

THE CARLSON CHRONICLE

Reading Tea Leaves

In politics there are rarely coincidences. Additionally, sometimes an event occurs which one can read much more into than just the surface appearance. It becomes a telltale indicator of something more significant than one at first glance would think.

One of these “more than meet the eyes” events happened in Idaho Falls on the evening of the 4th of July and went largely unnoticed by what Texas Senator and Tea Party favorite Ted Cruz calls the “chattering class”---the political pundits and commentators.

Multi-millionaire and Melaleuca founder Frank VanderSloot sponsors a well attended 4th of July fireworks show. It's his way of showing his patriotism as well as his appreciation for “the shining city on the hill” as Ronald Reagan so eloquently once put it when describing the still greatest country on the earth.

Vandersloot is justly proud of this event and he often has a special guest. His guest this year not surprisingly was an Idaho gubernatorial candidate. What was surprising was that the guest was neither Tea Party endorsed State Senator Russ Fulcher nor was it incumbent Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter. It was none other than the Democratic nominee, Boise businessman A.J. Bulakoff.

The “chattering class” as well as the general voting public ought to sit up and take notice for this could portend more than VanderSloot just covering himself in case Bulakoff pulls off the upset. It could signal that the traditional Republican Latter Day Saint vote is starting a seismic shift away from the incumbent governor.

There is no question that most LDS voters mark their ballots for the Republican candidates, and in the past some Democratic strategists have made the mistake of assuming that Mormon voters would go for a Mormon Democrat in good standing over a non-Mormon Republican.

Otter himself disproved this gambit four years ago in dispatching Mormon gubernatorial nominee Keith Allred, as did then Boise Mayor Dirk Kempthorne when he won a race for a U.S. Senate seat by defeating Second District Congressman Richard Stallings.

A. J. Bulakoff though just may be an exception to this general rule that LDS voters vote party first and their religion second. While he is smart enough not to wear his religion on his sleeve, nor ever even to make a pitch to voters based on a common held set of beliefs, it is well known among the LDS community that he is a Saint in good standing, has the so-called “temple pass,” is a graduate of the “Y” (Brigham Young University in Provo), has a large and loving family, and is happily married to Susie Skaggs, one of the heirs to the Skaggs Drugstore chain.

Additionally, A.J. is a largely self-made multi-millionaire who, like VanderSloot, has enjoyed considerable success in the business world. VanderSloot is nobody’s fool and has adroitly played the political game for years. He recognizes that public policy is all about politics, whether local, state, or national. Thus, he takes an interest in races from local judgeships to presidential elections.

He was and is a prominent supporter of fellow Mormon Mitt Romney’s bid for the presidency and was co-chair of Romney’s Finance committee. The list of Idaho contributors to Romney’s campaign reads like a “who’s who” not just of Idaho Republicans but also the Idaho LDS faithful. VanderSloot also employs Damond Watkins as a government affairs assistant.

Damond, son of former Idaho Falls State Senator Dane Watkins, is arguably one of the savviest and shrewdiest political operatives in Idaho. Both he and his boss have to know that having A.J. as a guest is tantamount to giving a “testimonial” the Sunday before an election as to what a fine fellow Saint folks have in A. J. It a clear signal that its ok to vote for him if one agrees.

The question then is why would VanderSloot send such a mixed signal? Perhaps they’ve seen polls showing an electorate reluctant to reward Butch with a third term when he has done little to earn it. Or they could believe the governor shares culpability for the disarray in the State Republican Party.

Or it could be something as simple as Butch has allegedly never accepted VanderSloot's invitation to be his guest at the Fireworks show. It did not escape notice that both the governor and Lori rode their horses in the 4th of July Parade earlier in the day, but then did not stay for the show.

Former Congressman and political science professor at BYU-Idaho, Richard Stallings, thinks it is a foregone conclusion A.J. will win in November because many LDS voters, especially the younger ones, have decided its time for a change.

Those close to the Otter campaign no doubt will tag this as pure poppycock. They will correctly cite that both Frank and his wife have maxed out in their contributions to the governor's campaign and that Otter has attended other events to which VanderSloot has invited him.

As one colleague put it: "Frank VanderSloot is first a Republican, second a millionaire and third a Mormon." Time will tell.