

Risch has his deer-in-the-headlights moment

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

During his more than 40 years in public life, U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, has earned a reputation for message discipline and staying on script.

Yet on last Wednesday, Risch gave a performance on Wolf Blitzer's CNN program that hands down wins this year's Deer in the Headlights Award.

Who, asked Blitzer, does the Idaho Republican support for the GOP presidential nomination?

Risch had to know the question was coming. No doubt, he's been fielding it at every Idaho Lincoln Day banquet and Republican gathering ever since his first choice, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, dropped out.

Yet here was Risch hemming and hawing:

- Donald Trump is unacceptable. "It is stunning the defeat that Donald Trump would face against Hillary Clinton. It probably would be epic and historical."
- Ohio Gov. John Kasich does not have a chance. "Obviously Kasich is so far behind, it's impossible, really, for him to get the numbers."
- "So, by the process of elimination, that gets you to Ted Cruz. At this point, there's no choice."

Blitzer sensed a scoop. Only Cruz's Senate ally, Utah's Mike Lee, and South Carolina's Lindsay Graham have endorsed Cruz.

Risch would be the third GOP senator at his side.

The CNN anchor pressed on: "So far, you're only, I think by our count, the third senator, Republican senator, who now effectively on this program has come out and endorsed Cruz."

Countered Risch: "Did I just endorse, Wolf?"

Blitzer: "I don't know. You sort of said you prefer him over the other two."

Risch: "I do."

Blitzer: "That sounds like an endorsement, doesn't it?"

Risch: "I guess it depends on your definition."

It didn't take long for Risch to displace former U.S. Sen. Larry "Wide Stance" Craig as the late-night comedians' favorite Idaho punchline.

"It's that kind of passion that inspired the new campaign slogan: 'Ted Cruz: Abandon all hope!' " chimed in Stephen Colbert, whose description of Risch was "Idaho senator and inappropriately chipper funeral director. ..."

Of course, nobody has forced Risch's colleagues - Sen. Mike Crapo or Congressman Mike Simpson, both R-Idaho - off their game plan. They've remained neutral. Risch merely needed to say the same thing - if that's what he meant.

Or, like Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, Risch could find plenty in Cruz to like.

They're aligned ideologically.

Both Risch and Cruz score high in the National Journal's rankings of conservative U.S. senators. In one recent survey, Risch came in No. 1; Cruz ranked fourth.

They agree on a string of issues, from gun ownership rights to spending to abortions. When Cruz spearheaded the 2013 government shutdown crisis, Risch joined Cruz in voting against the budget compromise Sen. Patty Murray and now-Speaker Paul Ryan designed to end it.

Each represents a conservative state.

And last month, Cruz won the Idaho Republican presidential primary.

So what's behind Risch's reticence?

Could it be he'd have to explain to his constituents Cruz's apparent support for privatizing the federal lands? Here's what Cruz said while campaigning in Idaho last month: "Too much land in this country, particularly in the West, is owned by the federal government. It's not right. It doesn't make sense. So we need to transfer that land back to the states - or even better, back to the people."

Or could it be Cruz's support for closing the U.S. Department of Energy and his description to the Idaho Statesman's Rocky Barker of the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls as "the kind of crony capitalism he hopes to end when he gets rid of the department. ..."?

What does it say about Cruz that a seasoned pol such as Risch would split hairs on live television about what the word endorsement means - or that he'd even get boxed into such a corner by the process of elimination?

What is it about working day in and day out with Cruz in the U.S. Senate that has so unnerved Idaho's typically unflappable Risch?

Is there something Risch is not telling us? - M.T.