

The political pulse

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The election eye . . .

Fisher entry muddies GOP governor race

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The formal entry Wednesday of Bernard Fisher, 54-year old Kuna farmer but known in the past for winning the Congressional Medal of Honor as the only U.S. Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War to do so, can't help but complicate the Republican gubernatorial contest.

It now means Fisher will vie against the two other Republican contenders, Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, Wilder onion grower, and House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, Twin Falls farmer and cattle feeder.

The 1978 primary winner, former House Speaker and a Blackfoot farmer, Allan F. Larsen, hasn't shut the door yet on his possible entry but the Fisher announcement likely will help close the door even more.

It brings misgivings to the majority in the Republican hierarchy who fear a bitter primary contest among three or more might weaken the winner for the struggle with Democratic Gov. John V. Evans in the general.

They point to the overcrowded field of six in 1978 which they feel brought a sharp split and weakened the nominee. Actually only the top three, Larsen, the winner; Vernon Ravenscroft, former state party chairman and legislator; and C. L. "Butch" Otter, former legislator and J.R. Simplot executive, were the only serious contenders.

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In a head-to-head contest and contrary to what most believe, Olmstead, viewed as the most conservative, likely would have won the primary over the more moderate Batt. Since Robert Smylie finished serving a 10-year term in 1967, the Republicans have never nominated a moderate gubernatorial candidate. They even chose Don Samuelson, a Sandpoint state senator, over Smylie in 1966. Samuelson's lack of leadership was so pronounced that Democratic Cecil D. Andrus knocked him out the following election, in 1970.

From this east Idaho view the Fisher appearance likely will harm Olmstead far more than Batt. Olmstead is frankly crestfallen at the late development as he was banking on winning substantially in east Idaho on what he felt was a more conservative image than Batt. He told this writer he hoped Fisher would not enter and he believed he would not once he found out the difficulties of campaign.

Batt, however, said he didn't believe the Fisher challenge will bring a split, adding he had no idea whether it would help or hurt him.

Batt, among the political activists, is considered a moderate except perhaps in the fiscal sector.

It's obvious that if Batt can get anywhere near an even split in east Idaho and Olmstead's home base in Twin Falls, he feels he will lead in the more populous Boise area and north Idaho for the primary victory.

Olmstead apparently is basing his appeal to the large conservative primary voters to gather substantial majorities in east Idaho and Twin Falls area, then running about even in the

Boise region and in North Idaho.

About the only drawback for Batt is the fact that Fisher comes from Kuna, located near Boise, where Batt hopes to run big. However, past elections show that geographical locations are not much a factor, as compared with political philosophies.

Fisher appears to be hoping for strong showing throughout South Idaho for the victory.

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Fisher's formal announcement in his first press conference here Wednesday indicates a sincere, rather modest candidate who could appeal to voters. This will depend on the type of campaign he conducts. He's a hard conservative.

His latest endorsement of the Moral Majority could win him the extreme right voters of which there are many but lose him the moderates and the less rigid conservatives.

It was no surprise that he favors Right to Work, and opposes Equal Rights Amendment, severance tax on minerals, abortion and any form of new taxation in his dedicated role in what he feels is a true conservative.

He also came out strongly for President Reagan's programs, adding he didn't understand why anyone would oppose them.

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Fisher will face two professional and capable candidates in the primary against Batt and Olmstead. Their political credentials are imposing as leaders in the state's political process.

Larry Jackson, Boise businessman, former legislator and who ran a rather poor fourth in the 1978 gubernatorial primary, said at Boise last week that the Fisher entry would bring a split among the Republicans and lose them the governorship. This assessment can be viewed with question.

The Idaho Republican Party under Chairman Dennis M. Olsen sought to enact a law that would require convention approval for state candidates. This was an obvious attempt to restrict a large number of candidates but the bill, after passing the Senate on a straight partyline vote, was buried in the House State Affairs Committee.

Fisher admits he has raised only a little over \$1,100 while Batt said his war chest has reached close to \$70,000 and Olmstead reported more than \$40,000. They each plan to raise \$200,000.

As if to stress his ultra conservative image, Rep. Gene Winchester, a fellow townsman and considered in legislative circles as somewhat a maverick right winger, accompanied him on his press tour. Winchester has been instrumental in encouraging Fisher to run and is apparently his leading advisor and campaign strategist.

It would now appear that Fisher, a devout Mormon, and with his admitted meager resources is banking on a strong hard conservative swell to propel him to victory. He feels apparently there are enough voters disenchanted with Batt and Olmstead to make this possible. He still needs money—lots of it to help. The ball is now in his court.