

# On Syria, Idaho's Risch asks the right questions

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

American presidents seem tortured by one historical lesson - the price of not standing up to aggression.

But ordinary Americans have nightmares of their own - quagmires in foreign lands that have sapped their treasure and brought young people home, either maimed or dead from those adventures.

The first lesson is the so-called Munich analogy. It refers to the decision of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier to appease Adolf Hitler by ceding control over much of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany.

After striking the deal in 1938, Chamberlain proclaimed "peace in our time."

Winston Churchill countered: "You were given the choice between war and dishonor. You chose dishonor and you will have war."

When war did come the following year, Churchill was appointed to lead Britain in its desperate struggle to survive the Nazi onslaught.

Munich has come to stand for the perils of not confronting despots forcefully and early. Had the Democratic powers - including the U.S. - checked Hitler in the 1930s, he would have retreated and possibly been deposed by his military, preventing World War II. Appeasement merely encouraged him.

The Munich analogy has justified any number of U.S. military campaigns in the years since Hitler was defeated, whether it was blocking communist expansion in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, forcing Iraq's Saddam Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait in the early 1990s or deposing Hussein a decade later on the premise that he possessed weapons of mass destruction.

In the case of Vietnam or the second Gulf War, getting in was much easier than getting out. It's this lesson that undoubtedly drives Americans' resistance to their president's call to action in Syria.

President Obama sees the specter of Munich in the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its own people. If the Syrian government is not brought to heel, what further atrocities might it commit?

Some of the best questions, so far, have come from Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho. Serving on the Foreign Relations Committee, Risch Wednesday joined the minority in opposing Obama's request for congressional authorization.

Here's what Risch is saying:

- "I want to hear the analysis of what happens if you do pull the trigger," Risch told Boise's KTVB. "You heard (Obama's) statement that it was going to be a one-shot deal sort of thing is what he described. Well, what happens if (Syrian strongman Bashar Hafez) al-Assad turns around and ups the ante and kills 5,000 people or 10,000 people with the nerve gas, which he has the capability of doing. What do you do then?"
- This is no Afghanistan. Syria has some of the most sophisticated weaponry Russia can supply. So what happens after the U.S. intervenes? "My biggest fear is escalation and the unknown," Risch said.
- If not responding to the chemical attack threatens U.S. credibility, what about staging any attack that leaves al-Assad still in power?

Here's one more you'd hope Risch or one of his colleagues might ask: What commitments, if any, have the U.S. made to Syrian insurgents? How deeply involved are we already? - M.T.