

Labrador's ambition trumped his conscience

Marty Trillhaase /Lewiston Tribune

Here's the statement Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, could have released more than a week ago:

On Dec. 4, I voted against the National Defense Authorization Act. My vote reflected my deep reservations about what our nation is doing in Syria.

The Obama administration's decision to spend \$1.6 billion to arm and equip Syrian rebels raises unresolved questions about U.S. policy in that unhappy region: Who are we working with? Some of the rebels are against ISIS. Some are helping them. Some are fighting Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Some are motivated merely by their hatred for America.

In other words, we cannot be certain that the very resources and weapons we provide to these rebel groups won't be turned against us and our allies.

Moreover, I can't disregard a national policy that detains American citizens indefinitely because they are suspected of terrorism - something this measure does not resolve to my satisfaction.

Most of all, Congress has a constitutional duty to hold hearings, get the most reliable information and then debate what course of action is in the best, long-term interests of the United States.

If we are to commit more treasure and lives to yet another war in the Middle East, Congress cannot be a rubber stamp.

In voting no, I have joined a minority of my Republican colleagues in the House and Senate - including Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson and Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch.

But in doing so, I ultimately opposed two features of that bill that were important to Idaho. One conveyed 31 acres of federal land in order to create a gun range near Riggins. The other continued existing grazing permits until a series of time-consuming environmental reviews are complete, among other provisions. Both had been grafted onto the defense bill.

I very much regret voting against Idaho interests. But this is a matter of national and constitutional principle. I can leave this job behind. I can not so easily dismiss my conscience.

I trust my constituents will understand.

But that's not what Labrador said.

Eight days after voting no, he issued a statement taking credit for the gun range and grazing rights measures - which became law when the Senate and House majorities passed the defense bill.

In paragraph after paragraph, Labrador's office detailed the benefits of his measures:

- "Ranchers with grazing permits own nearly 120 million acres of nearby lands, making the collaborative management critical to rural economies. More stable business conditions will prompt investment in improvements such as stock ponds that benefit livestock and wildlife."
- "The Idaho County Shooting Range Land Conveyance Act would establish the first public shooting range in the state's largest county by conveying 31 acres of BLM land to Idaho County. ..."

Summing up, Labrador said, "I am just as gratified to see it (the gun range land conveyance) pass as I am the grazing reform that will boost economic certainty for ranchers across the West. Both measures are examples of how Congress can act to better manage public resources."

Only in the seventh paragraph at the end of his press release did Labrador acknowledge voting against the overall bill - and ultimately, his own measures. In other words, Idaho depended on his colleagues from other states - such as Washington's Doc Hastings and Cathy McMorris Rodgers - who voted yes.

Labrador took another stab at it Monday. In a "Dear Friends" letter, he bemoaned the "D.C. practice of tying unrelated bills to must-pass legislation," forcing him into this awkward position.

Hastings, the outgoing chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, may well have pushed the grazing measure on his own. But would he have attached a bill creating one gun range in one isolated part of Labrador's congressional district without first asking him?

Labrador broke no rules. In fact, he demonstrated a cognizance of the old D.C. slipperiness characterized by John Kerry's "I voted yes before I voted no."

He got it both ways. But Labrador had his opportunity to stand on principle - and accept a momentary setback to his ambitions.

By running away from the first, he has cheapened the second.