

# Otter's slush fund shakes down corporate Idaho

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idahoans have stopped listening to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. A severe case of lame duckhood has settled in. After barely hanging on in last year's GOP primary against an underfunded opponent, the third-term governor's job approval rating of 47 percent puts him in Barack Obama territory.

Nobody even pretends Otter wields much influence over the Legislature. He tends to sit back, wait for what arrives on his desk and then takes credit.

And it's been almost a decade since conservatives ditched Otter's Republican Party chairman, Kirk Sullivan, and took control of the GOP machinery from the chief executive.

So what's Otter's solution?

Shaking down corporate Idaho.

With wife Lori, the governor has established Otter PAC. This political action committee's stated mission: "All contributions to Otter PAC go back into the community to directly help local, county and state races, including the election of precinct committeemen."

And you thought it was bad enough when former Gov. Dirk Kempthorne maintained the fiction of waging a re-election campaign in 2003 and thereafter simply to raise more money than

Idaho's campaign finance limits allowed. At least the financially challenged Kempthorne was using those dollars for more modest goals - such as hair cuts and rib dinners.

If Otter were maintaining his campaign fund, he could accept no more than \$5,000 from any one source. But Otter, who closed that account, is going after big bucks. PACs can accept any sum of money from any source.

For example, Otter PAC's invitation to the Jan. 9 Governor's Dinner is selling tickets in lots:

- For \$10,000, you become a "Governor's Platinum Sponsor," receive 10 tickets, two reserved tables and a photo opportunity.
- \$5,000 gets you "Governor's Gold Sponsor" status, six tickets, one reserved table and a photo opportunity.
- If you want to donate \$2,500, you can be a "Governor's Silver Sponsor" and get four tickets.
- The cheap seats - a "Governor's Bronze Sponsor" - go for \$1,500. That's two tickets and a photo.

Potentially, Otter could funnel these dollars directly into campaign contributions - but that limits him to \$1,000 per legislative candidate.

However, the art of SuperPacs involves so-called independent expenditures. As long as Otter PAC does not coordinate with a candidate's campaign, it can spend freely promoting his cause.

The leverage is enormous. Imagine you're a lawmaker, county commissioner or even precinct captain being targeted - or helped along - by Otter PAC.

No wonder it's being dubbed "Butch's vendetta fund" in some circles.

It's a good bet some lobbyists are grumbling being hit up for another contribution. What choice do they have? Otter sits atop the state executive branch. That means government contracts. Regulations. Appointments. And ultimately, the gubernatorial veto.

Who casually says no to that?

Ironically, this new round of corporate pay-to-play comes from a governor whose fingers bear the scars of having been scorched by corporate cronyism.

His pals at Corrections Corporation of America transformed the understaffed Idaho Correctional Center into a "gladiator school" of inmate violence, bilked taxpayers for at least 26,000 hours of unworked shifts, and embarrassed Otter's Board of Correction and Idaho State Police.

Otter's buddy and former Department of Administration Director Mike Gwartney had switched the massive Idaho Education Network contract to a corporate ally - a move that undermined federal funding before a state judge declared the entire operation illegal.

Part of the reason former Transportation Director Pamela Lowe walked away with a \$750,000 settlement check was her claim that she got fired because she would not play ball with Otter's corporate backers.

And before he got bounced as State Tax Commission chairman, former Otter campaign operative Royce Chigbrow was caught playing favorites.

Now in his last term with no more campaigns to wage, Otter is sufficiently independent to leave all that behind and pursue an agenda on behalf of all Idahoans.

Instead, he has chosen to make the next three years indistinguishable from the preceding nine. - M.T.