

Our man in Havana? Butch Otter, who else?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

There's talk about Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter becoming President-elect Donald Trump's secretary of the Interior.

It goes without saying that he has some of the right credentials.

Otter, who served three terms in Congress as well as lieutenant governor before becoming Idaho's chief executive a decade ago, represents a Western, public lands state.

There's a precedent. Former Idaho Gov. Cecil D. Andrus served as President Jimmy Carter's Interior secretary; former Gov. Dirk Kempthorne held the job under President George W. Bush.

There's been a small amount of buzz. Reuters mentioned him as a possibility. So did Energy and Environment News.

Otter also met with Vice President-elect Mike Pence earlier this week. Pence is heading up Trump's transition.

But the farther you travel from Boise's Jefferson Street, the thinner this gets.

Otter's name is not on the list of most likely suspects, currently headed by Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin or even U.S. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D.

What this does tell you, however, is that Otter has something more in mind than finishing out the last two years of his term and retiring to his ranch in Star. Obviously, he has no qualms about turning his desk over to Lt. Gov. Brad Little - who is running for the office in 2018.

So why not toss Otter another political plum?

How about an ambassadorship?

Otter certainly has the right skill-set for it.

He's loyal. Once Otter signed up as co-chairman of Trump's Idaho campaign, he stood by him even in the midst of the "Access Hollywood" video when others, notably Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, distanced themselves from the GOP standard bearer.

You can expect Otter to follow orders. Even as Idaho's governor, he tended to let others - whether it was former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna or state lawmakers - set direction on education reform, tax policy and highway funding.

Nobody is better at the ceremonial duties of the job. Whether it's cutting ribbons, back-slapping at parades or schmoozing at campaign rallies, Otter is Idaho's premier retail politician.

Otter loves to travel. He did it as an executive for his ex-father-in-law Jack Simplot's company. While Idaho's second banana under three governors, he was the unofficial trade envoy. As governor, Otter has headed several trade excursions.

And there's one diplomatic posting that is a near-perfect fit.

Cuba.

Assuming Trump maintains the re-opening of diplomatic ties with Havana launched under President Obama, he's going to need someone who is credible with that island's communist rulers.

No one has a better track record on that score. Nearly two decades ago, Otter was waging the lonely battle to restore Cuban trade - often standing alone with fellow Republican Jeff Flake of Arizona against the Bush White House.

By the time he made his second visit to Cuba in 2004 - along with then-U.S. Sen. Larry Craig - Fidel Castro was greeting him as "yo vaquero" and asking Otter to inscribe the Idahoan's drawings of a salmon.

Through the years, Otter has kept at it. Last year, he joined eight governors - including Washington's Jay Inslee and California's Jerry Brown - calling for an end to a trade embargo rooted in a Cold War era that has long since passed.

"It's time for Congress to take action and remove the financial, travel and other restrictions that impede normal commerce and trade between our nation and Cuba," they wrote.

Although not fluent in Spanish, Otter does have more than a few contacts with Cuba's trade ministry and national assembly.

Obama's nomination of Jeffrey DeLaurentis as ambassador is bottled up in the Republican Senate. On the other hand, Otter might sail through confirmation. Not only is his party in charge, but Idaho Sen. Jim Risch sits on the Foreign Relations Committee. In fact, if Trump elevates Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., to be his secretary of State, Risch will preside over those confirmation hearings as chairman.

Ironically, it would be a much more historic capstone to Otter's career.

Where would he rather wind up? Defending the nation's landlord to his fellow Westerners? Or serving as America's first ambassador to Cuba since Oct. 28, 1960? - M.T.