

Behind the resignation of US House Speaker Boehner

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The resignation of House Speaker John Boehner, the highest-ranking Republican in Washington, second in the line of succession to the presidency, has put the political spotlight on the enormous power wielded by a small minority of ultra-right politicians both within the Republican Party and more broadly.

Boehner resigned Friday, giving almost no notice, rather than face a vote on a procedural resolution to declare the speakership vacant. With Republicans holding a 247-188 majority in the House, and 30 or more Republicans committed to voting against him, he would have been compelled to rely on Democratic votes to retain office.

More importantly, as he later admitted, every Republican who voted to support him would face the threat of a well-financed ultra-right challenger in Republican primary elections next year. Because of systematic gerrymandering, most House seats held by Republicans are safe from any Democratic challenge, making the primary tantamount to election and magnifying the power of Christian fundamentalist and Tea Party groups.

The bitterness of the divisions within the Republican Party was expressed at the “Values Voters” summit, a conference of Christian fundamentalists held Friday in Washington. When Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican presidential candidate, interrupted his address to announce Boehner’s resignation, there was a prolonged ovation.

Appearing at the same conference, another ultra-right presidential hopeful, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, lashed out at Boehner with characteristic vitriol, expressing concern that “the speaker, before he resigns, has cut a deal with Nancy Pelosi to fund the Obama administration for the rest of this year, to fund Obamacare, to fund executive amnesty, to fund Planned

Parenthood, to fund implementation of this Iran deal, and then presumably to land a cushy K Street job after joining with the Democrats to implement all of President Obama’s priorities.”

Boehner, who earlier this year denounced Cruz as a “jackass” for his role in forcing a temporary partial shutdown of the federal government in October 2013, fired back Sunday morning in an appearance on the CBS interview program “Face the Nation.”

Asked whether his critics among the most right-wing faction in the Republican caucus were unrealistic about what could be accomplished with a Democrat in the White House and Democrats in control of the Senate until January 2015, Boehner responded, “Absolutely they’re unrealistic. But the Bible says, beware of false prophets. And there are people out there spreading noise about how much can get done. I mean, this whole idea that we were going to shut down the government to get rid of Obamacare in 2013, this plan never had a chance.”

He continued, “So we have got groups here in town, members of the House and Senate here in town, who whip people into a frenzy believing they can accomplish things that they know, they know are never going to happen.”

Boehner pointed to a series of right-wing policies enacted by Congress on a bipartisan basis and put into practice by the Obama administration, including the largest spending cuts in US history, retaining the bulk of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, and a major step in slashing Medicare benefits (which he described proudly as “the first major entitlement reforms in 20 years”). He then concluded bitterly that these steps in implementing the right-wing agenda were “all voted against by my most conservative members because it wasn’t good enough. Really?”

The soon-to-be ex-speaker was simply spelling out the real dynamic of American capitalist politics over the past 35 years, whatever the balance of power between the Democratic and Republican factions of the financial aristocracy. The most right-wing faction sets the pace, while the “mainstream” of the two parties struggles to keep up in a process that invariably moves the political spectrum further and further to the right.

This is reflected in Boehner’s own political biography. He entered Congress in 1990 as one of a “gang of seven” ultra-conservative representatives that included Rick Santorum, later a US senator and presidential candidate. Boehner and company were aligned with the hard-right faction of Republicans led by Newt Gingrich.

Over the past 25 years, Boehner’s political views have hardly moderated. Instead, the Republican Party has moved further and further to the right, embracing anti-immigrant bigotry, demands for the destruction of basic social programs such as Social Security and Medicare, and positions on “social” issues such as abortion and gay rights that amount to legislating a Christian fundamentalist theocracy.

The ouster of Boehner has produced a wave of commentary in the corporate-controlled media, fueled by concerns, particularly on Wall Street, that the ultra-right faction of the congressional Republicans—whose influence is visible as well in the presidential campaign—will take reckless actions that disrupt financial markets and harm their profit interests.

One representative of this group, Representative Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina, declared his support for shutting down the federal government at midnight September 30 to force an end to funding for Planned Parenthood. Mulvaney declared, “When you go into a negotiation and say, ‘Look, the one thing we’re never going to do is shut the government down,’ you have completely given up your constitutional ability to use the power of the purse, and I think that is an abdication of responsibility.”

Other representatives have called for using the federal debt ceiling as leverage for forcing through right-wing policy priorities, essentially threatening to force the Treasury to default on federal debt payments by denying it the authority to borrow additional funds.

It appears that Boehner’s appearance on “Face the Nation” had as a major purpose reassuring world

financial markets that his resignation would not mean the destabilization of federal finances. The first question he was asked was about a possible federal shutdown and he declared categorically that Congress would pass a resolution to continue federal funding past September 30, when the fiscal year ends.

The House would take up and pass a Senate bill continuing funding for all federal agencies, he said, including funding for programs involving the women’s health organization Planned Parenthood, the target of a smear campaign orchestrated by anti-abortion groups. He acknowledged that the continuing resolution would require Democratic votes to pass and that he was counting to Democrats to provide their support.

There are other deadlines looming soon after September 30. All federal highway funding expires October 29, the Treasury expects to reach the debt ceiling sometime in November, and the continuing resolution set for approval next week would allow funding to expire again December 11.

In big business circles, there is even less confidence in Boehner’s likely successor, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, to keep the far right wing of the Republican Party under control in dealing with these deadlines. McCarthy has been in the House for only nine years and has never chaired a committee or subcommittee, rising rapidly as a protégé of the previous majority leader, Eric Cantor, as well as Boehner.



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