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GOVERNOR

OPINION  
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## FACTS CAN BE STUBBORN – BUT THEY'RE NECESSARY

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

In December 1770, while arguing for the acquittal of British soldiers charged with killing his fellow Americans in the Boston Massacre, John Adams said, "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."

There was a time when most newspaper columnists at least paid lip service to the good intentions of public officials. They might be misguided, shortsighted or simply stupid, the writers would suggest, but at least they meant well. Social niceties were observed; there was a higher level of mutual respect and civility.

That just isn't the case anymore. Too many writers now ignore, gloss over or leave out facts they find at odds with their conclusion or the point they're trying to make. Facts after all, as Adams said, can be stubborn things – and inconvenient.

As Governor, I expect to take my share of flak. It's more than fair to criticize and even blast me. You don't spend as long as I have in public life, or in business for that matter, without developing a pretty thick skin. But while I'm grateful to live in a country where the Constitution protects our right to freely express our opinions, I still am disappointed when some portray their opinions as facts.

Let me cite a couple of recent cases in point, without either crediting or condemning the offending parties:

**The Claim:** Otter wants to cut funding for public schools.

**The Fact:** Faced with revenue shortfalls, a constitutional requirement for a balanced budget, the fact that public schools make up a big share of the State budget, and the political reality that nobody wants to raise taxes – especially in an election year – I made the difficult decision that public schools would have to share the burden facing every other agency of State government and indeed every other Idaho citizen.

**The Claim:** Otter wants to shut down State parks and the Department of Parks and Recreation, Idaho Public Television, the Idaho Human Rights Commission, the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs, the Idaho Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the Idaho Council on Developmental Disabilities, and the State Independent Living Council.

**The Fact:** I encouraged all State agencies in September 2009 to submit proposals for saving as much taxpayer money as possible. I wanted agency directors and administrators to have the flexibility to find efficiencies and savings without doing damage to their core statutory and constitutional missions. Most

came through like champions, in many cases exceeding my expectations. However, Idaho Public Television said there was no savings to be had – anywhere. Facing the deadline for submitting budget proposals, I submitted plans for moving those budgets off the taxpayer-supported General Fund over four years. It was an effort to nudge those agencies toward the greater efficiency we need, or give them the chance to find alternative funding methods; the choice was theirs. Director Nancy Merrill of the Department of Parks and Recreation stepped up with a business plan for every park and a “can do” approach. The Human Rights Commission and Director Pam Parks – with the help of Roger Madsen at the Department of Labor – also found a way to address their budget needs, and those of Idaho taxpayers. The Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is getting administrative and support services help from the Department of Health and Welfare and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. The other agencies all are working hard to find solutions.

It was not an artful process. That’s a fair criticism. However, I did not propose closing any parks or eliminating any agencies. I did not propose “a batch of half-baked plans to zero out small but politically popular state services.” I did not ignore “hidden costs.” My approach was not, “If it brings joy to people, government has no business doing it.” And I am not trying “to run parks or public TV on the cheap.”

I understand that columnists are in the business of selling newspapers. I also understand that responsibility and prudent financial management are not exciting or headline-grabbing topics. However, they are at the heart of what State government must do on behalf of the people we serve.

It’s unfortunate that some columnists consider facts little more than obstacles to be overcome or sidestepped, justified in their minds by the righteous end of afflicting those who they consider “comfortable.”

But Adams was right 240 years ago. He still is.

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