

UP FRONT/COMMENTARY Come to the party dressed as your favorite politician

By William L. Spence of the Tribune The Lewiston Tribune | 0 comments

All Hallow's Eve and out come the costumes, the fantasy personas, frightening or playful or just whatever creature Mom can cobble together from the available material.

Time to turn the lights out and pretend we're not home. Let the little darlings haunt someone else's neighborhood. We'll sit here in the dark scarfing down our own goodies.

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Yes, I have done that.

Was it simply happenstance that put the November general election within reach of this spookiest of holidays? Or was it a sly commentary by whoever schedules these things, a satiric recognition of the masks politicians wear, of their chameleon-like ability to hide flaws and blend in as they wait for voters to step closer, just a little closer, until at last their tongues flick out to gobble us down?

The higher the office, the more carefully crafted the look. True professionals save their effort for the presidential race, the world championship of make-believe.

At that level, the demands go way beyond Mom and a handful of safety pins. Here candidates drape themselves in the finest costumes money can buy, with instant polls, focus groups and consultants all helping hone the message, tweak appearances, capture every advantage. It's a Cinderella story where the illusion goes on and on: props never turn back into pumpkins and the contenders never come clean.

State politics can be similarly misleading. Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, for example, often casts himself as a Reaganesque character, someone who wants smaller government, government that runs more like a business, with less regulation and greater respect for the free market.

There's no doubt Otter sincerely shares these beliefs, but the reality behind the idealized mask is more complex. The governor isn't as purely anti-government as appearances might suggest.

Exhibit one in this hypothetical case is the state budget: Over the last three years, it wasn't Otter leading the charge for spending cuts. The recession and resulting revenue decline gave him a perfect opportunity to hack away at the size of government - yet his budget recommendations were consistently more "liberal" than the Legislature's.

Last year, for example, Otter proposed a \$184 million increase in general fund spending - almost \$40 million more than what lawmakers approved. In 2010 his recommendation was \$50 million higher than the final budget, and the year before that he actually wanted to raise new revenue to pay for highway maintenance.

Granted, with the exception of the highway funding it didn't take much arm-twisting to get him to sign the smaller spending plans. But when real programs and real people are on the chopping block, Otter has proven to be more practical politician than political ideologue. He doesn't let the mask drive his decisions.

Similarly, Otter was thrilled that Idaho was the first state to sue over health care reform - yet that didn't

keep him from letting state agencies apply for federal grants to develop a new insurance exchange. Here again, he chose a reasonable approach rather than hide behind politically favorable appearances.

Why, then, even wear a mask? Nobody could ever mistake Otter for a Democrat, so why not metaphorically disrobe and be seen as reasonable? Why do Idaho Republicans have to appear more ideologically pure than they sometimes are?

This, of course, is the problem of every election: Are candidates showing us their true selves, or someone they think we might vote for? The latter approach creates problems for everyone, both the true believer who wants a "real" Republican or Democrat and the independent or moderate who wants someone who can represent them.

The deeper issue, though, is why ideologues have come to drive the election process. As much as anything, they're the reason masks are now a necessary tool to advancing through the primary and on to the general election.

Maybe it's time for the non-voting wall flowers to turn the lights back on and take part in the celebration. Let the candidates know it's not just true believers they have to dress up for any more. Otherwise, elections may surpass Halloween as the scariest day of all.

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