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Popkey: Resigned to its dysfunction, Risch loves the Senate

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Jim Risch

STATESMAN FILE

Idaho Sen. Jim Risch celebrated his 70th birthday Friday, content in his likely re-election in 2014 to another six years where he can fine-tune his expertise on the Middle East and North Africa.

“You know, I really enjoy this job. I really like this job,” Risch said last week, saying it’s a breeze compared to the seven months he served as governor in 2006. “Governor will wear you down. You can’t do that job permanently. This you can do ad infinitum.”

Home for a Senate recess that included a visit with the Statesman editorial board, Risch was remarkably passive about the failure of Congress to deal with the country’s problems, starting with a \$16 trillion debt.

“I can’t explain to you how dysfunctional it is back there,” Risch said, predicting it will take a catastrophe for the national legislature to tackle its responsibilities. “They’re really not bad when it comes to crisis. If there’s a war, if there’s, you know, like the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, those kinds of crises seem to bring people together.”

Rather than stick his neck out like his Idaho GOP colleagues — Sen. Mike Crapo and Reps. Mike Simpson and Raul Labrador — Risch has avoided leadership on the debt crisis or immigration.

The biggest splash of his four-plus years came last month, when he was the voice of Republicans vowing a filibuster aimed at stalling votes on gun legislation, a sure-fire base builder for re-election.

Risch also is proud of employing a temporary block of President Barack Obama’s nomination of Sally Jewell as Interior secretary. The tactic was meant to persuade the administration to embrace Gov. Butch Otter’s plan to keep sage grouse off the endangered species list.

“If you’ve got a low tolerance for frustration with the governing process this isn’t the job for you,” Risch said. “You’ve got to learn to do the best you can, get what you can and move on.”

Risch touts his role as the top Republican on the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs, which tracks North Africa and the Middle East. That’s meant a lot of overseas trips for the senator and his staff.

On Syria, he says, “the president does not have good options,” because supporting the rebellion against Syrian President Bashar Assad will mean “you’re going to be having to sidle up to al-Qaida and some others that are not-so-savory characters.”

The last Idaho senator to take such an interest in foreign affairs was Democrat Frank Church, who chaired the full committee and led the passage of the Panama Canal treaty. Church, after 24 years, was defeated in 1980 in significant part because Idahoans thought he’d caught “Potomac fever” and lost touch with Idaho.

Risch’s conservative voting may inoculate him from such a malady. But to hear him wax eloquent about life in the Senate makes one wonder if he risks being branded as a dilettante.

With his wife, Vicki, at his side, Risch boasted about her membership on the board of Ford’s Theater, where the couple entertain themselves “relatively frequently.” Last year, Mrs. Risch chaired the luncheon for Michelle Obama, organized by Senate spouses. Their condo is on Pennsylvania Avenue, Risch said, allowing the pleasure of spectating at various misguided protests.

Despite the failure of the Senate to agree on matters vital to the nation’s future, everybody gets along just swell, Risch reports.

“You hear about this toxic atmosphere,” he said, but it’s not like that when senators and their spouses get together. “We talk about our kids, we talk about sports. ... Socially, the people are incredibly, incredibly civil to each other.”

Risch brushes off criticism the Senate takes too much time off from Washington. “There’s nothing happening when we’re back there and there’s nothing happening when we’re not back there. What’s the difference?”

He chortles at the toothless threats of Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., to make the Senate work weekends. Said Risch, who spent about two decades as a leader in the Idaho Senate: “Can you imagine if I would have stood up on the floor as the majority leader and said, ‘We’re going to work this Saturday’ and then not do it?”

Risch is nostalgic about his 22 years in the state Senate, 5 1/2 years as lieutenant governor and brief stint as governor. He wishes he could click his heels and transport 105 Idaho lawmakers to Washington. “Put them in charge and they’d straighten this thing out in a couple few months,” he said. “They’ve got common sense. They can understand these things and they actually do stuff.”

What I find odd about Risch’s blithe spirit is how easily he’s adapted after a lifetime of making things happen.

“When you wake up in the morning and you’re governor they hand you a plate and it’s pretty full and they say, ‘Eat this.’ And you’ve got to eat what’s on the plate.

“That’s one of the differences with this job. You can do a lot more of what you want to do. There’s 100 senators, 435 congressmen; we all have our own ideas, our own passions in life. We all have our own interests and you can pursue them.”

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