



C.L. "BUTCH" OTTER  
GOVERNOR

## OPINION

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CONTACT: Jon Hanian  
(208) 334-2100

# **IDAHO'S BUDGETING PROCESS HELPS AVOID FEDERAL-STYLE DYSFUNCTION, PARALYSIS**

*By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter*

Each year about this time I'm reminded once again how wise the framers of the Idaho Constitution were, and how lucky we are to live in a state where people understand the value of stability.

We recently closed the books on Idaho's 2013 budget year not only in the black but with enough extra to put more than \$85 million in the State Budget Stabilization Fund. That's one of the "rainy day" accounts from which we withdrew almost every dime to weather the Great Recession without cataclysmic impacts on State services.

Size and scope aside, those numbers contrast starkly with what increasingly appears to be our intractable, perhaps permanent federal budget mess. But for the most part it's not the product of Idaho legislators or the chief executive being any smarter or better at budgeting for an enterprise as large and diverse as government has become. It is, by and large, the result of a state process that more highly prizes efficiency, fiscal responsibility and the importance of predictability to individual taxpayers, their families, and employers.

That's why the Idaho Constitution – Article 7, Section 11 – requires us to consider, approve and balance our state budget. That's why we don't take on financial obligations that can turn into entitlements. And that's why we must carefully review, debate and specifically appropriate what we collect and expend – every year. About the only thing I might change is to schedule elections as close as possible to Tax Day, April 15, to help remind voters that political choices have direct consequences on their pocketbooks.

The federal government, by contrast, only appropriates about one-third of the federal budget – ever. Most of the rest is essentially on autopilot. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and some veterans programs, as well as the interest on our national debt, are not subjected to annual scrutiny by Congress. Those tax dollars are spent regardless of what we can actually afford. How you and I vote makes very little difference.

It is a system filled with opportunities for waste, fraud and abuse. Even the inherent civic virtue of our national leaders and the best intentions and tireless efforts of our own esteemed congressional delegation are of only marginal effect against such a process seemingly designed for failure and frustration.

Here in Idaho, even at the moments of our greatest internal divisions we enjoy a unity of purpose and clarity of principle regarding our budget that bureaucratic and partisan entropy will not permit on the federal level. Here, our budget debates have very real and direct meaning, and very real consequences.

There, even debates along the margins of our fiscal realities turn into sullen wars of attrition. Intransigence turns to fits of pique and counterproductive episodes of grandstanding that threaten essential roles of government but leave the fundamental problems to fester.

I believe as strongly as ever that the foundations of our national government are sound and resilient. We have within our Constitution and the genius of our people the ability to change our fiscal realities. If only we had the political will, the courage of our convictions, and a little more of the good sense that those of us in Idaho sometimes take for granted but for which we all should be eternally grateful.

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