

Welcome back, Mike Crapo; where have you been?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Remember the Mike Crapo who went to Washington D.C., as an agent of reform?

Or the Idaho Republican who understood the necessity of crossing the aisle to reach a deal with Democrats?

How about the fellow who, as a member of the Simpson-Bowles deficit reduction commission and then the Senate's "Gang of Six," acknowledged he'd have to accept some form of tax increases to get the spending cuts he wanted?

That Crapo resurfaced last week after a long absence.

He's been missing in action at least since the 16-day-long government shutdown in 2013.

That shutdown pulled \$24 billion from the economy, reduced GDP growth from 3 percent to 2.4 percent and shook public confidence. By the time Congress voted to pass a spending bill to reopen the government, Crapo joined fellow Republican Sen. Jim Risch and Congressman Raul Labrador by voting no.

That left it to people such as Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, to swallow hard and vote yes.

Fast forward to last week's spending package. You're familiar with the drill by now. Without that measure, the government - or at least the part that drives the Idaho National Laboratory, the land management agencies and other "non-essential" programs - would close its doors.

This time, Crapo joined Simpson in voting to keep the government open for another 10 weeks; Risch and Labrador once again voted to shut it down.

Labrador called it a betrayal.

"Establishment Republicans have once again partnered with Democrats to ignore our fiscal crisis, rather than join conservatives determined to restore fiscal sanity," complained Labrador.

Having persuaded his colleagues to add a 4.1 percent boost in veterans programs to the spending bill, Crapo was obligated to support the final package. Of course, that hasn't stopped Idaho politicians from having it both ways before - taking credit for supporting a program popular at home, then voting against the overall measure later on.

Crapo is far from unique. Of the 18 Republican senators who opposed the 2013 package, eight - including John Cornyn of Texas, Marco Rubio of Florida and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania - signed up this time. Of course, the GOP Senate majority is stuck with governing; three years ago, Crapo and his GOP colleagues could watch from the sidelines while the Democratic majority struggled with keeping the lights on.

Even in the House, Labrador saw the ranks of his Freedom Caucus allies dwindle. Three years ago, it took 198 Democrats to save the day by joining only 87 Republicans willing to vote yes.

Voting no were 144 House Republicans.

This year, with the White House on the line - and the specter of Freedom Caucus member Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., losing his seat to an establishment Republican still fresh in their minds - 170 Republicans joined 172 Democrats in supporting the measure. Only 75 Republicans voted no.

Ever since his Dec. 23, 2012, drunken driving arrest, Crapo had to worry about a challenge from the right - which never materialized. Now safely past the spring GOP primary, Crapo looks like a lock for re-election against political newcomer Jerry Sturgill of Boise.

He's is free to dial down on doctrine and pivot back to a more collaborative stance.

How long it lasts remains to be seen. On Dec. 10, the spending bill expires. Look for Crapo response then as the acid test. - M.T.