

# Congress Takes Lead In Not Trying Anymore

• **SEPT. 14, 2016 – WILLIAM L. SPENCE – LEWISTON  
TRIBUNE**

*An "Idaho Mountain Gem"  
Is a theme we can't condemn,  
And our national forests  
Certainly don't abhor us.  
So here's my contest entry;  
I hope it gets me plenty.  
It isn't my best effort,  
But it's good enough  
for government work.*

Washington State University football coach Mike Leach went on a rant this week, saying the Cougar football players lost their first two games this season because they were playing like "a JC softball team."

He went on to suggest this was symptomatic of a larger societal disease, "where they give every kid a trophy and don't keep score in Little League anymore. That whole thing has retarded the competitive spirit in America."

What, I wonder, would Leach make of Congress, which has become so gun-shy of anything resembling a tough decision it now punts on first down rather than risk offense?

The latest, unexpected example of this is the "Christmas helper" grade school contest currently underway in Idaho.

On its surface the contest, which runs through Sept. 30, encourages students to make an effort: Provide an original multimedia composition - an essay, poem, video or artwork - that reflects the theme "an Idaho Mountain Gem" and highlights the importance of our national forests.

The grand prize is a trip to Washington, D.C., where the student will help light the U.S. Capitol Christmas tree, which is being provided by Payette National Forest this year.

Sounds great - until you read the fine print, which notes the tree lighting helper "will be selected at random."

Seriously? It took me 10 minutes to come up with the bit of doggerel cited above. So some kid who puts as little effort into his or her entry has as much chance of winning as those who pour their hearts into their work? That's just not right.

Yeah, I know. If they actually judged the contest and picked a winner based on merit, some snarky reporter would undoubtedly do a public records request and write a story about how little Johnny got hosed because his two-minute video on the history of Christmas tree logging in Idaho didn't make the final cut.

Interview some bawling 8-year-old who would say Mike Crapo is the "Senate scrooge who stole Christmas?" Man, I know reporters who would kill for that story.

And heaven forbid the winner's parents actually donated to Crapo's re-election campaign. Then we're talking real scandal, front page stories in every paper in the state.

So, yes, there may be some practical benefits to choosing a winner at random - but as this column shows, members of Congress are going to get criticized no matter what they do, so they might as well stand tall and uphold the grand American tradition of making sure all those losers out there know just who they are. Next time work harder, punks. What do you think this is, softball?

Punting on a Christmas contest wouldn't bother me so much if that didn't seem to be Congress' standard modus operandi these days.

As an institution, it has hobbled itself with self-imposed rules that allow a minority of members to forestall votes and prevent legislation from moving to the floor.

As an institution, Congress defers time and again to the executive branch, allowing the president to set policies and spending priorities.

As an institution, Congress plays like a pansy - or maybe a patsy. It fails to operate as a team, jealously guarding its constitutional authority. Instead, it now plays parliamentary ball, with members siding for or against the executive branch based on their party affiliation.

One yearns for an alliance of voters, a cadre of Leach-like electoral coaches who scream and yell, demanding more of incumbents and refusing to reward them with another term unless the team as a whole begins to perform. Balance those budgets. Defend those constitutional powers. Work harder, punks, because there are no trophies for second place.