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The Politics Of Inspiration In The West

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As I traveled through the Southwest this past week, I aimed to examine what types of inspiration young people draw from when they think about politics. I came across two towns only 263 miles apart but seemingly from different eras. In Gallup, New Mexico, I talked with a number of Native Americans from the nearby Navajo Reservation, and to the west I spoke with residents of the experimental town of Arcosanti, Arizona. For Gallup, inspiration seemed to come from a deep well of history and a look to the past. And, on the other hand, at least one resident of the Arcosanti, seemed to believe that politics should be about moving off the current path, about someone willing to break from history with a sense of innovation.

In Gallup, I came across O'Steen Bob, 19, a Navajo Indian (or Diné as he called himself) standing beside his Ford pickup adjusting an elaborate headdress. The U-shaped accessory, made of neon orange and green feathers and streamers, would be the finishing touch on his Pow Wow attire that included blue and white shoulder pads, a neon tunic and apron, and gray moccasins.

Bob was preparing for a traditional ceremony called the Fancy Dance that he would be performing in Gallup's town square. Bob, who has been

dancing since he was two years old, said there are many reasons to participate in this ritual, but for him, it was to stay out of trouble.

"My people have long had a history with alcoholism," Bob said. "If I spend my time dancing, dancing for those who can't dance any more, I'll stay sober."

When Bob said his people have had a long history with alcohol, he means since the very confluence of Indians and Europeans. When settlers made their way into the country in the 1800s, one of their biggest trading items was alcohol. In his book "The Great Plains," Ian Frazier says that for many Indians, "Whiskey" was their first English word.

Today the problem has grown so large that the Navajo Nation, the biggest Indian Reservation in the country, located in Arizona, has outlawed the possession, consumption and distribution of all alcohol.

But the Navajo are a proud people who draw from their spiritual past when looking to a brighter tomorrow.

"Anyone can push us down, call us alcoholics, wife beaters, drop outs, but we can hold our heads high," said Anthenette Fern Spencer, 24. "We have had struggles in the past, but when we think about politics we still are thinking about the future through a lens of the past. We as a people look to the future, we look to the dawn. Prayers come at the dawn. We stand at the east and pray for life. We place corn pollen on our tongue so we speak truth, we put it on the tops of our head to bless our thoughts and minds, and we place it on mother earth so it can rise up to father sky and bless our journey for the day. These are our blessings for the future and these are my blessings for our political future."

When trying to decide on a candidate, Spencer said that it would be impossible not to look to history. She said not only does history say to vote democratic (especially after Bill Clinton who claimed to be part Native American and proved to be a supporter of their cause), but also that Obama in particular is worthy of praise.

"In a lot of ways, Obama is like a warrior," she said. "He is willing to step into the realm of his enemy, without fear, in order to fight for a better world."

Where the Diné clearly draw their inspiration from their tradition of spirituality and historical memory, just 3 hours and 40 minutes to the west, the "laboratory of urban planning" named Arcosanti seems to encourage a different type of thinking: one that focuses on innovation rather than the past.

In the lobby of the visitor's center of Arcosanti is a shiny white model of what architect Paolo Soleri wanted the city to look like by the end of the 1970s. The entire city, made to house 5,000 people on just 25 acres of land, would be kept underneath enormous cement awnings, and would have residential housing within walking distance from everything a city needs. In an effort against urban sprawl, Soleri hoped to create a community based on density and efficiency (called "arcology," a mixture of architecture and ecology).

The project was met with much excitement in the 1970s during the oil crisis, for many people thought that this was the solution to gas consumption. Today, as oil prices rise again, and as gas tops \$4.50 in some states, members of Arcosanti say there has been a renewed interest in the design, but even forty years after Soleri broke ground, the graying utopia is less than 10 percent of what the model promised.

Still, the basic groundwork has been laid, and to a small degree Soleri, 89, is proving his point (if only to a small number of people). Crosscurrent ventilation and heat trapping cement keep the buildings cool in the summer, and meticulously placed windows maximize the amount of sunlight to keep the same rooms warm in winter. Every part of each building is put to use (Soleri made sure that all roofs had stair access), and human waste is naturally taken care of by bacteria at the bottom of a swamp. And of course, everything from the houses to the cafeteria to the peach tree orchards is in walking distance (even the cement used to make the buildings comes from the nearby town of Jerome).

Whether or not Arcosanti is viable, many people feel they can learn from the place, and come out here either to live permanently or to work at the five-week summer program that specializes in activities from ceramics, to graphic design, to architecture (no more than 100 people live here at any given time). One of the people here for the summer session today is a 22 year-old architecture student from Atlanta, Georgia by way of Tulane University named T.J. Bogan.

Bogan came here initially because "The one thing they really don't teach you in school is how anything is actually put together," but says he will come away from the experience with much more than just that knowledge. In addition to the hands-on experience, Bogan seems to have gained some perspective on life and politics while working at Arcosanti.

"You can learn a lot from a guy like Paolo Soleri," he says. "He's a guy dedicated to living frugally and living efficiently. If we were to think about energy problems like Soleri, or run the economy like he runs Arcosanti—with everything being accounted for, everything serving at least one purpose—than our money would go a lot further in this country."

For Bogan, this really amounts to thinking outside of the box.

"There's this scientist who discovered that there's an algae that takes in carbon dioxide and gives out oxygen and gives out oil as a byproduct," he says. "Well if you actually spend the time and energy to research these things, to turn this oil into fuel, that's going to create jobs if anything, and the product will save money in the end as well."

When Bogan talks about this type of creative thinking, he is not only talking renewable energy, but about the way we deal with everything, including our struggling economy. It's about being wise with your investments, like creating a window that can be sunny in the winter but shady in the summer.

"Probably ways to resolve a lot of the most important issues in this country with just a few acts," he says. "I feel like cutting a lot of the different loopholes in our tax system will open up a lot of doors. People are always saying, 'Well, how will you pay for this? How will you pay for universal healthcare or better education?' If you look at how much money is being spent poorly, like the trillions of dollars spent in Iraq could have been spent to overhaul the entire infrastructure of the United States. Fixing all the bridges and roads in disrepair in the country would have cost far less than the war. We have money, just not the know-how of how to spend it best."

Bogan does not know exactly how the economy can be fixed and will vote for the presidential candidate who will surround himself with and listen to the best real experts. For Bogan, the best candidate is someone who is just as much of a listener as he is an actor.

"But, just because I want someone who listens to advisers does not mean I don't want an innovator in office," he says. "A lot of people have ideas about fixing the way the world works, but stop when they start to think the dream is improbable or impractical. Well sometimes it's good to have

your head in the clouds. If you're the president of the country, everything goes on what you say, if you have an idea it can become reality. In that way, I think that Obama would be more inclined to think outside the box. He's still young and clearly full of hope."



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