

First the sound, then the fury and finally nothing

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Prediction 1: Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter will kick off the 2014 Legislature Monday promising to do as little as possible.

Which will be just fine with the members of his own party serving in the Legislature.

This year, their directive is to avoid a GOP primary skirmish - or at least survive a primary election challenge. From top to bottom, these elected officials will hunker down, adopt a defensive crouch position, wait to see who lines up to run against them in mid-March and do the absolute minimum required.

Prediction 2: There will be a lot of people who are sent to Boise this year to make things happen. They are called lobbyists. A bunch of defeatist lawmakers too intimidated by Idaho's Republican Party civil wars aren't going to stop them.

- Idaho's health care providers will not be deterred in reminding Idaho's elected officials how they are failing the test of leadership by not extending Medicaid coverage to nearly 100,000 working poor Idaho adults. To do otherwise would be fiscally irresponsible, they'll remind everyone. Because the federal government pays 100 percent of the program's cost in the first three years - and never less than 90 percent thereafter - Idaho taxpayers no longer will have to pay up to \$80 million a year covering the medical bills of people too poor to pay them.

And that says nothing of the moral imperative. By one estimate, extending preventive medical care to this population will spare 600 lives a year.

- Humiliated by his party's rejection of a transportation package in 2009, Otter never tried again and won't this year. But the people with a stake in the smooth flow of goods and services across Idaho's highways and bridges may well ask how a state can go two decades without raising more money. Waiting another year means putting maintenance behind another \$262 million, while the backlog of needed improvements expands by another \$281 million.
- The business community will make another push for the tax cuts they've been promised. Simultaneously, parents, teachers and students will expect more than lip service to the reinvestment in public schools they've come to expect. One side will lose. You can't have it both ways.
- The culture wars are just beneath the surface. Idaho's GOP faithful will try to erase the ability of mayors and city councilors to compensate for legislative indifference by passing local ordinances banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. An election year is as good a time as any to bring up another ultrasound bill - to say nothing about dumbing down new Common Core school standards. And with same-sex marriage breaking out in Utah, you can count on some futile gesture to stop it in Idaho.

- Then there are the time bombs in Idaho's criminal justice system that just can't be ignored, no matter how hard the politicians try. Putting the state Department of Correction back in control of the Idaho Correctional Center will take a political fig leaf. But after private management transformed ICC into a violence-ridden "gladiator school" while probably gouging the taxpayer as well, the transformation is necessary. And at the same time, Idaho's tough-on-crime mantra has locked up too many people for too long at too great an expense.

Prediction 3: When the merry-go-round stops, nothing will have changed. Once the list of primary contests emerges from Secretary of State Ben Ysursa's shop, the politicians will have a hankering to return home and begin the spring campaign.

Prediction 4: Otter will award the do-nothing session an A. Others might invoke Shakespeare: "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." - M.T.