

For Idaho GOP, the hits just keep on coming

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The weekend Idaho GOP central committee meeting didn't so much resemble a peace treaty as it did the signing of a truce.

The parties at the table were exhausted from six weeks of war that erupted from Moscow's dysfunctional state convention and ended in a Twin Falls courtroom.

In their new chairman, Steve Yates of Idaho Falls, Republicans picked someone nobody knows much about. Yates moved to Idaho three years ago - after serving as deputy assistant for national security to Vice President Dick Cheney and as a senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation. In the May 20 primary, he came within 108 votes of defeating state Rep. Jeff Thompson, R-Idaho Falls.

To his face, some might call Yates a transplant. Behind his back, he's just as likely to be called a carpetbagger. Either way, he was able to cobble together a coalition from both sides of the Republican schism and barely defeat Doug Pickett, an otherwise low-profile Cassia County Republican who made an unsuccessful primary challenge against Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, two years ago.

Yates prevailed 107 to 95.

Missing from the field were names that had been at the center of the leadership standoff:

- Former Chairman Barry Peterson, whose disputed tenure came to an end last week in 5th District Judge Randy Stoker's courtroom.
- Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, who had failed to dislodge Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. Fulcher's wing of the party pushed him for chairman. Otter said no.
- Blackfoot businessman Doug Sayer, who had the governor's support.

Also absent: any indication that the elected officials in the party had a preference.

But before you get the impression this was a kumbaya session, consider how it began. With Peterson no longer in office, the session required a temporary chairman to preside over the election. Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, agreed to sign on.

Nothing doing, protested Bryan Smith of Idaho Falls, the Club for Growth-backed challenger who failed to unseat Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho. In Winder's place, the assembled Republicans relied upon their national committeeman, Damond Watkins of Idaho Falls, to run the show.

All of which adds up to a huge vacuum in leadership and a disconnect between the party apparatus and elected officials. This papering over of differences does not erase years of

infighting that climaxed with a slate of ultra-right candidates challenging right-of-center incumbents up and down the Republican primary ballot. The establishment wing won most - but not all - of the contests.

How - or if - these divisions are set aside for the campaign is the GOP's next challenge. Then the real fighting begins. Around the first of the year, party activists will gather in Boise and what's been avoided will become unavoidable:

- Setting the rules for seating delegations - the very issue that derailed the Moscow convention when Ada and Bannock counties were disenfranchised.
- Deciding whether the GOP will stick by its decision to keep all but registered Republicans out of its primary elections.
- Resolving the hot-button issues - everything from the Common Core education reforms to health insurance exchanges - that distinguish Tea Partiers from the RINOs.

All of this was supposed to have been settled during three days in Moscow.

One morning in Boise repaired just a piece of it. - M.T.