

Scratching an itch

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to freshman state Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard. She just wrapped herself in the symbol of racism and slavery - the Confederate Battle Flag.

Literally.

Consider the timing - July 25 at Priest River Timber Days:

- As in more than a month after the massacre of nine black churchgoers in Charleston, S.C., by an alleged assassin who posed with the battle flag and posted a racist screed jarred the Old South into reality.
- As in more than two weeks after South Carolina Gov. Nikki R. Haley and that state's Legislature removed the flag from the Statehouse grounds, providing the nation a ray of hope toward racial reconciliation.

In case you missed it, Scott made sure to drape a campaign banner - with her name and title in life-size letters - beneath her.

In case you missed it, Scott posted a photo of the event on her Facebook page.

"Protecting and promoting our freedom of speech is an honor," she wrote.

Free speech?

Hardly. This is about judgment and sensitivity from an official elected to represent everybody - including people for whom that flag telegraphs an unmistakable message of hate. What was she thinking?

That the Confederate Battle Flag is a cultural icon?

Make that flimsy argument in the South, if you want. That flag never flew over the territory or the state of Idaho.

Unfortunately, the battle flag occupies a place in Idaho history. The last prominent northern Idahoan who displayed it publicly was Richard Butler, whose band of Aryan Nations gave the state the sordid reputation as a hotbed of racism it's still trying to shake a generation later.

Why, Rep. Scott?

What itch are you scratching here?

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. He refused to throw red meat to anti-abortion rights extremist David Ripley - executive director of Idaho Chooses Life - and the 27 Idaho Republican lawmakers who want the state to launch an investigation of Planned Parenthood.

Of course, these lawmakers are pro-life until birth. Half of them voted against the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act. Had they prevailed, they would have disrupted the state's ability to collect and distribute about \$205 million worth of support checks among 183,000 Idaho children.

Among them: Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood, Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, Rep. Ron Mendive, R-Coeur d'Alene, and Rep. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg.

For Otter, getting in line might have been the path of least resistance. Planned Parenthood's public image took a hit when a series of edited, surreptitiously shot videos suggested the organization profits from the sale of fetal tissues. In fact, as the New York Times' Jackie Calmes noted this week, investigations are underway in Texas, South Carolina, Arizona, Kansas, Missouri and Ohio.

Read through Ripley's list of inquiries. Even if every allegation he makes against Planned Parenthood's clinics in Boise, Meridian and Twin Falls were true, no crime would be committed. The disposal or use of body tissue is a private matter between patient and physician. It's not the state's business.

Just the same, an investigation would have harassed one of the few places in Idaho that provide low-income women with health care services.

So Otter declined.

"Since there is no evidence that a crime has been committed, there are no grounds for a legal investigation," he wrote.

Good for him.

JEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. He has sponsored measures to place federal lands under state and local management - on a pilot project basis. But Labrador has stopped short of embracing efforts to transfer those lands to state ownership.

Until now.

On Tuesday, Labrador will attend what is billed as "an evening with friends in support of the Western Landmark Foundation."

Former state Sen. - and recent GOP gubernatorial hopeful - Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, is hosting the event at his home.

"Refreshments will be served, and we will 'pass the hat' around to anyone interested in donating to the Western Landmark Foundation," Fulcher wrote.

The foundation is Idaho County Commission Chairman Jim Chmelik's tax-exempt nonprofit entity underwriting his efforts to persuade county officials across the country to claim the national forests and rangelands.

It's a dubious idea. After two years of study, an Idaho legislative task force headed by Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, and former Rep. - and now Secretary of State - Lawrence "Boss" Denney, R-Midvale, abandoned the idea of suing the federal government into relinquishing those lands.

Promoting this premise was Chmelik's acolyte, Utah State Rep. Ken Ivory, who uses collections to his American Lands Council to draw a \$115,000 family income.

After spending \$90,000 on its own attorney, the Winder-Denney task force found Ivory's legal theory bogus.

Congress will never go along. The public doesn't support it. And even if the state acquired these lands, it could not afford to manage them and fight fires. The net result would be a sell-off to the highest bidder.

That could explain Jim Seckler's report in Sunday's Lake Havasu City, Ariz., News-Herald - which broke the story of Chmelik's activity earlier this summer: "The commissioner (Chmelik) said petroleum executives Charles and David Koch are also interested in the state land transfer efforts, possibly contributing millions of dollars."

Why is Labrador - who as a member of Congress should be careful about where he lends his name and prestige - now getting involved with this discredited cause?

JEERS ... to Lewiston City Councilor Ged Randall. On Monday, he tried to pull \$20,000 from the city's support of the Lewiston Civic Theatre - in an attempt to restore funding for Valley Vision.

As the Tribune's Joel Mills reported, Randall said the city has no business supporting the arts. Let the theater get by on its own.

That's a shortsighted view. Nobody wants taxpayers shouldering the entire burden. But it should play a role.

Arts improve a community's quality of life and its ability to compete for economic development. If you doubt it, look at cities with both thriving economies and cultural activities.

Fortunately, Randall was on the losing side of a 1-6 vote. - M.T.