

Spending freely

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Marty Trillhaase

JEERS ... to former Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho. Remember Mr. Conservative? Mr. Balanced Budget Amendment?

Just before he retired Jan. 2, Craig delivered generous year-end bonuses to his staff, according to The Idaho Statesman's Erika Bolstad. Among them:

circle Former Craig state director Will Hart got an estimated \$14,000. Prior to that, the Web site LegiStorm.com says Hart was earning an estimated \$117,400 a year.

circle Former administrative assistant Patricia Olsen got \$36,000. Her previous base salary was about \$129,416 a year.

circle Former chief counsel Brooke Roberts got \$32,000. Her base salary was estimated at \$147,290.

circle Former chief of staff Mike Ware got \$27,000. Ware had been earning an estimated \$164,498.

Craig's staffers say this was money meant to ensure continuity of his staff. Craig opted to retire after he was arrested and pleaded guilty in a 2007 Minneapolis airport sex sting.

But not everybody does this. When the National Taxpayers Union looked at this issue in the House, it found one in five members awarded bonuses to staff. Rarely did any Capitol Hill staffer take home a bonus of more than \$10,000, the NTU says.

Oh, and if you don't like what Craig has done with your money? Too bad. He's out of office and answers to no one.

JEERS ... to Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. Doesn't he have anything better to do than grandstand on the Fort Hood massacre?

Last week, Risch tried to get his name in the newspapers by announcing he will ask a U.S. Army prosecutor to add a 14th murder charge against Major Nidal Malik Hasan.

"Both federal law and the Uniform Code of Military Justice allow for a murder charge when a person causes the death of an unborn child," Risch said in a press release. "One of the victims, Private Francheska Velez, was pregnant when she was killed and as a result, her child died as well."

Does that Army prosecutor have enough to do without fending off the unsolicited advice of a U.S. senator? Do you think the prosecutor already knows about the law and how it applies to the death of a pregnant woman? Who has a better grasp of the evidence in the case, the prosecutor at the scene or the senator in Washington?

And if Risch, a former Ada County prosecutor, was just trying to be helpful, why didn't he merely pick up the phone and have a private conversation? Here, he's issued a release announcing that he was "preparing a letter" to the Army prosecutor. Who is that meant to impress? The prosecutor or Risch's

voters back home?

This is precisely the kind of political interference that undermined public trust in the Justice Department under the Bush administration when several U.S. attorneys were fired because they were deemed insufficiently supportive of the White House and its allies.

And what happens now if the Army prosecutor ultimately files this 14th charge as Risch suggests? Who is going to be the first to accuse that official of playing politics?

CHEERS ... to House Assistant Democratic floor leader James Ruchti of Pocatello. Speaking Wednesday at the annual Associated Taxpayers of Idaho pre-legislative conference, Ruchti said lawmakers deserve some of the blame for Idaho's budget problems.

It's easy to blame the budget cuts on a faltering economy, and that's a big part of the problem. But lawmakers didn't help matters when they cut taxes twice on the eve of two recessions.

Just before the 2001-2003 downturn, Idaho lawmakers sliced income tax rates for wealthy families and corporations. At least one analysis says that move contributed to two-thirds of Idaho's budget woes during the subsequent recession.

In 2006, lawmakers cut property taxes by \$260 million and restored only \$210 million of it through a 20 percent boost in the sales tax. As the economy tanked, that tax shift aggravated funding shortages for public schools.

"There's millions of tax revenue dollars that we don't have now that we desperately need," Ruchti told the ATI. "My guess is the votes would have come out much differently if we knew then what we know now."

That's giving the anti-tax, anti-government, anti-education wing of the Idaho GOP a lot of credit, don't you think?

JEERS ... to Marie Bulgin. When will someone tell her to keep quiet. Oh, that's right. Someone already did - her superiors at the University of Idaho.

Bulgin can't seem to reconcile her affinity for the Idaho domestic sheep industry with her role as a scientist and head of the UI's Caine Veterinary Teaching and Research Center. Earlier this year, she assured the Idaho Legislature - which tilts toward the wool growers anyway - that domestic sheep do not transfer a deadly disease to wild bighorn sheep.

The body of scientific evidence, including work conducted at her own center, says otherwise. The 1994 Caine study found transmission occurred in separate cases in Nevada and Oregon. Bulgin says she never heard of the unpublished report. But others did. Among them was Bulgin's daughter Jeanne Bulgin, who performed tasks used in the review.

So in June, the UI suspended Marie Bulgin, who pledged "to not write or disseminate any information until such time as the charges filed against me have been concluded."

Apparently the pledge was good for about two months, because in August Bulgin gave an interview to the journal *The Shepherd: A Guide for Sheep and Farm Life*. In it, she repeats her stance that domestic sheep do not infect wild sheep.

"It's the bighorns' own pathogens that are killing them - not something they are picking up from domestic sheep or goats," Bulgin said.

Why doesn't Bulgin do the university a favor? Either leave the institution so she can express her opinion as an advocate or stick to the objective evidence? She can't do both. - M T.