

The Meadville Tribune

0 cents.

www.meadvilletribune.com

WEDNESDAY, MAY 19, 2004

Blue versus red America

The presidential race has finally come to our area, but it appears to be muted. In the wake of John Kerry's recent visit to Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, the fissures that divide Blue America and Red America have become evident in our region as well, at least some of them have.

The colors refer to the way the American electoral map was shaded during news coverage of the 2000 presidential election. Blue states were the ones that voted Democratic, while red states voted Republican. But even more than that, blue residents tend to live in urban areas and along the coast while red residents tend to live in rural areas and the interior part of the country. Blue Americans are more liberal in their political views while red Americans are more conservative. In our region, we might think of Erie County as more blue and Crawford County as more red.

During Kerry's visit, I stood in the hot sun for an hour outside the Edinboro University Student Center with about 500 others waiting to see the Democratic nominee for president speak. We were blue America. But red America was not absent from the event. A band of Bush-Cheney supporters about 50 strong was there to make sure that sunburn would not be the only red marks on this day.

This is an unusual and tumultuous time in our history. The blue and red forces are about evenly divided for one of the few times ever. While angry politics appear to



be boiling over in the rest of the country as blue and red clash, the clash at Edinboro was more of a whimper. The Bush-Cheney supporters held up signs supporting their candidates and espousing traditional conservative positions such as Pro Life. But the only person who seemed to be angry

from either side was me.

As the red forces attempted to hand out propaganda to the line of blue supporters waiting to hear Kerry speak, it was almost absurdly quiet. The blue neighbors just politely declined the literature. Even when I began yelling, "Hate is not a family value!" no one reacted. No one on either side said a word. Some of you might say that's great. You would say that blue and red may not agree in our area, but they can treat each other with civility. But I think that take on what happened misses an important point about politics in America.

What makes politics vital in our country is the passion that comes along with it. Arguably, politics was the first national sport. Rabble rousing is something that goes back to the beginning. What the blue and red forces seemed to lack at Edinboro was passion. Mounting a soap box and shouting to the roof tops about your political positions is as American as apple pie.

Perhaps the lack of passion has to do with the fact that neither presidential candidate will be confused with the great blue and red orators of the past such as Kennedy or Reagan. These were candidates who knew how to give a rousing speech that would get their forces charged up.

While angry politics appear to be boiling over in the rest of the country as blue and red clash, the clash at Edinboro was more of a whimper.

Kennedy knew how to interject passion into the blue forces. Reagan could do the same for the red. But they could do something more. They could get those in the middle excited too.

Zeal is often seen as a negative. We usually want to defuse zealots. But it is these kinds of political devotees that drive our system. They get the rest of us excited, whether it is for or against their cause. Presidential candidates don't make their way to our region very often. In those rare moments, you would expect all of the zealots to come shouting.

If the zealots were at Edinboro University during the Kerry visit, they were quite muted. Most Americans don't think of the First Amendment as a quiet thing. Hopefully, the rest of blue and red America are raising their voices. Because if the political landscape in the rest of America is as quiet as here, then our political system is in trouble.

Forrest, an Edinboro resident, is an adjunct professor of political science and women's studies at Penn State Erie.