

Kempthorne won't talk about his finest hour

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Former Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne got in and out of Moscow last weekend without mentioning his finest hour as a public servant.

Who knows? Maybe Kempthorne was merely being modest.

Saturday, the University of Idaho awarded an honorary doctorate in administrative science to Kempthorne, a former ASUI student body president, mayor of Boise, U.S. senator, governor, secretary of the Interior and now president and CEO of the American Council of Life Insurers.

That event triggered a string of interviews in which Kempthorne listed his highlights as governor: redirecting the state's federal highway funds toward improving corridors, including the interstate highways and portions of U.S. Highway 95; spending more money on capital improvements at the state's institutions of higher learning and connecting rural Idaho to broadband services.

None of that was easy to accomplish and all of it was significant.

But it barely compares to the challenge facing Kempthorne as he began his second gubernatorial term in early 2003.

The dot.com bust, coupled with the conservative Idaho Legislature's insistence on passing what turned out to be unaffordable income tax cuts when times were still flush, had sunk the state budget.

A year after draining reserves, cutting higher education, eliminating some Medicaid services and reducing child care subsidies for low-income parents, Idaho was out of options.

To balance a \$200 million budget hole, Kempthorne would have to impose a 10 percent cut everywhere in state government, including the public schools.

The consequences would have been severe - dramatic increases in local property taxes to make up the difference, more schools going on a four-day week and a growing reliance on fees to cover the costs of everything from labs to athletics.

Kempthorne refused to do it.

Instead, he called for an increase in sales and cigarette taxes.

"I have done something that is absolutely not part of my fiber," Kempthorne told the Washington Post at the time. "But I'm not going to dismantle this state, and I'm not going to jeopardize our bond rating, and I'm not going to reduce my emphasis on education."

So he vetoed the GOP Legislature's cuts-only budget and settled in for a standoff. By the time conservative lawmakers acquiesced to a temporary penny increase in the sales tax for two years, the legislative session had dragged out to a record-setting 118 days.

But Kempthorne prevailed.

Like his predecessors who raised taxes under similar circumstances, Kempthorne had made certain the schools were not diminished on his watch.

It was left to his successors to do that.

Weeks after Kempthorne resigned to join President George W. Bush's cabinet in 2006, interim Gov. Jim Risch insisted on a one-day special session to unravel the schools' reliance on a stable maintenance and operations property tax levy, replacing it with less reliable state funds and local supplemental levies that worked a hardship on less prosperous communities.

Then during the Great Recession, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter took a cuts-only approach to balancing the budget, a period that saw Idaho schools lose more ground than many other states.

To this day, the state still ranks at the bottom - or right next to it - in terms of the amount of money it spends per pupil.

Voters finally said enough of that in 2012 when they resoundingly rejected former state schools Superintendent Tom Luna's so-called reforms - which were premised on the damage inflicted on public schools remaining in place. Only then did Otter and the GOP switch gears, pledging to increase school spending by about \$250 million. But after allowing for inflation and enrollment growth, public education has yet to recover from the losses. Local property taxes are still rising. And finding teachers willing to work in Idaho remains a challenge.

So Kempthorne was vindicated, right?

Think again.

For any Republican, backing a tax increase is heresy.

For any Republican in ruby red Idaho, the stigma is even worse. Kempthorne paid a price in terms of his conservative credentials and fractured ties within his party. He never again tested Idaho's political waters.

Making a political sacrifice in the service of a greater cause was the metric President John F. Kennedy devised in his Pulitzer Prize-winning "Profiles in Courage."

It applies in Kempthorne's case - even if he'd prefer you not remember any of this. Just the same, the state is in his

debt. - M.T.