

Risch seems content to play Trump's toady

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Don't look to Idaho Sen. Jim Risch to follow in the footsteps of Sens. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., or Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz.

Both Baker and Goldwater put principle ahead of their Republican president during the Watergate crisis of the 1970s. Serving on the Watergate committee, Baker famously asked: "What did the president know and when did he know it?" And it was Goldwater who walked into the White House one afternoon in August 1974, to tell President Richard Nixon the game was up; he'd either resign or be impeached.

But as one scandal after another has swirled around President Donald Trump, Risch has contentedly played the part of political apologist.

Ten days before Trump took office, Risch was minimizing the Russian election hacking: "This goes on constantly ... on a scale of one to 10, we've seen a number of 10s; this one doesn't come close to a 10. Because it's in the political spectrum, it has caught the fancy of the media, it's caught the fancy of the American people. Russia is not, in my judgment, the most aggressive actor in this business."

A month later, when National Security Adviser Michael Flynn got booted amid allegations he had been undermining the Obama administration's dealings with Russia during the transition, Risch told PBS Newshour host Judy Woodruff that probing the matter would be a "very delicate situation between two branches of government."

When Trump's intelligence agency heads appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee last week, Risch got so wrapped up in complimenting Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats and CIA Director Mike Pompeo that he literally ran out of time: "The media isn't as focused on this administration's fast, and in my judgment, robust engagement with the intelligence communities around the world and with other governments. And my impression is that it's good and it is aggressive."

Only a handful of Republicans - notably Arizona Sen. John McCain - pushed for a special prosecutor to probe into Russia's involvement in the election before the Justice Department finally appointed former FBI Director Robert Mueller as special counsel Wednesday.

You'll not find Risch among them. The Los Angeles Times placed him with 23 Republicans - along with fellow Idahoan Mike Crapo - in a category it dubbed "Nothing to see here."

After Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, the Washington Post listed 16 Senate Republicans who were critical of the move.

Not Risch. He got mentioned among 21 senators - again, including Crapo - who have been virtually invisible on the issue.

This week, Risch has offered a full-throated defense of a president who betrayed the nation's secrets to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

Rather than the president, Risch went after the "weasel" who leaked the story to the Washington Post: "It was not the president of the United States that caused this. It was some traitor who's in the chain of command below the president who actually disclosed this."

Not that Risch stands apart from his timid Republican colleagues. But he could. From Risch, you hoped for more.

Here, after all, is a man who has served Idaho in one capacity or another for more than four decades. Like him or loathe him, his personal moral standards are impeccable. He clearly recognizes right from wrong.

He is Idaho's voice on the Foreign Relations and Intelligence committees. That not only makes him a guardian of the nation's secrets, but it imposes upon Risch a duty to serve as a check against executive overreach or misbehavior.

Who better to stand up to a president of his own party than a U.S. senator with the political freedom that comes from having a virtual lock on office for as long as he chooses to remain in Washington, D.C.?

If Idaho's junior U.S. senator won't distance himself from Trump now, when will he ever?

Is he waiting for someone to connect the dots between the Russians and past and present Trump acolytes Flynn, Carter Page, Paul Manafort and Roger Stone?

Until tape recordings verify Comey's account of his dinner with Trump?

When Trump's mishandling of intelligence demonstrably undermines the national security?

This is Risch's moment. He's in the process of forging his legacy. How does he want future generations to remember him? As a statesman or as Trump's toady? - M.T.