By all indications, Church was not merely a political opportunist. The senator often led his constituents in directions political pundits told him they would not go, particularly on environmental issues. Yet in Idaho throughout the 1960s, even as voters grew more conservative, they continued to return the liberal Church to the Senate. In the 1968 election, for example, Richard Nixon carried Idaho with just over 56 percent of the vote, and Republicans easily claimed both of Idaho’s House seats. In that same election, voters elected Church to a third term by a whopping 60.3 percent majority. By way of explanation, one political observer noted that “Idaho’s political history has been characterized by a high degree of political independence, attraction to political figures, and highly selective voting.”

In 1980, however, Church lost his bid for a fifth term to conservative Steve Symms by just 4,262 votes. A result of the Reagan Revolution, Carter’s early concession, and a well-financed, negative campaign against him, Church’s defeat signaled the end of proactive environmental legislation from the Idaho congressional delegation. Symms, in fact, once jokingly observed that he saw “some advantages to having a hamburger stand on every peak.” In 1984, the nation lost Church, who succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of fifty-nine. Just before his death, however, Congress appended his name to the largest roadless area in the continental United States: The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho.

Though some environmental activists and critics have characterized Church’s willingness to compromise as indicative of an incomplete commitment to preservation, Church once commented, “Sometimes it is necessary to take the unpopular positions. I have to live with my conscience a lot longer than I’ll have to live with my job.” In the end, Church did not embrace environmental concerns because they were popular but because he believed they were right. “What I had to do was simply vote my convictions. . . . If the people believe you are serving the state, they will not demand that you agree on all issues.” When examined in complete perspective, Church’s participation in the Hells Canyon controversy reveals a fundamental value shift—from pro-development to pro-preservation—and the growth of an environmental consciousness in the senator from Idaho.

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