

Today's lofty pledge is tomorrow's target

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Back in 2008, Republican Bill Sali was the incumbent and his challenger, Democrat Walt Minnick, was targeting Sali's spokesman Wayne Hoffman.

Hoffman was drawing a federal salary as Sali's congressional office press spokesman.

He was also working on Sali's campaign - and it was tough to tell when he was working for the taxpayers or whether he was campaigning at taxpayer expense, Minnick contended.

Now the situation is reversed. Minnick is the incumbent. And John Foster, Minnick's senior adviser and communications director, is drawing heat for doing the same thing - working as a spokesman for both the congressional office and Minnick's re-election campaign.

Ryan O'Barto, spokesman for Republican congressional candidate Vaughn Ward, is only too happy to call him on it: "I think something no one has asked the Minnick camp is why is a member of his congressional staff listed as the press contact for his campaign? This is someone who is getting paid with taxpayer funds and yet he is his campaign spokesperson? He also has been writing blog posts for Walt well after he was even elected. This is unacceptable and Walt Minnick needs to be held accountable for it. This is also something that the Idaho press went after Wayne Hoffman from Sali's campaign for doing."

Good luck proving any of this breaks the House rules. Congressional staffers can't perform campaign duties on the taxpayer's time - but they can volunteer their services off hours.

For press secretaries, the rules are even more forgiving because conversations with reporters often veer from policy to politics. In fact, you'll find spokespersons in other congressional offices, including, for instance, Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson, who help out the boss' re-election effort on their own time. Usually, it's a matter of common sense and ethics. If the conversation turns exclusively to politics, the press spokesman leaves the office, picks up another phone and logs the call on his private schedule.

Foster argues, correctly, that his boss raised the Hoffman issue in the heat of a campaign, not a year before the election when the campaign machinery is largely dormant. In other words, much if not most of Hoffman's attention was devoted to politics.

And with Hoffman, there were lots of questions about how he was spending his time - from the media and other candidates. In 2006, as a state employee, he found time to help with Sali's campaign as well as Tom Luna's successful bid for state superintendent of public instruction.

In his former career as one of Idaho's best newspaper bulldog reporters, Hoffman might have challenged many of those practices.

But nothing was proved. The only hard fact was that Hoffman held two jobs, one supported with taxes. He did not resign from Sali's congressional office to work in the political office.

Foster will settle things next month. He'll step down from Minnick's public staff to work full time on the Democrat's re-election committee - although he may work a few hours completing projects in the congressional office.

Maybe that's more than necessary. But his boss took a stand. Now he has to follow it or look like a hypocrite.

All of which should stand as a stark lesson to O'Barto. If his boss is successful next year, O'Barto has promised to keep the campaign and congressional press secretaries entirely separate. It may be expensive, impractical and far more than the rules mandate.

But you can bet the pledge O'Barto made in 2009 will be waved in his face in 2012. - M T.