

On Homeland Security, Labrador goes with the flow

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When he backed House Speaker John Boehner's re-election earlier this year, Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador found himself in an unusual position - he was drawing heat from his right flank.

Reliable conservative fans - such as St. Maries Republican Ken De Vries - now were complaining that the Tea Party darling had thrown "his most ardent conservative supporters under the bus and he is laughing about it."

It didn't help that Labrador had broken a cardinal rule of politics - occupying both sides of an issue. Two years ago, he joined in an abortive coup against the speaker. And as soon as he cast his lot with Boehner this time, Labrador began backing away - assuring his friends the vote " ... is not an endorsement of his past leadership."

The Idaho Press-Tribune of Nampa picked up on Labrador's wavering: "That's not what his supporters want. They want a congressman who will stick to his guns, and both they and Labrador aren't happy with Boehner."

So the Idaho Republican quickly set about re-establishing his bona fides with the base. Before it was over, Labrador found himself putting the nation's security at risk.

At issue was funding for the nation's first line of defense against terrorism, the Department of Homeland Security. Under its umbrella is Immigration and Customs Enforcement. When President Barack Obama issued an executive order sparing 5 million undocumented workers from deportation, Homeland Security's appropriation became a target.

A week ago Friday, Labrador and his colleagues within the House Freedom Caucus rallied 52 Republicans to block Boehner and the GOP from merely extending DHS funding for another three weeks. An agreement quickly cobbled together with Democrats put the agency on a week-long lifeline.

Never mind that Labrador and his colleagues had no chance of prevailing. The GOP lacks enough votes to end a Democratic filibuster in the Senate, nor could it override an Obama veto.

Never mind the constitutionality of Obama's executive order will be resolved in the courts - and the first round has gone to the president's critics.

Never mind that by destabilizing DHS, Labrador was willing to impede the very Border Patrol meant to block illegal immigration as well as airport security and the protection of vulnerable sites, including those in the Pacific Northwest - dams, nuclear facilities, bridges and ports.

And never mind how the seeming inability of the United States to engage in the basic business of governing was undermining the confidence of our allies and emboldening our adversaries.

All that mattered to Labrador was sending a message. Sure, he had a point about Obama's executive overreach, but he was hardly going against the flow within a political base that detests Obama.

Tuesday, Boehner yielded. He made a deal to pass a clean DHS spending package by relying on Democratic support. That gave 167 House Republicans a pass to cast the no votes that would prove popular with their conservative bases at home.

But Boehner still needed 75 House Republicans to cast responsible votes. Among them were Cathy McMorris

Rodgers of Washington's 5th Congressional District, and Labrador's seat mate, Idaho 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson.

Indeed, Simpson was the floor sponsor on a tricky floor maneuver to steer the measure to passage.

"Whether on the border, at our nation's airports, or in many vital programs at Idaho National Laboratory, funding for the Department of Homeland Security is critical to our national security and ability to protect our nation from those who would do us harm," Simpson said. "Delaying that funding, or playing any further political games with it, would be completely irresponsible and those who suggest otherwise don't know what they are talking about."

So the country heaved a sigh of relief.

But Simpson and McMorris Rodgers have nothing to gain from this. Because they get elected from overwhelmingly Republican districts, they answer to a hard-core, ideologically driven base within the GOP that will be unhappy with their votes.

All of which tells you Simpson and McMorris Rodgers put the national interest ahead of their own.

That's not to say Labrador was disingenuous, but he sure didn't stick his neck out, either.- M.T.