

## Stallings blasts Statesman editorial board/page

### **Richard Stallings, former Democratic congressman**

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I read this recent editorial headline in the Idaho Statesman: "Wanted: Candidates for Congress in Idaho." So I decided to offer my opinion.

From a candidate's perspective, a more appropriate headline would be: "Wanted: A Capital City Newspaper That Gives a Damn About Politics." Or, as it applies to the Statesman: "Wanted: An Editorial Board with Backbone."

The Idaho Statesman, the state's largest and potentially most influential newspaper, has turned itself into an arm of the political establishment. On the opinion page, it sees, hears and speaks no evil – to incumbents, that is. In the last election, this jellyfish of an editorial board endorsed every incumbent running in a contested race, except one. The Statesman did not have the courage to take a stand on the state treasurer's race, where the incumbent was neck-deep in allegations of mismanagement.

When it comes to contested races, the Statesman's lead editorial writer has never met an incumbent or establishment politician he didn't like.

The Statesman writes that "Idahoans deserve a choice when they go to the polls. And voter turnout is not going to improve unless candidates give voters a real choice."

I agree. But the Statesman makes sure challengers are never seen or heard from – at least, not on the candidates' terms. The Statesman seldom runs news releases. Speaking engagements and town hall meetings are rarely covered. And the gate to the opinion is closed to candidates wishing to comment about issues. The Statesman does have a voter's guide, which is useful. But the grand exposure is with the editorial endorsement, which has become the Statesman's forum for gushing over incumbents.

One shot that challengers have is in the dreaded "endorsement interview" with the editorial board, which is the equivalent to walking the plank on a pirate ship. I could tell the moment I arrived that the editorial board members were not in the least bit interested in what I had to say about my race against Congressman Simpson. Sure, they were courteous. But their body language told me their minds were made up long before I walked into the room. And the final result was an endorsement for Mr. Simpson based on a topic they didn't ask me about, the INL. The Statesman gave similar treatment to Nels Mitchell in his challenge against Sen. Risch and State Sen. Shirley Ringo, who dared to challenge Congressman Labrador. In the Statesman's view, experience ends up being one of the leading factors in the endorsement process – and, of course, incumbents are the ones with the experience.

Running for office, especially a congressional office, is a huge commitment – personally and financially. How does a challenging candidate get the word out against an incumbent who has millions in the bank and unlimited ability to advertise? And what match does a challenging candidate have against a capital city newspaper that has built its reputation favoring the status quo?

Yes, it would be nice to have challengers in congressional races. The Democratic Party has done a good job recruiting smart candidates who are willing to put themselves out there and give voters viable choices in congressional races. Unfortunately, the Idaho Statesman has proven itself to be an enemy of the cause that it is feebly trying to promote.