

The Butch Otter of old would not act this way

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

American life has its dark undercurrent.

You see it whenever reason, compassion and "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" yield to hysterics.

Such was the case during World War I, when German-Americans were spied upon, harassed and even lynched in the name of fighting the Kaiser.

Such was the case during World War II, when American citizens of Japanese ancestry were rounded up from their homes and interned in concentration camps.

Such was the case during the early days of the Cold War when people were forced to take loyalty oaths - and those merely accused of being Communists saw their lives and careers wrecked.

And such was the case in the days following the 9/11 attacks, when the people and politicians alike cared little about trampling on America's tradition of civil liberties if it interfered with restoring a sense of security.

Once the crisis passes and people regain their balance, they ask themselves how they could have allowed people to be treated so shabbily. How could they act so shamefully? How could they forget their country's principles?

Public officials who followed the irrational tide - even figures as revered as Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, who as California's governor allowed the Japanese internment - would find their record tainted.

But a few stood by their principles.

One such man was C.L. "Butch" Otter.

Otter was a freshman congressman from Idaho's 1st District when 9/11 occurred.

The government's response was an expansion of wiretapping and surveillance to be authorized under a bill dubbed the Patriot Act.

Otter said it was a bad bargain to forfeit freedom in the name of security.

He was one of only three GOP House members - the others were former Reps. Ron Paul of Texas and Bob Ney of Ohio - who stood against their own president, George W. Bush, and voted no.

Years later, Otter was vindicated. In fact, many believe his lonely stance on the House floor is what propelled Otter into the Idaho governor's office.

Now another wave of hysteria is washing over the country.

In the aftermath of last week's bloodbath in Paris, more than two dozen governors - Otter among them - want to halt President Obama's plans to admit 10,000 refugees from the Syrian civil war to this country.

Never mind that the U.S. is dealing with such a small sliver of the 4.3 million Syrians - half the population - who have been displaced from their homes that it's more a gesture than a response to the human suffering.

Never mind that any refugee who makes it to America's shores has been as thoroughly screened as can be imagined: Does his biography check out? Is he telling the truth? Are there any ties to terrorist organizations? In all, a 14-step process involving multiple layers of national intelligence organizations sifts through the details.

Never mind that a true terrorist - assuming he's not already a U.S. citizen - would find it easier to enter the country on a student or work visa or even cross the border illegally.

Never mind that through this filter a mere 35 Syrian refugees, including 20 children, passed into Idaho last year. In that time, 1,000 refugees representing 25 countries came to the Gem State.

In this latest struggle between reason and hysteria, between giving into our fears or standing up for our values,

Otter has chosen expediency.

He has joined with his fellow governors and gone one better.

Rather than target Syrians - as

Idaho's congressional delegation supports - Otter would deny entry to all 85,000 refugees, everywhere from the Congo to North Korea.

"It makes no sense under the best of circumstances for the United States to allow people into our country who have the avowed desire to harm our communities, our institutions and our people," Otter wrote to President Obama. "While I understand that immigration and refugee resettlement are authorized under federal law, I am duty-bound to do whatever I can to protect the people of Idaho from harm."

Can you imagine the Butch Otter of old acting this way?

That fellow might have stood against the tide, explained his reasoning to his constituents and placed his trust in their logic and respect for American traditions - rather than playing to the momentary heat of the mob.

What happened to him? - M.T.