

- [Home](#)
- [Opinion](#)

Commentary Bill Hall The leader of Idaho's rebel pack

Posted: Friday, June 8, 2012 12:00 am | Updated: 6:15 pm, Thu Jun 7, 2012.

Bill Hall, Lewiston Tribune

Perry Swisher was a rebel with many causes. He wasn't born to tolerate the status quo.

Swisher, who died Wednesday at 88, was one of the most colorful and effective politicians and journalists in Idaho history. During a lifetime in the thick of politics, he was a highly opinionated writer, a Republican state legislator, a Democratic state legislator and a candidate for both lieutenant governor and governor. (He was also night managing editor of the Lewiston Tribune.)

He was a teacher in the formal way, lecturing on occasion at the university level, and a teacher in the informal way, hammering common sense into dozens of fledgling politicians and writers, including yours truly.

He was an original thinker and he expected everyone he knew to be the same. He scoffed at people on the both the left and the right who practiced group-think and let their favorite mental mob tell them what to believe.

He had a pragmatic side, working on beneficial compromises across the aisle. He was a main force in the 1960s in passing a sales tax through the Legislature that lowered property taxes and provided a starving state school system with new revenue.

He could be irascible. When he was writing and publishing *The Intermountain* at Pocatello, a biting and frequently hilarious weekly discourse on politics and social norms, he made no pretense of being gentle. He preferred to be correct in his conclusions even if he was blunt in his choice of words. He had no patience with the willful ignorance of leaders who led only in reverse.

In that vein, he had been known to be so irked at a reader's letter to the editor that he would cancel the reader's subscription because "I don't want people like that reading my newspaper."

Similarly, if an advertiser started leaning on him for writing an opinion the advertiser didn't like, Swisher would cancel that advertiser's account. He didn't want people like that advertising in his paper either.

But more commonly, he enjoyed jousting with able adversaries. And he expected me and others to enjoy it too. He could be a handful in informal debate with his friends. But he abused us for our own good. He was a demanding Dutch uncle to many young journalists and politicians. He once put me in my place when I was a young editorial writer whose skin had not yet thickened enough to accept criticism. I whined to him that a lot of people writing cranky letters to the editor didn't understand me.

"Damn it, Hall," he said, bereft of sympathy, "It ain't a popularity contest! It's your job to make people think!"

He had a knack for succinct criticism. He said 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater believed that "people with bare feet should pull themselves up by their bootstraps."

Asked how he, a Republican, was going to vote for president, for Goldwater or for President Lyndon Johnson, he responded, "I'm just going to go into the polling booth, pull the curtain and have myself a good cry."

In an era when housewives did most of the grocery shopping, he was asked about so-called saving stamps, those little coupons that added up for prizes that stores gave out as a come-on. The stamp fad, he wrote, showed that some women will fool around but they expect the man to send flowers.

All his life long, he was first and foremost one of Idaho's most ardent civil rights advocates. He welcomed and worked for the rise of women and the elevation of minorities in America. That stemmed in part from the fact one of his direct 19th-century ancestors was an indentured servant freed by Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation along with the slaves.

He would mention that same Lincoln connection if anyone dared ask him, given his progressive views, how he could remain in the Republican Party. He stubbornly remained a Republican - until it became clear to him that Lincoln would have been purged by the mid-20th century version of the Republican Party.

But he was equally uncomfortable wearing the Democratic label later in his career. He was a rebel, not a joiner. In fact, there has hardly ever been a bigger, better rebel in the 122 years of this state than Perry Swisher.

And in his honor, if you don't agree, I may think about canceling your subscription.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cableone.net.