

# Balukoff stands up to Idaho's political bully

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Here's something you don't see every day: An Idaho politician who isn't merely running against a foolish gun measure - the guns on campus law - but one who is taking on the group responsible for it, the National Rifle Association.

Last week, A.J. Balukoff, a Democrat seeking the Idaho governor's office, threw the NRA's questionnaire back in the gun lobby's face.

He didn't like the loaded questions. The NRA wasn't shy about telegraphing its position and then putting candidates in an "our way or the highway" bind.

And Balukoff more or less disqualified himself from getting the NRA's support by opposing its signature measure in the 2014 Legislature - a bill giving students 21 and older the right to carry a firearm into class and across much of the state's public college campuses.

"I believe this bill was not necessary and creates more problems than it solves," Balukoff wrote to the NRA's Dakota Moore.

Whichever Republican he faces in November - either Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter or Otter's challenger in the May 20 GOP primary, Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian - has no such compunction.

Otter signed it into law.

Although Fulcher was absent when the measure came up for a vote, his stand-in - Kuna real estate broker Dan Johnson, not to be confused with Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston - supported it.

Balukoff wasn't shy about it. He didn't privately submit his letter. He publicly rebuked one of the most powerful forces in Idaho politics. As the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey noted during the weekend, the last politician to successfully challenge the gun lobby was former Gov. Cecil D. Andrus - and he had a near-death experience in 1986 just the same.

As a Democrat, Balukoff has less to fear from the gun lobby than Republicans - who live or die by the results of the GOP primary election. The NRA has less sway with the the 460,000 Republicans, Democrats and independents who vote in November's general election. That's why only a handful of Republican lawmakers - among them Lewiston's Sen. Johnson - opposed the measure while Democratic legislators voted no en masse.

But in this case, the NRA overreached. No public clamor begged the NRA to swoop into Boise and defend the gun rights of beleaguered college students.

Far from it.

This was a national lobby imposing its agenda on Idaho students, parents and faculty - leaving them with misgivings about this brave new world that injects firearms into a cultural stew of social experimentation, drugs, alcohol and academic stress.

This was the NRA putting points on the board, despite the opposition of Idaho college and university administrators who had managed to keep the peace without outside interference.

This was the NRA imposing its political will against the professional judgment of Idaho law enforcement officers - who now face the real possibility of responding to an emergency without knowing which armed student is a villain and which armed student is the hero.

This was the gun lobby enthusiastically substituting its political pull for the constitutional authority of the Idaho State Board of Education.

And this was the NRA getting a pass from the heavy hand of Senate State Affairs Committee Chairman - and guns-on-campus bill sponsor - Sen. Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa. McKenzie had all the time in the world to hear Moore testify in his committee but froze out Idahoans such as Boise Police Chief Mike Masterson.

Will all of that persuade ordinary Idahoans to trust Balukoff over the NRA? Nobody knows. Even the candidate's campaign manager, Marie Hattaway, urged him not to take on the gun lobby so directly.

"I'm not in Gov. Andrus' league, for sure," he told Popkey.

Still, it's the NRA that stomped all over Idahoans' sensibilities. It's Balukoff who courageously is standing up to a political bully.

To win this fight, he may not have to be in Andrus' league. -M.T.