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Congressional comments . . .

McClure power rises in Reagan hierarchy

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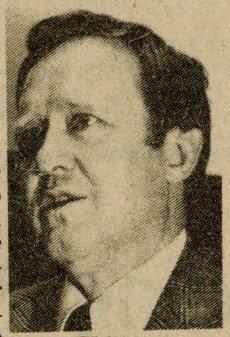
As the Reagan economic program plods onward, it's apparent that Idaho's U.S. senator, James A. McClure, is part of the inner circle.



U.S. Sen. Jim McClure

It could be compared with the short-lived status of Sen. Frank Church, who was considered a member of President Jack Kennedy's so-called "palace guard," those close to the White House and who exerted immense influence. This all terminated suddenly after Kennedy was assassinated. That was because Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, did not view Church as a close ally, particularly after Church threw his support to Kennedy in the national convention and helped Kennedy win the nomnination over Johnson and subsequently, the election.

Perhaps the only other Idaho congressional member who can be compared to these two as far as national power is concerned was the legendary "Lion of Idaho," Sen. William Borah, the independent Republican and so named because of his leonine characteristics.

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When McClure won the Republican Conference Committee chairmanship, or caucus chairman, he vaulted into leadership, and not even Borah nor Church held this esteemed role. Each was chairman of the prestigious Senate Foreign Relations Committee which in their time exerted considerable influence. This contrasts at present with the rather low profile role played by the present chairman, Sen. Charles Percy, R-Ill.

As far as can be remembered, McClure is the only Idaho senator to win a leadership spot, which is No.3, and ranking only behind Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, of Tennessee, and Assistant Majority Leader Ted Stephens, of Alaska.

McClure is accused, with some justification, by many of those participating in the political process as devoting entirely too much time to national affairs at the expense of Idaho problems. Idahoans in the past have shown their distaste for this. This factor was one that helped bring Church's defeat in 1980, although probably not the paramount one.

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McClure, however, does also hold the important chairmanship of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee which hasoversight of many activities of interest to Idaho, not the least of which is the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory and the immense federal public lands, which account for 62 percent of Idaho's land area.

Church was a ranking member of this committee but not the chairman because no senator can hold chairmanships of more than one major standing committee.

In answer to charges that he is isolating himself from his constituents, McClure replies that he is devoting much of his time for Idaho oriented legislation in Washington, adding "by working hard here I'm working for Idaho."

McClure, of course, is one of Reagan's closest lieutenants and is riding high. However, if there should be a slide in Reagan's popularity, and polls show this is already happening, then McClure's stature also could slip.

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McClure has been in the vanguard fighting for Reagan's economic program, including the concurrent resolution for spending cuts which Reagan vetoed last week. McClure warmly applauded the veto, contending the $2 billion cut wemt only a quarter of the way, rather than the halfway cut of $4 billion.

McClure then commented "It is now up to Congress to respond to his veto and I think we will spend the next few days trying to work out permamnent solution which the president has raised. That's how to fund the government in the near future while we grope for a longterm reduction in the growth of so many government programs."

Peculiarly, McClure voted for the compromise, as did Sen. Steve Symms. McClure explained this was done so that Reagan would have an opportunity for the veto which hardly smacks of responsible government.

What the future brings no one can tell for sure and McClure doesn't face the voters for re-election until 1984. In the meantime he is riding high in a seat of power.