



Our view: South Jersey helped launch the modern conservative movement

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After the recent election, Gov. Phil Murphy said there was a “blue wave” across New Jersey bringing victory to Democrats — except in South Jersey’s 2nd Congressional District.

“I did expect Amy Kennedy to win her race against Jeff Van Drew,” Murphy told the Philadelphia Inquirer. “It’s the most conservative district in the state, so I guess I shouldn’t be shocked.”

The governor may not realize the depth of conservatism in South Jersey, which started achieving national influence before Murphy was born.

Chief among the group of populist, right-wing radio broadcasters who brought conservative ideas to the nation starting in the 1950s was the Rev. Carl McIntire. He grew up in Oklahoma watching his missionary grandparents minister to American Indians who survived the infamous Trail of Tears forced migration.

McIntire’s first house of worship was the Chelsea Presbyterian Church in Atlantic City, where he preached from 1931 to 1933. He also gave sermons on the Boardwalk and pioneered a new ministerial outreach on radio.

After the 1962 storm, McIntire moved his operations to Cape May, and soon his “Twentieth Century Reformation Hour” was broadcast on 150 stations across America to 20 million listeners.

A new book, “The Radio Right: How a Band of Broadcasters Took on the Federal Government and Built the Modern Conservative Movement,” credits McIntire and a handful of fellow broadcasters with establishing the basis for populist uprisings such the surge in talk radio in the early 1990s, the Tea Party revolt of 2009 and the election of Donald Trump. Author Paul Matzko, a historian and editor with the Cato Institute, also details how liberal politicians then used the federal government to punish these critics.

McIntire’s colorful South Jersey career included creating Shelton College, buying and preserving several Cape May landmarks including Congress Hall, reviving the local economy and opposing the first beach fees in the state.

“He believed in the rights of the individual and preached the evils of communism, long before the Berlin Wall fell and Reagan was elected,” said developer Curtis Bashaw, who now owns Congress Hall, after McIntire died in 2002 at age 95.

Among Cape May hotels he saved were three that he moved down Beach Avenue — riding on one of them while giving a sermon.

McIntire was an advocate for religious liberty and fought the state unsuccessfully when it wouldn't accredit Shelton College. "This is a question of the rights of church property and religious schools to exist outside of state regulation," he said in 1981.

Matzko describes how President John Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, hatched a plot with progressive labor leaders Victor and Walter Reuther to have the Internal Revenue Service target the conservative broadcasters with audits and to urge the FCC to compel stations with right-wing programs to give equal airtime to opposing views under the Fairness Doctrine.

That led to a 1967 FCC regulation requiring stations attacking "the honesty, character, integrity or like personal qualities of an identified person or group" to quickly notify them of the broadcast and supply a transcript. Many got the message and dropped such programming. During the next two decades the FCC backed away from the Fairness Doctrine and ended it in 1987, allowing the renaissance of conservative talk radio.

The election results in the 2nd District suggest that the values and views South Jersey shared with America half a century ago are still popular today.