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The Salt Lake Tribune

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Legislators' lapel pin signals a politician is packing heat

By **Robert Gehrke**
The Salt Lake Tribune

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The ubiquitous lapel pins that legislators wear can express a lot of things - support for a college, for teachers, for cancer research, or for the troops.

One pin - an innocuous looking red oval with a gold, six-pointed star in the center - has its own special message: I'm packing a gun.

A handful of lawmakers and several of the sergeants-at-arms that guard the doors at the Capitol have sported the pin this session, a unique code among the concealed weapons crowd, and one that they are squeamish or evasive about discussing or even acknowledging.

"I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you," joked Rep. Curtis Oda, R-Clearfield, when asked about his pin. When pressed, his story was that a friend who was "sort of affiliated" with law enforcement wasn't doing well and had a bunch of the pins and gave them to several members.

"It was given to me by the Highway Patrol," said Sen. Mark Madsen, R-Lehi. "It just symbolizes

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Pins with a gold star inside a red oval, worn by Rep. Curtis Oda, R-Clearfield, and some other Utah legislators, indicate that they carry concealed weapons.

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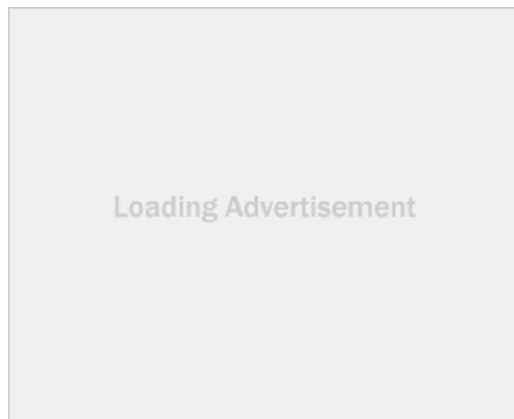
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support. I was given an award a couple years ago."

Regardless of whether Madsen got an award from the Highway Patrol, that's not exactly what the pin means. He declined to discuss his explanation Monday.

It's an open secret that a significant number of the lawmakers - easily over 10 percent of the 104-member body - have concealed weapons permits and many, at least on occasion, have their weapon at their side. Most, but not all, wear the pin, but it is strictly voluntary.

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members were carrying.

The pins serve as subtle reminders of the commitment that many lawmakers have to the issue of gun rights - to a point that is curious to some of their colleagues.

"Sometimes it feels like we're in a parallel universe. It's strange how some people view gun rights" said Rep. Phil Riesen, D-Holladay. "They should be everywhere in their opinion, and they should be out in the open and everyone should be given a horse and a pair of chaps to go with it."

Rarely has the pistol-packing at the Capitol become an issue, but in 2005, it nearly ended in a dead mascot, when the Utah Jazz Bear surprised House members by bursting into the chamber and firing off a confetti cannon. While other representatives were startled and confused, Oda instinctively went for his gun.

During a recent legislative field trip through Davis County, the lawmakers' tour bus had to make a stop so that Oda, Madsen, Wimmer and Sen. Howard Stephenson, R-Draper, could check their weapons when they reached an oil refinery, which is a secure facility.

This session, gun permit holders such as Oda and Madsen have sponsored several bills to reinforce the rights of the concealed weapons holders.

"Legislators are considered targets, sometimes," said Oda. Two weeks ago, a number of lawmakers got an e-mail that suggested they should be tried for treason and executed.

"You don't know. . . . It's just the fact that I'd rather be prepared. The officers here are great, but they can't be right there next to you."



"We're not directing them to wear any pin or any identifier or anything like that," said Utah Highway Patrol Lt. Barton Blair, who helps coordinate security at the Capitol.

And as the session has worn on, fewer and fewer members are wearing the pins.

"I had one for a while, but then I stopped wearing it because everyone knows what it is," said Rep. Carl Wimmer, R-Herriman, a former police officer. But does he still carry? "Oh, heck yeah," he said.

Last year, Rep. Craig Frank, R-Pleasant Grove, teased readers on his blog when he posted a picture of the pin concealed weapons carriers were wearing then - a half-blue, half-red pin with a star - and challenged them to guess what it meant.

In another post, Frank posted pictures of the guns that

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