

Idaho GOP broken, dysfunctional - so what?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In a memorable "Saturday Night Live" parody of the 1988 presidential debate, Dana Carvey portrayed Republican George H.W. Bush as too tongue-tied to say more than: "Stay the course. Stay the course."

At which point Jon Lovitz, the actor playing Democrat Michael Dukakis, sighed: "I can't believe I'm losing to this guy."

Anything sound familiar?

Here we have the Idaho Republican Party.

Once known as the epitome of organizational discipline and brand loyalty, it has squandered both.

For years, it has engaged in internal warfare - dumping Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's choice for party chairman, suing the state in order to kick ordinary voters out of its primary and then targeting insufficiently pure legislators and officials for extinction at the polls.

It famously came to a head in Moscow about six weeks ago when the center-right and the ultra-right battled over whose delegates should be recognized - and then left town without electing leaders or enacting a platform of shared principles.

Next came embattled Chairman Barry Peterson clinging to the office - on the premise that delegates essentially gave him the job by default. Said Peterson's lawyer, Christ Troupis: It didn't matter that the delegates were acting on a faulty parliamentary ruling. They were at least sincere.

In Twin Falls Tuesday, 5th District Judge Randy Stoker told Peterson and Troupis: No, you can't do that.

But how much did Stoker really settle?

The judge opined he - and the state - didn't have a dog in this fight. When Troupis argued the GOP "is in trouble," Stoker replied: "Well, that's not something I can fix."

Now comes Saturday, when the GOP central committee convenes at a session called by Peterson's antagonists.

First question: How many people will show up? If it's not enough for a quorum, it's back to the drawing board.

Then there's this: Supposedly the rift in the party developed because people loyal to the governor went to the polls and defeated a string of ultra-conservative precinct captains - all in an attempt to regain control of the party organization.

So where do you find a center-right candidate for party chairman among these three?

- Steve Yates of Idaho Falls. An Idaho resident for three years, Yates served as deputy assistant for national security to Vice President Dick Cheney from 2001-05 and was a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. Most telling, he challenged state Rep. Jeff Thompson, R-Idaho Falls, from the right and, had he won - Thompson beat him by a mere 108 votes - Yates was seen as a potential vote against House Speaker Scott Bedke.
- Cassia County Republican Chairman Doug Pickett. He was among the slate of right-wing challengers who targeted moderate state senators in 2012. Pickett took on budget committee Chairman Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, and carried 44 percent of the vote.
- Mike Duff, a Blackfoot sheep breeder, who was in the hunt for the post back in June. Duff managed Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth's campaign and championed the state constitutional amendment that banned marriage equality.

Add to that a governor - supposedly the titular head of the GOP - who seemingly has been content to play the role of passive spectator to his party's debacle.

Plus there is the status of a 2-year-old platform that retains such radioactive planks as one that suggests ordinary voters are incapable of electing their own U.S. senators.

All of which brings to mind Lovitz's line: How can Idaho Democrats be losing to these guys?

Idaho's GOP controls all four congressional delegation seats, all of the state's constitutional officers and 80 percent of the Legislature. Will this spectacle of Idaho's dominant political party drifting aimlessly in a sea of dysfunction change any of that?

Do you want to bet? - M.T.