

# Has Butch been making Big Don look good?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter has six years in office under his belt and two more to go.

But what does he have to show for it?

To say he has the thinnest legacy since Gov. (Big) Don Samuelson would be taking an unfair poke at Samuelson.

Idaho's 25th governor, Samuelson served from 1967 to 1971. He generally rates near the least successful governors. He was a terrible public speaker. He suffered comparisons to his predecessor, Robert Smylie, and his successor, Cecil Andrus. And the voters denied him a second term.

By contrast, Otter is an exceptional retail politician who has won three terms in Congress, two as governor and could have a third for the asking.

But in terms of governing, Samuelson's record is not insignificant. On his watch, Idaho streamlined its judicial system, modernized stewardship of its state lands, launched annual legislative sessions and reformed its state financial and insurance agencies. Samuelson presided over incorporating what would become Boise State University into the state college and university network. And Samuelson's staff also competently implemented much of Smylie's program, including the newly created sales tax.

Other governors have done more. Andrus, for instance, developed kindergartens, environmental protection and land-use planning. John Evans doggedly pursued a glide path for state budgets during the economic slide of the 1980s. Phil Batt resolved the nuclear waste issue and won worker compensation for farm laborers.

But Otter has done far less.

The budget cutting during his tenure has been consequential - but it's been passive and imprecise. As revenues shrank, Idaho reduced just about everything rather than strategically making choices.

There's been movement toward providing college scholarships to Idaho's neediest students and reorganizing the departments of Commerce and Labor as well as improving the State Board of Education.

But it's pretty thin gruel.

Otter's most meaningful legislative success was his 2011 partnership with schools Superintendent Tom Luna to overhaul public education. All of it - the undermining of teacher

collective bargaining rights, imposing merit pay and diverting resources from the teacher to the computer - came crashing down Nov. 6 when Idaho voters repealed the laws by a landslide.

Elsewhere, it's been the Legislature, not Otter, calling the tune. Otter wanted a grocery sales tax break targeted toward Idaho's neediest citizens. Lawmakers extended the credit to everyone at greater expense.

Otter wanted to stop the Legislature's Capitol renovation. Instead lawmakers prevailed, and they have the ample auditoriums and personal offices to show for it.

Otter wanted to invest more money in Idaho's deteriorating network of highways and bridges. In 2009, he even resorted to a flurry of vetoes to goad lawmakers into going along. When that tactic failed, the governor retreated into silence.

One thing Otter and lawmakers agreed upon was their antipathy toward Obamacare. He ran a three-year campaign against it. Otter challenged national health care reform in the courts. It became a centerpiece of his successful 2010 re-election drive. And he winked at nullification - the idea that states could defy federal laws.

Now he's on the cusp of transforming Obamacare into Ottercare. Pursuing a state-based health insurance exchange beats leaving the feds in charge.

And how can he say no to expanding Medicaid to low-income adults when the alternative is to throw away tens of millions of state and local tax dollars on Idaho's medically indigent program?

Of course the books are not closed on the Otter administration. But while his contemporaries continue to think well of him, the governor might want to cast an eye toward history's verdict. - M.T.