

Picking on Idaho's defenseless millionaire

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Marty Trillhaase /Lewiston Tribune

Prominent Idaho Falls businessman Frank VanderSloot gave more than \$1 million toward a Super PAC supporting Republican Mitt Romney.

He is a national campaign finance co-chair for the GOP presidential hopeful.

For that, Barack Obama's re-election campaign added VanderSloot to a list of eight Romney mega-donors, and characterized VanderSloot as "litigious, combative and a bitter foe of the gay rights movement."

And a Democratic opposition research worker started digging around VanderSloot's history, including his divorces.

Then both the Internal Revenue Service and the Department of Labor slapped audits on him. The IRS wants to look at VanderSloot's 2008 and 2009 tax returns; the labor department is reviewing three temporary foreign workers VanderSloot employs at his Riverbend Ranch in southwestern Montana.

So the Obama administration is harassing one of Romney's top contributors. This story couldn't look any more damning for Obama's re-election campaign, could it?

VanderSloot isn't drawing a connection between his political involvement, his membership on an Obama campaign "enemies list" and the two audits. He doesn't have to.

Wall Street Journal Editorial Board member and columnist Kimberley A. Strassel did it for him.

"Did Mr. Obama pick up the phone and order the screws put to Mr. VanderSloot? Or - more likely - did a pro-Obama appointee or political hire or career staffer see that the boss had an issue with this donor, and decide to do the president an unasked-for election favor?" Strassel wrote last week. "Or did he or she simply think this was a duty, given that the president had declared Mr. VanderSloot and fellow donors 'less than reputable?' "

Then, on FoxNews, VanderSloot said: "The problem is the president made the list, and 61 days later I get the first letter. One has to ask: Is the fact I'm being shot at the result of having a target on my back? Was the list made with that intent?"

Idaho's mainstream media didn't rush to VanderSloot's defense. VanderSloot has a long record of trying to swamp his political opponents in the Gem State.

But, agreed the press, if these facts held up, it could pose a chilling effect on political contributions and free speech.

That's if.

VanderSloot is the only source for this story and the assumptions buttressing it. All the IRS will say that is VanderSloot's taxes are a confidential matter. For any IRS employee to talk about that would be a federal offense.

As for the Department of Labor inquiry, a staffer there says such matters typically are selected at random.

But don't dismiss the following:

- Absent the rhetorical enemies list, there is no pattern of political reprisals from the Obama administration. For that kind of thing, you have to look back to the George W. Bush administration's dismissal of seven U.S attorneys amid allegations they either had been too soft on Democrats or too harsh on Republicans - or the actual "enemies list" itself implemented during the Nixon presidency.
- As the founder and CEO of Idaho Falls-based Melaleuca Inc., VanderSloot is worth millions. That kind of wealth attracts tax scrutiny. Likewise, the labor department has an interest in reviewing how the H-2A program allows thousands of non-citizens to work temporarily in this country.
- If the IRS and the labor department didn't know their timing was, to use VanderSloot's word, "curious," both agencies were snoozing.

VanderSloot has a well-deserved reputation of giving as good as he gets. He has the financial and legal wherewithal to fight back. He has the willing ear of Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal and Fox News. Going after him now would cause grief to Obama's campaign without doing much to deter VanderSloot, who has already written his checks to Romney.

Besides, any flimsy, politically motivated pursuit of VanderSloot might land federal officials in front of an unsympathetic federal judge.

So how about another interpretation? Could it be that the IRS and labor department proceeded not because of VanderSloot's political connections but in spite of them? Doing anything else, both agencies concluded, would demonstrate that the government could be bullied. Talk about a chilling effect.

Or maybe not.

We're just asking. - M.T.