

Where four once stood, only one remains

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Nearly four years ago, Syria President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people drew President Barack Obama's threat of military reprisals.

Among those weighing in on Obama's red line was Idaho Sen. Jim Risch. A member of the Senate foreign relations and intelligence committees, Risch argued against wading into another Middle East quagmire.

"If we go in with a limited strike, and the day after, the week after, or the month after, Assad crawls out of his rat hole and says, 'Look, I stood up to the strongest power on the face of this Earth - and I won,' " Risch said.

After President Donald Trump responded to Assad's latest chemical attacks with 59 Tomahawk missiles last week, Risch planted himself firmly in support of the Republican White House.

"No question about it, not only did he make the right move, I think the timing was exquisite," Risch told the Spokesman-Review.

So which is it?

If a one-and-done strike left the Sharyat airfield still capable of launching sorties, doesn't that mean Assad has stared down the most powerful force on the face of the Earth and emerged stronger from it - just as Risch once feared?

Likewise, Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo was no fan of military intervention four years ago. He doubted it would enhance U.S. influence abroad, bring Assad to heel or even promote stability in that troubled part of the world.

"A high bar must be set when considering the engagement of armed forces personnel," Crapo said back then. "The president has the responsibility of explaining fully to the American people how intervening in Syria is part of our strategic interests in the Middle East."

But like Risch, Crapo is full of praise for Trump.

"The brutality of the Syrian regime seems to know no bounds," Crapo said. "I support the president's decisive actions to prevent future use of chemical weapons against innocent women, men and children, and from allowing those from falling into the hands of terrorists."

How has Trump explained why the policy of non-intervention he advocated throughout his campaign changed on the basis of disturbing television images? Between the conflicting comments of Trump administration officials, where has the White House crossed that high bar?

Back in 2013, Idaho 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson was "strongly leaning" against Obama taking military action in Syria, according to his spokeswoman, Nikki Watts.

Now, Simpson's backing of Trump for doing just that was equally effusive.

"I support the president's action against the Assad regime," Simpson said. "The United States of America took a strong stand tonight against the unfathomable act Bashar al-Assad conducted this week by murdering innocent men, women and children with a chemical attack."

In 2013, Assad killed many more victims with chemical warfare. What's different now? Has American intelligence within Syria offered up new details that Simpson found compelling?

Let's not forget: Simpson has never wavered in his characterization of Trump as unfit to be president. Is the Idaho Republican at all concerned about encouraging military unilateralism on the part of a president who is known for neither stability nor deliberation?

Of Idaho's four members of Congress, only 1st District Congressman Raul Labrador seems willing to say the same thing about the same policy, whether the commander in chief is a Democrat or a member of his own party.

Four years ago, Labrador was preaching the Constitution. Congress has the power to declare war; therefore the White House is obligated to seek its approval.

Last week, Labrador declared: "The Syrian government's abuse of human rights is unacceptable and deserves a strong, thoughtful response from the United States and all civilized nations. However, our response must be in the best interests of the American people and approved by Congress through the deliberative process outlined in our Constitution."

So give Labrador his due: Not only is he consistent, but in this case, he's consistently right. - M.T.