

Welcome to the gubernatorial debate freak show

By Wayne Hoffman, Idaho Freedom Foundation

Nothing has illustrated better the differences between GOP Congressman Mike Simpson and his challenger, Bryan Smith, than their debates. Both candidate forums were lively, feisty, but most importantly, informative. Anyone could see where the two candidates stand and what their differences are.

And those differences were on parade without the usual campaign bling that colors and distorts everything. No flashy fliers. No slick TV ads. Just two men and two visions for governing.

This, of course, brings me to the gubernatorial debate. Idahoans would have benefited from an hour-long exchange of ideas between Republican Gov. Butch Otter and primary challenger Russ Fulcher. Instead, Idaho public television viewers were treated to a freak show featuring two additional candidates who really aren't even running serious campaigns. But Otter insisted on having them, and Idaho Public Television acquiesced to the governor's wishes.

As a result, most viewers learned next to nothing about where the two serious candidates stand. And national news organizations were given a chance to mock us.

TIME magazine urged readers to watch the debate, saying they'd be in for a "rare, rare treat" of comic relief. "Everyone take a moment to thank Idaho for being Idaho," urged the mag author. ABC News, The Hill, Fox News and the Washington Post all got a laugh out of the show. And if you think we are somehow better off because there are, perhaps, more articles about the gubernatorial debate than ever before, think again; the articles were about the circus and its clowns.

The serious policies that a governor will need to tackle during the next four years were dismissed because ideas for running a state detract from the narrative of campaign season silliness that writes like butter from the fingertips of journalists uninterested in how a state's CEO impacts the lives of Idahoans. Reporters don't care which candidate will expand government health care, raise or cut taxes, spend more or less on government programs, promote Big Government or free markets. They just want to share News of the Weird. And this debate delivered.

Most news accounts suggested Otter made this happen because he wanted the distraction gained from bringing two marginal opponents into the mix, diminishing face time for his primary opponent. I blame Idaho Public Television's debate organizers, including the Idaho Press Club and the League of Women Voters, whose criteria to participate in debates are so loose, any old publicity seeker can come out to play.

After more than 25 years in public policy, I have participated in numerous debates. I've moderated them. I've been a panelist asking questions, including in this same public television setting. I've reported on countless candidate forums and debates. A well-constructed debate is good for the voting public. It sheds light on the most important issues and draws out straight answers and distinctions.

This debate was good for nothing, except to the out-of-state journalists who got a good laugh from it. We're the butt of the joke. And voters got little useful to help make an informed decision.