

Otter's CCA CYA

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. He reversed his earlier rejection of Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's plea for a criminal investigation into Corrections Corporation of America's mismanagement of the Idaho Correctional Center near Boise.

But it's an exercise in political CYA performed under duress.

CCA is a politically connected for-profit outfit that funneled \$20,000 in campaign cash to Otter since 2003. No other politician in the United States has received more. It has Otter's former chief of staff Jason Kreizenbeck for a lobbyist. For years, it put profits ahead of adequately staffing the Idaho prison. As inmate violence soared, ICC became known as the "gladiator school."

A year ago, The Associated Press discovered that CCA had falsified time cards to conceal chronic understaffing.

The disclosure kicked off a federal contempt of court citation against CCA and Otter's reluctant decision to bring ICC under state management. Meanwhile, Correction Director Brent Reinke asked the ISP to investigate.

Then came another bombshell: ISP Col. Ralph Powell - a political appointee answerable to Otter and whose expertise is traffic control, not investigations - said he concluded no crime had been committed. No detective was assigned. No report was issued.

Two weeks ago, Wasden urged Otter to order a criminal investigation.

Otter told Wasden to butt out.

Six days later, Otter's GOP primary election challenger, Sen. Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, sided with Wasden.

Tuesday, Otter gave in.

But it's too little. The governor wants to restrict the investigation to CCA's activities in 2012. This investigation should follow all leads - up to and including CCA's Nashville, Tenn., headquarters.

It's too late. The Board of Correction settled with CCA for \$1 million - after consultant KPMG's forensic accounting pointed toward 26,000 hours of mandatory guard posts left unstaffed.

And it's tainted. ISP's top cop already has drawn his own conclusions. Can the public really trust Powell's subordinates to ignore that?

At minimum, put Wasden in charge of a team of ISP investigators.

Or better yet, form a federal-state task force. This case screams for impartiality, credibility and a large checkbook.

U.S. Attorney Wendy J. Olson can deliver all three.

CHEERS ... to Wasden. This isn't the first time Idaho's three-term attorney general has put principle ahead of politics - or even his own self-interests. Shortly after taking office in 2003, he rebuffed lawmakers who wanted him to undermine the tribal gaming initiative voters had passed the year before.

Then he sued his fellow Republicans on the State Land board when they violated their constitutional obligation to impose market-based rents on families renting cabin sites on state endowment lands.

Wasden also had the temerity to tell Tea Party lawmakers that nullifying Obamacare was a violation of the Constitution and their own oaths of office.

But jumping into the CCA scandal is something altogether different.

He put Otter on the spot, not on a matter of politics or policy, but over a question of criminal behavior by a corporation with ties to the governor's office.

Nor was this a gentle nudge. Wasden acted in front of everyone on the eve of Otter's bid for a third term.

That took nerve. It took conviction. And it was decisive.

JEERS ... to House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star. To Moyle, Idaho's schools, colleges and health care programs still have too much money. So he's raiding the treasury and handing over more goodies to the well-off.

Moyle wants income tax rates sliced to levels not seen since the Great Depression. Over time, the top corporate and individual rate would drop from 7.4 percent to 6.8 percent.

Estimated cost: \$125 million. That's on top of \$475 million in tax breaks Moyle and his fellow legislators have passed since 2000. It's a big reason why schools are struggling to recover. And without a tax increase, they may not.

Moyle says cutting taxes will expand the economy. His own Office of Performance Evaluations says otherwise. Depriving the state of good schools and services would "decrease Idaho's competitiveness in the long term," OPE said.

Idaho now has the second-lowest tax burden in the U.S. If low taxes spurred growth, how come we're choking on low-wage jobs?

But who cares about low-income workers? Certainly not Moyle. This is a rich person's tax break.

Someone making \$30,000 a year saves a mere \$13. But the fellow earning \$300,000 saves \$1,633.

CHEERS ... to State Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston. Because they would rather waste lives and taxes than implement Obamacare, Gov. Otter and the GOP-led Legislature refuse to extend Medicaid to about 100,000 impoverished adults. So Idaho taxpayers will spend \$90 million in state and local health programs for the poor. And during the course of the year, as many as 600 Idahoans will die prematurely for lack of medical care.

If you want to know what Idaho's politics are costing you over time, check out Rusche's Feb. 14 newsletter. As of then, 20 Idaho lives and \$8 million had been lost.

JEERS ... to Sen. Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa. He's sponsoring the National Rifle Association's bill to put concealed weapons in the hands of college students.

While chairing the Senate State Affairs Committee last week, McKenzie gave the NRA 40 minutes to speak in favor of his bill. But when it was time for Boise Police Chief Mike Masterson to give the rebuttal, McKenzie shut down the hearing.

Tuesday, as the Senate was debating McKenzie's bill, Democratic Leader Michelle Stennett of Ketchum asked the sponsor to yield for a question.

In a rare breach of decorum, McKenzie declined. Stennett is no partisan bomb thrower and her question was a reasonable one: How exactly do you define a concealed weapon?

OK, Sen. McKenzie. Answer this one, will you:

How do you define arrogance? - M.T.