

Otter's Jedi mind trick: Look here, not there

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter just employed the best Jedi mind trick since Obi-wan Kenobi distracted a pair of stormtroopers in the 1977 film "Star Wars" by telling them "These are not the droids you're looking for."

In discussing his new super political action committee - Otterpac - you can almost hear the governor intoning: "Look here. Do not look there."

Look here, Otter says, at how he intends to spend the money Otterpac collects.

He'll use it to offer campaign support to his friends in the Legislature.

He might get involved with contests for precinct leaders, the people who control the Idaho Republican Party.

Federal campaigns are out.

He has no intention of funneling any money toward Democrats.

Nor will this be Otter's vendetta slush fund.

"I'm not going to go out and take revenge," he told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "This is more a positive attitude, and a positive effort."

Look here at the response from Bonneville County Republican Central Committee Chairman Doyle Beck and GOP Region 7 Chairman Bryan Smith - who are sounding the alarms to the Idaho Falls Post Register's Bryan Clark

Beck and Smith were on one side of last year's GOP civil war; Otter was on the other.

Look here at what Boise State University Professor emeritus Jim Weatherby told Clark: "[Attorney General] Lawrence Wasden said during the primary election last year that it was a fight for the heart and soul of the party. ...This looks like it may be the beginning of chapter two."

And look here at the cuddly cartoon otter character first lady Lori Otter suggested as an emblem for Otterpac.

"It is so cute," Otter told Russell. "Where's that been 25 elections ago? I might have won the one that I lost. I could have been 25 instead of 24-and-1."

Look not at that sage of Idaho politics, former Secretary of State Ben "Obi-wan" Ysursa, to drag your focus where your eyes resist heading.

Such as the fact that by forming a super PAC, the governor of the Gem State is no longer bound by campaign finance laws. As long as he was a candidate for re-election, Otter could take no more than \$10,000 from any one source in any election cycle.

Look not at the rules that say, now that he is cruising toward retirement and his campaign account is officially closed, Otter can accept any amount from any source - corporations included - into his political action committee.

"This really is a precedent-setting endeavor," Ysursa told Russell.

Look not at Otter's disruption of the normal course of events. At this point, contributors would be coalescing around their choices for Otter's successor in 2018. Instead, they're now drawn back into Otter's cash machine.

Don't ask what would motivate Idaho's political heavy hitters to give more money to a governor who is never running for office again.

Would it be his ability to veto any bill the Legislature passes?

Is it his control over the state budget process?

Are these political campaign contributors interested in Otter's ability to make appointments to positions large and small scattered throughout state government?

Or even his influence over the regulatory arm of the state's executive branch?

Is there something they expect from Otter if they donate to his new political action committee? Or is it something they fear if they do not?

Look not at the recent confluence of campaign cash and Otter administration scandals.

Corrections Corporation of America donated \$19,000 to Otter's campaigns, and the company remained in charge of the violence-plagued Idaho Correctional Center until it was caught bilking taxpayers for phantom workers.

Otter's former Department of Administration Director Mike Gwartney steered the \$60 million Idaho Education Network contract away from the successful bidder, Syringa Network LLC and to Qwest (now CenturyLink) - a move that disrupted federal funding and then voided the entire project. Could the fact that CenturyLink contributed \$35,000 to Otter's campaigns have something to do with it?

Look not at a governor attuned to the priorities of his corporate allies - ongoing tax relief - and his deaf ear to the needs of public education, college students, public employees and the 78,000 low-income Idahoans desperate for Medicaid coverage.

As this all plays out during a time of spirituality, let us offer one hope:

May the force be with us. - M.T.