

Veteran looks to Risch to pull Idaho troops from Middle East

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MERIDIAN, Idaho — Meridian resident Dan McKnight, 43, has two children in their 20s who could theoretically serve in the same war he did, he said. That doesn't sit well with him.

McKnight is a veteran of 13 years, who served in the Idaho National Guard for 10 years. From 2005 through 2007, he was among the first combat units deployed to Afghanistan — the early years of the war.

McKnight is spearheading the surge in local activism aimed at bringing troops home from the Middle East. The efforts are directed at U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, who holds power on Senate foreign relations and intelligence committees.

"I am going to take a shot," McKnight said. "I am tired of seeing my friends go to deployment over and over again. Some of my closest friends have been deployed four or five times."

McKnight founded the Bring Our Troops Home organization in January, after Risch was appointed chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The goal: to get Congress to pull troops out of the Middle East and bring them home.

LOOKING TO RISCH

When McKnight was in Afghanistan in 2006, his group was having a hard time getting supplies. He did the only thing he could think of doing — he called Risch, who was governor at the time, and asked for help.

"He went to work for us. Immediately we had supplies within 48 hours," McKnight said. "I have kind of held him on a pedestal since then."

McKnight was injured in Afghanistan and returned home to Idaho in February 2007. He was medically retired in August of that year. He said his time in the Middle East disillusioned him. His unit consistently conquered territory, then often turned it back over to those they were fighting.

On Feb. 21, McKnight attended the Boise Metro Chamber constituent luncheon where Risch was addressing Idaho stakeholders. McKnight stood up in front of the room and asked the senator if he supported the cause to bring troops home.

"I'm with you," Risch said. "We cannot and will not be the world's policeman."

McKnight thought his job was done, he said, but over the next three months, Risch voted in favor of keeping troops in Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen.

On Feb 4, Risch voted in favor of an amendment to the Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019 that will prevent withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan. On March 13, Risch voted against a bipartisan resolution to pull American troops from Yemen not authorized by Congress, and then again on May 2 he voted against overriding the president's veto of that resolution.

In response to request for comment on the votes, a Risch spokeswoman directed the *Idaho Press* to two press releases. Risch cited support for allies in his vote on the Strengthening America's Security act, and that U.S. troops are providing "limited non-combat support" in Yemen that is necessary.

The Strengthening America's Security act also put economic pressure on the Assad regime and those "responsible for the tragic loss of half a million lives and ongoing atrocities" in Syria, Risch said in a statement.

McKnight said he understands why Risch does it, but each vote against the cause pushes McKnight to continue advocating.

"I understand his rationale. Each one of these votes puts the leader of his party, President Trump, in a position of limited ability to do his job," McKnight said. "And that's where I struggle because I agree. But limiting his power is what the Constitution does, and that's why we have three branches of the government."

Risch told the *Idaho Press* on May 31 that there won't be large deployments to the Middle East "short of some very catastrophic event that is unforeseeable at this time."

"First of all, the number of troops that we have there now is minuscule compared to what we've had in the past — and as long as Donald Trump is president, I'm convinced that it is going to stay that way," Risch said. "I've talked to him at length on this issue, and



Veteran Dan McKnight is leading efforts in Idaho to bring troops home from the Middle East. McKnight stands in front of his home in Meridian on June 3, with a photo of himself during his time in the Marine Corps Reserve.

he is always reluctant to commit boots on the ground to these kinds of things."

CONGRESS' RESPONSIBILITY

Several leaders in Idaho have signed on to support McKnight's cause, including Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, Rep. Tammy Nichols, R-Middleton, and Larry LaRocco, a former Democratic state representative. LaRocco has run against Risch in lieutenant governor and Senate campaigns.

In April, Boise State Young Democrats and Boise State College Republicans came together to host a meeting to discuss how to bring troops home.

"This is not a Republican issue; it's not a Democratic issue. It's an American issue," Pryce Robinson, former Boise State College Republicans chairman, told the *Idaho Press*.

The bipartisan support stems from the idea that the Constitution gives Congress the power to authorize the use of troops and to check the executive branch — which the group feels hasn't been happening.

"Right now, we are faced with a security issue because we are engaged in countries around the world that hasn't been approved by Congress," Robinson said. "If you look at the way our current government and Congress is going about declaring these conflicts, they are pushing a lot of power up to the executive, and it's their duty to wrangle it back."

The issue of troops in the Middle East, LaRocco said, "transcends party affiliation."

"I think that Congress sort of turned its authority on war powers to the administration over a period of years," LaRocco said. "Quite frankly, I feel that (Risch) has turned over the management of the committee to (national security advisor) John Bolton and the administration, and that he is not really fulfilling the proper role of oversight by Congress."

Keeping the balance in an era where legislation is stonewalled by the hyperpartisan atmosphere — as often described by Idaho's federal delegation members — isn't easy.

"We're building a broad coalition. Every time I add a Republican, I try and

add a Democrat, and every time I add a Democrat, I add a Republican," McKnight said. "The last thing I want is for half the people that are involved in the movement to feel like they are being used by the other half. It's important to keep that balance."

It shouldn't be political, he said. "Some say fighting a war over there is better than fighting a war over here," McKnight said. "But we're not fighting a war over there — we are policing, peacekeeping and nation-building, disrupting things that aren't a threat to the U.S. at this point in time."

THINKING BIG

On May 14, leaders of the Republican Party in Ada County, GOP Region 4, unanimously adopted a resolution urging Risch and the rest of the federal delegation to "advocate for and vote in favor of legislation and resolutions that call for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Middle East and ending the war in Afghanistan."

McKnight is thinking bigger than the resolution — the group is looking to present legislation in the Idaho Statehouse next session that would instruct the governor to allow Idaho National Guard troops to be deployed to combat operations only if it's properly authorized by Congress.

"Idaho's guardsmen, our troops, our treasure, our lives, are for Idaho, unless there's a constitutional basis for it," McKnight said. "If it's not an authorization from Congress or a declaration of war, then Idaho National Guardsmen are to stay home and take care of Idaho matters."

The Bring Our Troops Home online petition has gained more than 500 signatures, and McKnight works long hours trying to get more people involved.

"I think this becomes a really local issue when you realize your friends and neighbors are deploying to war over and over and over again," he said.

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