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## Pick for Interior Said to Show More Charm Than Substance

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho is well-liked as a down-to-earth guy. But some doubt his ability to get the job done, citing a list of unfinished plans.

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He rides motorcycles, battles a bad back, does a killer impersonation of fellow Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and sometimes forgets to balance his checkbook.

Even those who don't like his politics call him "Dirk," the way he prefers to be addressed. And they speak of him like he's the guy next door who just happens to be governor.

But the ready smile and neighborly style of Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne don't always get the job done, some supporters and critics say. They contend that the man President Bush has picked to succeed Gale A. Norton as secretary of the Interior often exhibits more charm than substance.

Fellow Republicans and business leaders say Kempthorne, 54, knows how to create consensus but is too politically cautious. Local Democrats and environmentalists say that

he is gifted at making people feel heard but that, at the end of the day, his loyalties lie squarely with development and corporate interests.

If confirmed, what kind of Interior secretary will Kempthorne be?

In the Idaho state capital, where he has been a major political player for two decades, many predict his performance will mirror that of his years as Boise mayor, U.S. senator and two-term governor -- a record of mixed success with a list of unfinished projects and a whole lot of people who refer to him as a good guy.

"His charisma carries him a long way. Even when we were at odds, he was very quick to approach our group with a smile and a handshake," said Roger Singer, the executive director of the local chapter of the Sierra Club from 1995 to 2004.

"He's very good at giving the ap-

pearance that he's listening closely to what you're saying," Singer said. "In the end, his votes have fallen along the conservative party line."

Singer cites two examples:

In the mid- to late 1990s, Kempthorne successfully brokered a deal -- protested by environmentalists -- allowing the military to expand a training ground into the Owyhee Canyonlands in southwestern Idaho. Kempthorne also succeeded in weakening federal protection of gray wolves, shifting control to the state.

Singer fears Kempthorne would continue his long campaign to water down the federal Endangered Species Act and would support oil-drilling in the Arctic and the sale of public lands to special-interest groups. Kempthorne, Singer said, has worked to overturn President Clinton's ban on building roads in wilderness areas.

"I'd like to give him the benefit of

the doubt in his new job,” Singer said, “but my fear is he’ll be closely aligned with Bush administration policies that have been detrimental to the environment.”

National environmental groups are harsher in their assessment. The League of Conservation Voters gave him a rating of 6 on a zero-to-100 scale.

Local political watchers view Kempthorne as a “middle of the road” Republican in an overwhelmingly conservative state. Among his critics are Republicans who say he isn’t conservative enough. But many Idaho Republicans are pleased that one of their own has been tapped to be part of the president’s Cabinet.

Former state Sen. Laird Noh, who led the Senate Resources and Environment Committee from the early 1980s to 2004, called Kempthorne “a good steward, a balanced steward” of the environment.

“He used considerable political skill to protect resources while also allowing for reasonable use of those resources,” the former senator said.

Noh, a Republican, credited Kempthorne with engineering an agreement with the Nez Perce Tribe over its claims to the waters of the Snake River, ending a decade of sometimes acrimonious debate. The compromise resolved the tribe’s water claims, preserved the state’s water rights and set protections for salmon and steelhead.

The agreement is seen as one of Kempthorne’s biggest accomplishments.

But Kempthorne’s most loyal supporters hail from his days as Boise mayor, between 1986 and 1993. He is largely credited for revitalizing a moribund downtown.

Don Brennan, a city councilman when Kempthorne was mayor, tells how Kempthorne took the initiative. It’s a story that Kempthorne likes to tell himself.

One day in 1986, the mayor assembled all the key players, including the City Council, in one room and told the group to finally make a decision on building the Boise Centre on the Grove, an open-air commercial plaza in the city’s core.

Kempthorne said the media were outside and anyone who wanted to admit failure could leave. An agreement was reached shortly after.

“The people in that room didn’t think they could get out,” said Brennan, a Democrat. Brennan said Kempthorne was most effective in his city role. Kempthorne’s successes as U.S. senator from 1993 to 1999, and as governor from 1999 to the present, have been fewer and harder-fought, Brennan said.

Kempthorne was born in San Diego and has lived in Idaho for 35 years. He earned a political science degree from the University of Idaho, where he was student body president as a junior. He and his wife, Patricia, have two grown children.

Before running for mayor, he worked as a public affairs manager for FMC Corp., a Philadelphia chemical company, and was executive vice president of the Idaho Home Builders Assn.

His election and reelection as governor came handily: He won the 1998 election by 68%, and four years later by 56%.

Kempthorne, who got to know Bush when both were governors, was considered a leading candidate to be the new administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in 2003. The job eventually went to a career administrator, Stephen L. Johnson, but Kempthorne remained on Bush’s radar. When the president visited Idaho last summer, the two went bike riding in the mountains.

Kempthorne’s popularity took some hits after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks when he barricaded the Statehouse and closed off several city blocks for nearly a year. A number of downtown businesses in this city of 185,000 suffered as a result of the closures. “It was a huge overreaction,” said Boise Mayor David H. Bieter, who held a town hall meeting on the issue.

In May of last year, Kempthorne bounced a couple of checks totaling \$111 to his hairstylist. The governor, who earns a salary and housing allowance of more than \$150,000, told the media that he and his wife had been very busy and that their finances had been drained by surgeries for his chronically bad back.

The mishap made the governor appear more down-to-earth to many Idahoans, just as his avid interest in Harley-Davidson motorcycles had.

Even his harshest critics -- including Spokane, Wash., Democrat and former Idahoan Tom Keefe, who calls Kempthorne “a pleasant man in a somewhat empty suit” -- often end their critiques with statements

like “That doesn’t mean I don’t like the man.”

Keefe said it wouldn’t surprise him if, after Kempthorne served as Interior secretary, the former governor became “a head lobbyist for the mining industry.” Mining and ranching interests have strongly endorsed Kempthorne.

Overriding disagreements with Kempthorne on economic and social matters is the sense among Idahoans that “one of our own is ready for the big leagues,” said political science professor Steve Shaw of Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho.

There’s great pride that another Idaho governor could follow former Gov. Cecil D. Andrus, Interior secretary under President Carter.

Shaw said some Idaho residents saw Kempthorne as “a photogenic man who isn’t much into doing the heavy, hard lifting of getting policies pushed through.”

Examples include Kempthorne’s unfinished campaign, which began when he was U.S. senator, to overhaul the Endangered Species Act; and his child welfare program, Generation of the Child, which critics say has fizzled.

Idaho legislators fear that Kempthorne’s \$34-million plan to improve Idaho parks and his \$1.6-billion highway project may fall by the wayside if the governor becomes too distracted by the Cabinet appointment process.

But what will probably carry the day for Kempthorne politically is his

knack for connecting with people.

Last year, Northwest Nazarene University awarded Kempthorne an honorary degree. After the reception, with the media and everybody gone, Shaw watched as Kempthorne knelt on the floor and chatted face-to-face at length with several small children.

Shaw said: “There’s something very human about the man.”