

Otter's rosy prescription appeals to Idaho voters

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Every day, in every way, Idaho is getting better and better.

Every day, in every way, Idaho is getting better and better.

Say it once more: Every day, in every way, Idaho is getting better and better.

The mantra of constant improvement is a common theme for those in power, no matter their party affiliation. Like Ronald Reagan in 1984, it's always morning on their watch, with sunny days and golden times just ahead.

Barring the occasional doomsayer or minority party humbug, politics is a land of eternal optimists, populated by those convinced not only of the rectitude of representative government, but of their own goodwill and common sense. They believe in a better future and are confident in their ability to steer the ship of state toward safe and productive waters.

And there is perhaps no greater optimist in Idaho than Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, whose personal charisma and laser-like focus on the positive and dismissal of the negative have propelled him to victory in all but one election throughout his long political career.

Like Reagan, Otter delights in economic growth and the opportunities it provides. For years he's used the phrase "architects of our own destiny" to capture the mix of freedom and personal responsibility he so esteems. While he rarely misses a chance to criticize the federal government, he is a relentless champion of Idaho, its pioneer history and traditional values.

"Idaho can be what America was meant to be," Otter said in his 2009 State of the State address. "Of course, that means keeping the ideals of freedom and personal responsibility and empowerment at the forefront of the government agenda."

Speaking at the height of the Great Recession, he went on to suggest "there's no time like now to realize the hopes and dreams of present and future generations."

Given his rosy views, Otter in many ways is a Gem State version of Norman Vincent Peale, the Methodist minister and author of "The Power of Positive Thinking."

Published in 1952, the book offers a mix of spiritual and practical advice on how to reduce stress, overcome doubt and create positive change in your life. It spent 186 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list - which ranks third all-time - and made Peale a household name.

The book was also scorned by mental health professionals nationwide, who said Peale's simplistic methods did more harm than good by encouraging people to delude themselves, ignore uncomfortable realities and be suspicious of more effective treatment techniques.

The basic point for critics was that implementing positive change requires substantial effort. People can't just think their problems away.

While Otter isn't guilty of this transgression, his tendency to downplay the negative can at times seem Pollyanna-ish.

Last week, for example, when asked to reflect on his third term, Otter spoke eloquently about the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, saying it was "as honest and sincere today as I've ever seen in government."

"If anything happens over the next four years, hopefully we can enrich that culture of cooperation and collaboration and transparency," he said.

This just eight months after a bloody Republican primary, when former state Sen. Russ Fulcher of Meridian slammed the governor as an ineffective leader and traitor to Republican values.

"Idaho sits at or near the bottom in several economic indicators (and) we're tops in the nation in minimum-wage jobs," Fulcher thundered in April. "The Otter administration will be remembered for eight years of missed opportunities."

Democratic contender A.J. Balukoff also tried to convince voters of Otter's shortcomings, highlighting his apparent preference for tax cuts over education spending, as well as multiple failings on contract awards, agency oversight and other management responsibilities.

Yet through it all, Otter waved such accusations aside and maintained his upbeat tone, cruising to another easy victory.

The lesson is that optimism is attractive. The "room with a view" Otter has to offer is infinitely more romantic and desirable than the "room for improvement" his opponents were hawking.

No matter how simplistic or naïve, no matter what the professionals think, it is a message we want to hear - that things will improve, that the clouds will disperse and the sun will shine through, and the future will be better and better.

"This chamber, this building, this (Legislature) has all the room anyone needs to accommodate the loftiest, most meaningful ideas," Otter said in his State of the State address Monday. "So think big. Be bold ... and as you consider the magnitude of the work ahead, keep looking towards higher aspirations."

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.