

## Risch Says Don't Write Off Rubio

Just as I was ready to go “all in” for Sen. Marco Rubio ... along came his awful debate performance in New Hampshire in which Rubio allowed himself to be Chris Christie’s punching bag.

Rubio could have stopped Christie easily by reminding the audience that serving as governor of New Jersey is not the same as being president of the United States, and that foreign policy is not conducted out of Hoboken.

Instead, Rubio allowed himself to be pushed around by a schoolyard bully with all of New Hampshire watching. He countered by repeating one of his 25-second Obama-bashing talking points four times, and made matters worse by continuing to use the line right up to voting day.

Boring. If Rubio can't defend himself, then how can he be expected to defend anyone else – or his country?

Idahoans may keep in mind Rubio's pathetic performance when they go to the polls on March 8. In Idaho, where hard work and sweat are part of the state's culture, weak-kneed presidential candidates don't get very far. Our governor is named “Butch” and his top political accomplishments include falling off bucking horses.

Christie, who was throwing a Hail Mary in an effort to keep his dying campaign going, didn't help his cause, because people don't like schoolyard bullies. His presidential election bid is in his rearview mirror after his dismal showing in New Hampshire. But he was successful in raising questions about Rubio that will linger in the coming weeks, or until he shows the ability to fight back.

So should Idahoans write him off on March 8? Not so fast, says Sen. Jim Risch, who was on the ground with Rubio in New Hampshire and strongly supports the Florida senator in the presidential race. Both serve on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

“There are very few people I've met in my life that I'd feel good about sitting in the Oval Office, but I would feel very good about Marco Rubio,” Risch told me. “If you are looking for someone who would be ready on Day 1, he is ready right now. This guy knows his stuff frontward, backward, inside and out. I am amazed at his abilities and analytical skills.”

Risch, one of the Senate's old political pros, is not one who is easily impressed – especially by most 44-year-old freshmen senators. If Rubio didn't have substance beyond his years, Risch wouldn't be endorsing him – let alone making pitches for him on voting day in New Hampshire.

“I've seen people in politics who think they're hot shots ... this guy is not like that at all,” Risch said. “He's very well liked in the Senate. The first time you meet him, you can't help but like him. He's a very normal person.”

OK, Senator. But what about that horrible debate?

“Everybody is being way too tough on him,” Risch said. “He’s the real deal. Every pitch that anyone has thrown, he has hit – and most of them out of the park. So he had one 30-second spot in a debate that was less than artful; you’d think it is the end of the world. Aside from those few seconds, he was flawless in the rest of the debate, and that isn’t being reported.”

If debates won elections, then Mitt Romney would be sitting in the White House today. He mopped the floor with President Obama in the first presidential debate four years ago, but Obama won re-election by a landslide in the electoral vote.

Risch sees a scenario for Rubio to win the nomination, but also sees a path for Donald Trump and Jeb Bush. As for Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, “not so much.” As for Ohio Gov. John Kasich, “I think he’s a one-trick pony. He doesn’t have the funding or ground game. South Carolina has 5 million people, and there are not enough hours to get to all the diners. So it becomes a media battle.”

Rubio, rightfully so, put the blame on himself for the fifth-place finish in New Hampshire. But Risch knows that a stumble in one primary could make Rubio a “comeback kid” in the next.

“Getting 1,237 delegates ... that’s what it’s about,” Risch says.

*Chuck Malloy is a native Idahoan and long-time political reporter and editorial writer. He is a former political editor with the Post Register of Idaho Falls and a former editorial writer with the Idaho Statesman. He may be contacted at: [ctmalloy@outlook.com](mailto:ctmalloy@outlook.com)*