

# **Risch won't run away from these debates, will he?**

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

U.S. Sen. James Risch, R-Idaho, does not like being on the same debate platform with former Congressman Larry LaRocco, D-Idaho.

After the pair clashed three times - in 1986 for the state Senate, in 2006 for lieutenant governor and six years ago for the U.S. Senate, the tension between them is conspicuous.

All of which may explain why Risch ran away from Idaho Public Television's statewide debates in 2006 and 2008.

Of course, Risch is the odd man out.

Sen. Mike Crapo and Congressmen Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson, all R-Idaho, have debated their most recent opponents on these statewide forums.

Risch can argue he showed up at a Boise television station's debate with LaRocco. Perhaps, the format and the audience was more to his liking.

In any event, LaRocco is not running this year.

Risch's opponent this year is Democrat Nels Mitchell, a Boise attorney who has none of LaRocco's history or chemistry with Risch.

And when his opponent was not LaRocco - such as 2002, when he squared off against Boise lawyer Bruce Perry - Risch had no qualms about the Idaho Debates.

He also has every advantage over Mitchell:

As Ada County prosecutor, leader of the state Senate, lieutenant governor, governor and U.S. senator, Risch is one of Idaho's most accomplished politicians. He's also a successful courtroom litigator. He's more than capable of thinking on his feet.

Mitchell is making his first run for public office.

Risch has a campaign treasury that won't quit.

Mitchell will be lucky if he can afford to buy television commercials.

Risch is the incumbent Republican in a state that hasn't elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate in 40 years.

Mitchell is a member of President Obama's political party.

So you'd expect Risch will show up this time.

Unless, of course, he's unable to explain away the damage he did to Idaho's school systems when he was sitting in the governor's chair. Risch pushed to passage a tax shift that hurt the schools and raised taxes on lower and moderate income Idahoans while benefiting the upper crust - including himself.

Or he's tongue-tied about his votes to shut down the federal government, to cut federal payments to Idaho's timber industry-dependent counties and schools, and to undermine funding of the Idaho National Laboratory.

Risch might be concerned about the comments he gave the Idaho Statesman about how easy serving in a dysfunctional U.S. Senate has been. "Governor will wear you down. You can't do that job permanently. This you can do ad infinitum, " he said.

Just maybe, he can't open his mouth without alienating one side or the other within the Idaho GOP civil war.

What does he say about immigration? Does he support the take-no-prisoners approach of the Tea Party wing of the Idaho GOP as well as Idaho's business class, which knows the state's agricultural and dairy industry is dependent upon immigration?

Or is this Senate Foreign Relations Committee member worried he can't finesse acolytes of neo-isolationist Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and supporters of interventionist Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.?

Nobody's presuming what Idaho's junior senator will do. He's got a few weeks to decide. But if he blows off this round of statewide debates, feel free to draw your own conclusions. - M.T.