

Idaho debate becomes a clown magnet

Marty Peterson/Lewiston Tribune

Following the recent Idaho gubernatorial debate, I made a quick check on the Internet to see whether Dick Tuck had moved to Idaho.

Tuck was the legendary political prankster who plagued Richard Nixon through much of his career. For example, when Nixon ran for California governor, he did a whistle-stop trip through the state on a train. At one stop, when he was speaking to a large crowd from the rear car, the train departed in mid-speech. About the same time, Tuck was spotted wearing a train conductor's uniform and cap.

Tuck is 90 years old and now lives in Arizona. And he is the kind of person who would have gladly shelled out the \$300-per-person filing fee for Walt Bayes and Harley Brown to make them part of the 2014 primary debate for Republican gubernatorial candidates. The debate looked as though it had been infiltrated by a combination of Duck Dynasty and ZZ Top.

For those who view Idaho politics as something of a joke, the debate was a huge success - so much so that it was featured on "The Tonight Show," the "Today" show, "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report," as well as overseas on German, Australian and British television.

However, for those of you who have serious concerns about the present and future of Idaho, it was a disaster. Idaho once again came off looking to the rest of the world like a backwater state occupied by a bunch of know-nothing bumpkins.

Certainly, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and Sen. Russ Fulcher did fine, but they weren't the focus of attention. The focus was on Bayes and Brown.

For \$300 each, they achieved Andy Warhol's benchmark of 15 minutes of fame.

There has been a lot of finger-pointing trying to lay the blame for this fiasco. Some are blaming Otter for insisting that Bayes and Brown be included in the debate. Others fault the media for allowing the governor to dictate some debate rules.

I'm not willing to point fingers at anyone, but I am willing to make some suggestions to ensure that we don't see future repeats of this fiasco.

First and foremost, Idaho needs to change its filing laws for statewide office to better ensure the legitimacy of candidates who appear on the ballot. Present law allows anyone who is at least 30 years old and has lived in Idaho for two years to pay a \$300 filing fee and sign a declaration of candidacy. Or, in lieu of the \$300, you can submit a petition signed by 1,000 eligible Idaho voters. Why not amend the law and require both the payment and the petition, perhaps with some sort of statewide spread of signers similar to what is required for initiatives?

I also think that Idaho needs some sort of formal commission on debates for statewide office. Not a governmental entity, but a commission with representatives of the state media, the two major political parties and the voting public.

This commission should, well in advance of elections, set specific dates and locations for debates and adopt fixed rules for the debates that aren't subject to change by individual candidates. They should also set some sort of threshold to determine who constitutes a legitimate candidate.

One such means would be to use the results of polling by professional polling firms and include only those candidates with something like 10 percent or greater support in the polls.

Without changes such as these, I expect to see Idaho becoming fair game for the Dick Tucks of the world.

In fact it might become something of a national sport to see who can put together the wackiest and most attention-getting Idaho candidates with the possibility that every four years programs such as "The Tonight Show" would spotlight the Idaho debates and invite some of the candidates onto national television to let the nation know how they, as Idahoans, propose to serve our state, the nation and the world.

Not a bad return for a \$300 investment, especially if you don't care how crude Idaho appears to the rest of the world.

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