

Crisis in Washington, Labrador flies home

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador is the face of the GOP insurrection that has triggered the latest government shutdown - and, potentially, debt ceiling - crisis.

With good reason.

At the start of the year, he was among 16 House Republicans who withheld their support from House Speaker John Boehner.

By summer, he was among 80 Republicans who signed North Carolina Congressman Mark Meadows' letter threatening to close the government unless Obamacare was blocked.

Then he joined 150 co-sponsors of Georgia Rep. Tom Graves' bill to take that step - a measure that ultimately forced Boehner's hand.

Plus you can't swing a dead cat without bumping into Labrador. Anytime there's a story about the government shutdown, he's a go-to source.

There he was on "Meet the Press" last week.

Pick up a copy of the New York Times. You'll find him quoted as the voice of the shutdown contingent. Elsewhere, Labrador gets noticed by Bloomberg and the Washington Post.

Labrador is everywhere.

Except where he's supposed to be.

Friday, while House members continued to battle their way out of a budget impasse, Labrador boarded a flight home to Boise. He returned to Washington, D.C., Monday.

Friday, when the House voted 244 to 164 to restore funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, Labrador was among 23 AWOL members.

Likewise on Saturday morning, when the House unanimously voted to promise back pay to furloughed workers when the government reopens, Labrador was among 11 Democratic and 13 Republican no-shows.

That makes Labrador one of only eight House Republicans who prompted the shutdown mess and then felt no obligation to at least face the music this weekend.

Just about every other government shutdown ringleader - among them, Justin Amash, R-Mich., Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., Steve King, R-Iowa, and Marsha

Blackburn, R-Tenn. - as well as mainstream Republicans such as Labrador's Idaho seat mate, Mike Simpson, showed up for work.

"Rep. Labrador had to attend to some family matters over the weekend and needed to come home Friday night," said spokesman Todd Winer. "He had not been home for two weeks and is expected to be in D.C. for the next two weeks."

But these are not routine procedural votes and this is no ordinary time. Federal workers are lingering without a source of income. Government programs are in limbo. The economy is suffering.

If the weekend floor votes were inconsequential, inconvenient or both, why did virtually all of Labrador's colleagues remain at their posts? Why was Labrador among the two dozen who felt entitled to leave?

Giving Labrador the benefit of the doubt for one weekend, it still doesn't answer why his overall absentee rate remains so high.

A year ago, his Democratic opponent Jimmy Farris forced Labrador to acknowledge missing 4.7 percent of floor votes up to that point was poor.

According to GovTrack, Labrador's absentee rate eclipsed Simpson's, which was at 2.9 percent, as well as Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, at 2.2 percent, and Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, at 1.5 percent.

It was also higher than his predecessors. When he served in the House, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter missed 1.7 percent. Former Congressman Bill Sali, R-Idaho, was gone 1.2 percent of the time. Former Congressman Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, missed 1.9 percent.

"I don't think it's acceptable," Labrador told the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey last year. "Of course if my son gets sick, I'll miss as many votes as I have to miss. But, no, I think I can get that down. The people of Idaho hired me to do a job and I should be there."

But in the past year, Labrador not only failed to keep his pledge, but GovTrack says the Idaho Republican has missed even more votes. Labrador's career-long absentee average has crept up to 4.9 percent.

What's going on here? Perhaps the congressman would like to explain. - M.T.