

# The name Butch Otter fears is not A.J. Balukoff

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry is tying Democratic gubernatorial candidate A.J. Balukoff to President Obama.

Linking an Idaho Democrat to an unpopular White House is a tried and true tactic.

It will work again.

Unless the conversations at Idaho's barber shops, golf courses, fishing holes, farmers markets, church socials and pool tables go like this:

"Who's your choice for governor?"

"The other fellow."

"What other fellow?"

"You know. Buzenschitz. Baryshnikov."

"Do you mean Balukoff?"

"Yes. That one."

Bill Hall, the editor emeritus of this page, heard the same kind of talk in 1966. Gov. Robert E. Smylie looked strong enough to scare off any credible opposition, at least within his own party. Smylie's one opponent was a backbencher from Sandpoint, state Sen. Don Samuelson, and no one took him seriously.

But Hall started hearing talk of support for "the other fellow."

Samuelson ended up defeating Smylie with 61 percent in the GOP primary.

By 1966, Smylie had been around a long time - attorney general in 1947 and governor since 1955. People were getting tired of him.

But Otter has been in politics since the early 1970s. Now he's seeking a third consecutive term. The last guy to do that was ... Bob Smylie in 1962.

Both men have suffered badly divided parties. Smylie had his Barry Goldwater wing; Otter has his Tea Party.

It's not a perfect analogy. Smylie committed the sin of smugness; Otter remains the most personable and best retail campaigner of his time.

But Smylie never faced some of Otter's liabilities - a moribund, minimum-wage economy that makes Mississippi look good by comparison.

Smylie could run on a record of genuine achievement - a modern tax system, state parks, a public employee pension plan and the prospect of a 1968 GOP vice presidential nomination.

Otter must run away from a record that includes the massive failure of his two initiatives - highway funding, which the Legislature rejected, and a school overhaul package he co-authored with state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna, which the voters overwhelmingly repealed. The one legislative "win" in his column was passage of a state-based health insurance exchange, which drove the right wing of his party nuts.

From the scandalous behavior of Corrections Corporation of America to the botched state investigation into it, from former Transportation Director Pam Lowe's allegations that government money was lavished on Otter's cronies to Otter's tax commission chairman, Royce Chigbrow, resigning amid allegations he was playing favorites, Otter has presided over an atmosphere of back-door dealing, corruption and incompetence.

That would explain the "Otter fatigue" that clearly propelled Sen. Russ Fulcher's challenge beyond anyone's expectations.

Here was a candidate nobody knew. He had no money. He had no message.

Yet he managed to take Otter's base - Kootenai, Canyon and western Ada counties - in the May 20 primary. The incumbent won renomination thanks to the Mormons in eastern Idaho whose support for him has been tepid.

There's a big difference between a primary and general election. Nonetheless, by getting in early and throwing the kitchen sink at Balukoff, IACI seems worried.

But it really doesn't matter what IACI says about Balukoff.

It doesn't matter what Balukoff says about himself.

It doesn't even matter if Balukoff gets rid of that annoying bow tie.

The name Otter should fear won't be Balukoff.

The name he's got to worry about is "the other fellow." - M.T.