

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with commentary for Tuesday, September 1, 2020.

A Blue Lives Matter rally visited Port Townsend on Sunday, seeking to underscore support of the police in the face of what is perceived as virulent anti-law enforcement sentiment. By all accounts it was a polarizing event and drew a vocal opposition, but both sides were restrained enough and no one got hurt.

I did not attend Sunday's event, for two reasons. The march organizers deliberately did not notify members of the local media, and their Facebook posts requested that potential attendees not share the notice about the march in order to discourage counter protesters.

But the primary reason for my absence at these rallies has to do with the pandemic. I have relinquished my place as a protester, counter-protester, or reporter at these gatherings for health reasons.

According to the Port Townsend Free Press, an online news outlet whose editor helped to organize the rally, the event included about 400 cars, trucks and motorcycles. They gathered at three Chimacum locations before traveling to Port Townsend and driving up and down Water Street and Lawrence Street several times.

From other sources, we hear that several counter protesters participated in a sit-in at a downtown intersection, bringing the rally to a halt. Police were present but did not take action, even though they could have cited the rally participants for a lack of a parade permit or removed the counterprotesters for obstructing traffic. Their restraint supports the idea that our local police aren't the problem.

Organizers said they did not intend this to be a political event, but that message was lost along the way. Rally participants had several Trump signs along with those supporting Loren Culp, the Republican candidate for Washington Governor. As for Black Lives Matter, it has at times become indistinguishable from criticism of Donald Trump.

Some Black Lives Matter advocates have maintained that the movement is not so much political as it is a human rights issue. They claim not to oppose police, rather they oppose police brutality. But these messages aren't received, partially because both sides are intractable in their beliefs and don't acknowledge or accept opposing viewpoints.

On Facebook, the comments reflected the posters' previous positions. Those who have expressed support for Blue Lives Matter lamented how the First Amendment rights of 20 people – the counter protesters – prevented hundreds of others from expressing their own opinions. Those on the other side of the fence wondered why this protest was taking place in Port Townsend, a town that generally supports its police and has no reported instances of race related police brutality.

Port Townsend admittedly lacks political and racial diversity, and lacks tolerance for other positions. Today, that's true everywhere. Which makes us like many other small American towns with political preferences that lean one way or the other. Many people live here – or anywhere – because they are comfortable as part of a majority. And some people will take the political temperature of a town before relocating.

I lean toward the left – no surprise – so Port Townsend fits me, more or less. While my politics haven't fundamentally changed, I have lived in places that lean toward the opposite direction. During those times I heard and understood other viewpoints and on occasion adjusted my own world view. That might not happen today, when I am so entrenched in my point of view that there is nothing that the other side could do to change

my mind. This is certainly true of the people on the other side as well. I'm not proud of this, if there is any doubt.

I miss the good old days, where the respective Barack Obama and Mitt Romney supporters could sit down together and argue the issues without drawing blood. Or when posting a political yard sign was a positive expression of candidate support rather than an attempt to tweak your neighbor.

I don't know what comes next, only that the rest of the year will redefine the concept of "stressful." Not too long ago I would joke that if things got too intense I'd leave the county and move to Oregon. Right now, that's completely off the table.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.