

What's a scandal among political allies?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It must take a lot to get black-balled in Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's administration.

Take Corrections Corp. of America, for instance.

This is a company that has bedeviled Otter for the better part of three years.

Under its \$29 million contract, it so mismanaged the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise that escalating inmate-on-inmate violence attracted civil rights lawsuits and earned the place its "gladiator school" moniker

Before it was done, CCA had bilked the state for unworked staff shifts, drawn a contempt of court citation from a federal judge and forced Otter to abandon his ideological bent toward privatizing prisons.

Once Otter's hand-picked members of the Board of Correction sent CCA packing, the state couldn't interest another private company into coming into Idaho and cleaning up the mess. So Idaho's taxpayers discovered it was just as cheap - if not cheaper - to have the state manage the renamed Idaho State Correctional Center.

Before it left Idaho last year, however, the private prison contractor got its licks in by leaving behind a malfunctioning communications system it refused to fix.

When trouble came, Otter could find no place to hide.

The prison contractor contributed \$20,000 toward his campaigns since 2006.

His former chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, joined a firm that lobbied for CCA.

Otter's staff and correction board appointees agreed to settle the unworked staffing issue with CCA for \$1 million - far less than some believe the state lost.

The governor's appointee to run the Idaho State Police - Col. Ralph Powell - somehow forgot to tell anybody he hadn't followed through with a requested criminal investigation.

Then U.S. Attorney Wendy Olson and the FBI stepped in.

So Otter took a beating last fall when his Democratic rival, A.J. Balukoff, used the prison scandal as a central theme for his campaign television advertising. Later, Balukoff and Libertarian gubernatorial nominee John Bujak ganged up on Otter on the issue during an Oct. 30 debate broadcast on Idaho Public Television.

Even after his re-election, Otter had to wait another seven months before Olson concluded the governor's mishandling of the whole affair did not meet the federal definition of public corruption.

Yet, it turns out Otter has not stopped doing business with CCA.

As Rebecca Boone of the Associated Press noted Wednesday, Idaho taxpayers provide nearly \$4.5 million to the prison contractor. In exchange, it houses about 210 Idaho inmates at the Kit Carson Correctional Center in Colorado.

That yielded two Boise Democrats - Reps. John Gannon and Mat Erpelding - the opportunity to make some political hay.

"In view of revelations from the United States attorney investigation and the entire history of the relationship, we believe the department needs to develop and implement a plan to completely get out of the private prison business," Gannon and Erpelding said.

Caught in the crossfire is Management Training Corp., which is paid nearly \$10 million a year to operate the 432-bed Correctional Alternative Placement Program near Boise. Even CCA's critics give MTC passing grades.

At least, it's operating in Idaho. Sending Idaho inmates to a CCA-managed prison two states away deprives them of access to friends and family - and could undermine their chances of being successfully rehabilitated.

So why didn't Otter move long ago to bring those inmates home and divorce his administration from CCA? Why not avoid the inevitable rumors about a \$4.5 million contract today leading to another CCA-managed Idaho prison tomorrow?

Then again, why are you surprised? This is the same governor who in more than eight years in office has yet to fire anyone. - M.T.