increase in this political climate is the ultimate high-risk, low-reward move. Points for gumption.

Her proposal at least forces an unpleasant conversation about harsh budget realities - and whether a tax increase is worth the hit it inflicts on families. My inclination is to say no. But I'd be interested in hearing the debate.

And if outnumbered legislative Democrats do not force the issue, the debate isn't going to happen. All too often, Democratic legislators and candidates have packaged themselves as a kind of GOP Lite: pretty darned Republican, only a dash less so. There's nothing GOP Lite about talking tax increases at this point in time.

I can just hear the refrain from conservative readers: "Maybe Idaho Democrats are in the minority because they're foolish enough to talk about tax increases during a bad economy." Not so fast.

I can remember a time, only six years ago, when Republicans discussed - and voted for - a temporary tax increase. Then-Gov. Dirk Kempthorne proposed the idea. Eventually, 45 of the Legislature's 84 Republicans voted for a one-cent, 26-month sales tax increase.

This year, Gov. Butch Otter and leading legislative Republicans have ruled out any new taxes - attempting to effectively close down the discussion. The economic climate is probably worse today than it was in January 2003. The political climate is certainly different. These days, it is the rare elected official who even wants to talk about a tax increase - and that stunted discussion doesn't do our state any good.

Fischer gone global

Bryan Fischer's old Idaho Values Alliance is silent, and his once-prolific Web site is dormant.

But Fischer, now a Mississippi-based radio talker, is doing what radio talkers do well. He is demagoguing a tragedy - the Fort Hood shooting massacre - by doing a little bit of old-fashioned religion-bashing. Fischer's prescription: Ban Muslims from the military.

From Fischer's blog on Nov. 6, the day after the Fort Hood shootings: "It's time we all got over the nonsense that all cultures and religions are equally valid or worthy. They most certainly are not. While Christianity is a religion of peace, founded by the Prince of Peace, Islam is a religion of war and violence, founded by a man who routinely chopped the heads off his enemies, had sex with 9-year-old girls, and made his wealth plundering merchant caravans.

"And just as Christians are taught to imitate the life of Christ, so Muslims are taught to imitate the Prophet in all things. Yesterday, Nidal Malik Hasan was simply being a good Muslim."

Fischer's first post drew the predictable response. MSNBC talker Keith Olbermann - himself no paragon of objectivity - awarded Fischer a bronze medal in his "worst person in the world" feature. So, a week ago, Fischer upped the ante. Since the Pentagon's own guidelines forbid soldiers from belonging to "supremacist" groups, Fischer reasons, that should apply to Muslims.

Writes Fischer: "If we shouldn't allow neo-Nazi skinheads who believe in Aryan supremacy to serve, neither should we allow Muslims who believe in Islamic supremacy to serve."

Comparing Muslims and neo-Nazis. Why must Fischer be so subtle?

Fischer is reacting to a tragedy - one marked, evidently, by missed warning signs - with classic overreaction. It is the second wrong, and it still doesn't make a right.

But it has turned Fischer into something of a global news source. He was quoted over the weekend in *The National*, an English-language newspaper based in the United Arab Emirates.

The silver lining: no mention of Fischer's Idaho connection.

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