

## However generous the terms, it's still surrender

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**By Marty Trillhaase of the Tribune**

Anyone who's seen the picture of General Douglas MacArthur lording over the defeated Japanese on the deck of the USS Missouri at the close of World War II can appreciate the plight of Idaho's moderate Republicans.

The moderates are the guys seated at the table, signing surrender terms.

The terms may be generous in the short term. The long term, however, beckons the slow but certain strangulation of the pragmatic, centrist-oriented wing of Idaho's dominant political party.

Already under siege from the ideological faction that gave you bills to nullify the U.S. Constitution and put a gun in every college student's hand, Idaho's moderate Republicans lost the war earlier this month. U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill said the party apparatchiks could close the state's GOP primary to all but card-carrying Republican voters.

Until now, Idaho's primary was open to all - Democrats and independents voted where the action was, in the GOP races. That tended to help moderates, but only on the margins. Even with an open primary, conservatives have whittled down the people they ridicule as Republicans in Name Only.

Introduced in the Senate, the new primary bill offers moderates only a few concessions.

For instance, there's certainty. With the rules of the game now set, they can plan a year ahead for the 2012 primary.

It also eases the way for independents to vote in the primary by allowing unaffiliated voters to register as Republicans at the polls.

For the party hierarchy, the plan makes it harder for a Democrat to get involved in the GOP contests.

It further gives the GOP leadership rather than the state's elected representatives the authority to decide whether to tighten or loosen the rules governing who can participate in the primary.

Here's how it will play out:

Armed with more campaign cash and greater familiarity among voters, moderate incumbents have a fighting chance to survive by mobilizing their own GOP supporters and possibly some unaffiliated voters to help them in the primary.

Still, it's a big question how many independent voters will be so uncomfortable declaring a party affiliation that they will stay home. In a low-turnout election already dominated by the rank-and-file partisans, even a small decline in independent turnout could make a difference.

It goes double whenever a moderate official retires. In a primary race for an open seat, the rules of the game heavily favor the conservative. So over time, you're going to see fewer people such as Sen. Joe Stegner, R-Lewiston, or Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, and more people such as Rep. Phil Hart, R-Athol, and Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens.

Unless, of course, you act.

The state can't dictate who the GOP or the Democrats support.

But there's absolutely nothing stopping Idaho voters from emulating Washington, and now California, by adopting a top two primary. Rather than nominate candidates from each party, voters winnow down the finalists for November.

In the rapidly diminishing places where Idaho's parties are competitive, you would end up with a Democrat and Republican opposing each other in November. In heavily Republican Canyon or Bonneville counties, two Republicans would square off in the fall. In Blaine County or Boise's north end, it's possible two Democrats would go forward into November.

Either way, the broad spectrum of voters - Republicans, independents and Democrats - would decide, without having to register with any party.

Don't count on the Legislature to do this. Voters, acting through the initiative process, would have to demand a top two primary.

Do that, however, and it will be the voters standing on the proverbial deck of the USS Missouri. Party bosses will find themselves seated at the table.

Now wouldn't that be a revolutionary concept? - M.T.