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Will Otter play Samuelson to Allred's Andrus?

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For any Idaho Democrat hoping to score an upset against a Republican incumbent, the election of 1970 looms large.

That year, Democrat Cecil. D. Andrus dislodged Republican Gov. Don Samuelson.

The latest is Keith Allred, The Idaho Common Interest founder who launched a gubernatorial bid late last year. Speaking at the Tribune last week, Allred labeled Republican Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter the weakest incumbent since Samuelson, offering an "exceptional moment in history."

Then as now, the GOP is fractured.

Samuelson personified the split. In the 1966 primary, he defeated Republican Gov. Bob Smylie with 61 percent. Four years later, he held off a primary challenge from Rexburg Sen. Dick Smith with 58 percent.

In Otter's case, insurgents ousted Kirk Sullivan, the governor's choice for party chairman. They've pressed for a closed primary. And the ongoing fight for Idaho's First Congressional District pits moderate against conservative camps.

Both Samuelson and Otter secured office by less than convincing margins. Samuelson won a four-way race in 1966 with 41.4 percent. Four years ago, with the state prospering and his party having delivered tax relief, Otter won the governor's office with 52.7 percent, the worst showing since 1994.

Like Samuelson, Otter has had a contentious relationship with his own Republican Legislature. Last spring, Otter vetoed 36 bills. That's second place for the most vetoes in a single session. The record - 39 - belongs to Samuelson in the 1967 session.

And both men share a gift for the gaffe.

In Samuelson's case, it was an awkward, unfortunate speaking style that earned him the moniker "Big Dumb Don." With Otter, it's political fumbles that have fomented a reputation for incompetence.

Allred is no Andrus. By 1970, the future governor was a seasoned politician, having been on the state scene for a decade.

Four decades ago, Idaho voters were ticket splitters. Today, Idahoans vote solidly Republican, especially if an election becomes a referendum on the national politics.

But Samuelson didn't have the burden of Otter's economy, with the highest unemployment and deepest budget cuts since World War II. Nor is it clear that the recent Republican wins in Virginia, New Jersey and

Massachusetts signal a coming tidal wave against Democrats - which would benefit Otter - or a populist undertow against incumbents - which could undermine Idaho's millionaire governor.

Then as now, it could come down to a game changer.

In 1970, Samuelson supported a molybdenum mine at Castle Peak in the Boulder-White Cloud Range. Andrus opposed it.

The emblematic mountain range was under consideration for inclusion in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. Environmentalism was just flowering in the year of the first Earth Day, but in Idaho it remained a movement of blue-collar workers, outdoors writers, Teddy Roosevelt Republicans and hunters and anglers.

By supporting the mine, Samuelson placed himself outside the mainstream of Idaho politics and was perceived as doing the bidding of a special interest, the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO).

Certainly, Otter is capable of doing the same thing. While still in Congress, he momentarily flirted with the idea of selling off public lands to pay for Hurricane Katrina relief, a stance that 2006 Democratic candidate Jerry Brady ridiculed. Some think Otter's recent mishandling of the state parks program - by proposing to fold the parks and recreation department into the Department of Lands, he might have cost Idaho the 1,100-acre Harriman State Park near Island Park - could have been equally damaging, had the governor not found a way to preserve the program.

The question is whether Otter slips again and does so in such a profound way that it resonates with voters the way the Boulder-White Clouds did two generations back.

And if he does, will Allred be shrewd enough to capitalize on it? - M.T.