

# Unstoppable facts met an immovable Otter

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Pulling the plug on Idaho's private prison was a bitter pill for Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

In transferring management of the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise to state government, the governor finally acknowledged his world view was warped.

Or at least one portion of it.

For years, he championed privatization. Get bloated government out of the way and any company tempered by the profit motive will deliver efficient service and taxpayer value.

Otter was comfortable with Corrections Corporation of America's \$29 million contract to manage ICC. He accepted \$19,000 in campaign funds from CCA and another \$5,000 from the GEO Group, the nation's second-largest for-profit prison firm.

His former chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, walked through the revolving door to hire on as one of CCA's lobbyists.

At one point, the governor even talked about extending the welcome mat to privately owned and operated prisons, which would import inmates from other states. He also proposed privatizing the state prison at Orofino.

But then some pesky facts began to mount. In August 2008, the state correction department documented four times as much inmate-on-inmate violence at ICC as at the rest of the state's publicly-operated prisons combined.

The place acquired a national moniker - the "gladiator school."

Inmate beatings were captured on videotape. Lawsuits proliferated. The latest alleged the company compensated for understaffed tiers by putting gangs in charge.

The common denominator was a business model. To maximize profits, CCA scrimped on staffing. Eventually it was caught falsifying time cards. That provoked a federal contempt of court order, an Idaho State Police investigation and a decision to rebid the ICC contract.

But what profited CCA didn't necessarily generate taxpayer value. Because it cherrypicked inmates who were healthier and less costly to incarcerate, the contractor left it for the state to handle more expensive prisoners.

The Associated Press explored the arrangement and found the state could be losing money on the deal. Much the same story was reported in Arizona and Michigan.

Eventually, Idaho's Board of Correction opened up the contract. Then CCA announced it would not rebid. The GEO Group also opted to walk away.

Only one company large enough to handle the project, Management and Training Corporation of Centerville, Utah, remained in the field. The lack of competition foreshadowed a substantial bump in the ICC contract's cost.

MTC is a comparatively smaller operator than either CCA or GEO - and it has a blemished record. An Arizona state investigation found it responsible when three violent criminals escaped its Kingman facility. At one point, Arizona refused to send new inmates to Kingman, but MTC insisted its contract entitled it to be paid whether beds were filled or not.

In the end, the unstoppable force of reality ran smack into the immovable object of Otter's privatization philosophy.

Until Friday.

Taking the correct step may have been the only option left to him, but at least Otter took it. Consequently, taxpayers may end up ahead. ICC's inmates will be treated more humanely. Public safety will be enhanced.

Still, it's only a respite.

Idaho continues to farm out its prison health care and Correctional Alternative Placement Program to private vendors.

For all its problems, the private prison industry offers state leaders one guarantee - they can meet demand for prison beds. Even with one of the nation's lowest crime rates, Idaho keeps a comparatively large proportion of its people behind bars. Owing to the Legislature's tough-on-crime mantra, Idaho locks up more non-violent offenders longer and at greater expense than just about any place outside the Deep South.

Its prisons overflowing, Idaho eventually will be compelled to hire CCA, the GEO Group, MTC or others to warehouse its inmates. Then, the choice won't be simply a matter of philosophy. It will be a matter of necessity.

Until Idaho decides to get smart - rather than tough - on crime, the next "gladiator school" is lurking in some future not too

distant. - M.T.