

# He who voted 'hell no' has tired of no votes

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

No Idaho politician knows more about voting no than Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

It was Otter, of course, as a young libertarian legislator who in the 1970s expressed his opposition to an anti-pornography bill by stating: "I vote not just no but hell no." The episode etched Otter firmly into the public's imagination.

And it was Otter who, as a newly minted U.S. congressman, was one of only three Republicans to oppose the Bush administration's Patriot Act shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Widely admired at home, the stance eased Otter's path into the governor's office.

But here was Otter in Coeur d'Alene last week, bemoaning state legislators who had glued their thumbs to the "no" button.

"They are stupefied by the cost and totally incapable of seeing the value. For a public servant, that is almost unforgivable," said Otter in a story written by Keith Cousins of the Coeur d'Alene Press. "It shouldn't be acceptable to anybody anymore just to hear the answer to a public policy question as 'No.' OK, what are you going to do about it, then?"

Otter was in northern Idaho campaigning on behalf of Rep. Luke Malek, R-Coeur d'Alene - who is one of the region's few surviving reasonable Republicans.

As the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer pointed out last month, the region is a hotbed for GOP lawmakers who think voting to keep the state government operating violates their principles.

Of the five lawmakers who opposed the most number of bills, four are from northern Idaho. Of the 10 most prolific no-voters, five represent this region.

Standouts among north central Idaho's delegation include Rep. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton, who is the second most negative member of Idaho's 105 lawmakers - voting no 56 percent of the time against \$5.7 billion worth of spending.

Only Rep. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg, who teaches economics at the Mormon church-owned Brigham Young University-Idaho, scored higher, voting no 57.1 percent of the time.

Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, voted against more spending - \$6.4 billion - including the entire public education budget. McMillan voted against seven of the eight education appropriation bills.

Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, is ranked 17th overall - she voted no 17.6 percent of the time against \$3.4 billion worth of spending bills. But Nuxoll's negative voting record is tops in the

Senate. All of which is a bit odd when you consider Nuxoll sits on the very panel that writes the budgets.

What accounts for Otter's stance?

- Perspective. It's one thing to cast a protest vote as a legislator. That's a luxury governors lack. For every former U.S. senator or congressman who, like Kansas' Sam Brownback, maintained a rigid ideology as governor, there's another, such as Ohio's John Kasich, whose views became tempered.
- Freedom. Now in his third and final term, Otter has gravitated toward restoring public school and higher education budgets while eschewing more tax cuts.
- Nothing to fear. What has Otter got to lose in northern Idaho? Two years ago, the region's GOP primary voters turned against him, supporting former Sen. Russ Fulcher. The bulk of northern Idaho's Republican lawmakers sympathize with the Idaho Freedom Foundation's agenda, not Otter's.

But this wing of the GOP has been contained to the portion of Idaho located in the Pacific Time Zone. Otter draws most of his votes - and legislative allies - from southwestern and eastern Idaho. None of them cares too much if the governor takes a poke at his adversaries in the north.

- Blood in the water. With less than two weeks to go before the May 17 primary, some conservatives - McMillan and Nuxoll among them - may be on the defensive. They face legitimate opponents in the election. Voters may still remember how these anti-government lawmakers nearly eviscerated Idaho's child support enforcement last year.

And who can say whether the right pitch from Otter might sway some voters?

Still, it's not every day you see a Republican governor openly blasting members of his own party. Why is Otter acting this way?

Isn't it obvious?

Because he can. - M.T.