

McCarthy withdrawal highlights deepening Republican Party crisis

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Representative Kevin McCarthy, the number two Republican in the US House of Representatives, said Thursday morning he was withdrawing as a candidate to succeed John Boehner as speaker of the house. The surprise announcement, made to a closed-door caucus of Republicans that was preparing to nominate McCarthy for the top job, came less than two weeks after Boehner announced his resignation, effective October 30.

The decision leaves completely uncertain the race to replace Boehner as the third-highest official of the US government, second in the line of succession to the presidency. It lays bare a deepening political crisis of the Republican Party, not only in Congress, but also in the initial months of the 2016 presidential campaign.

The ouster of Boehner and now McCarthy is the product of deeper processes at work within America society. The Republican crisis has something of the character of a political iceberg, with nine-tenths or more beneath the surface, still concealed, although new shocks and surprises may not be long in coming.

McCarthy said he would remain in his current position as House majority leader, a decision that may result in the cancellation of all of the current leadership contests within the Republican caucus except for the race for speaker, since the vacancies were created by McCarthy seeking to move up to the speaker post.

Several candidates, including House Majority Whip Steve Scalise, have been running for majority leader, and there were campaigns as well to replace Scalise as the number three Republican.

There were apparently two interrelated factors in McCarthy's decision to abandon the race for speaker, even though he was assured of the support of a large majority of the Republican caucus assembled for Thursday's scheduled vote. He was opposed by a small but powerful right-wing faction in the House Republican caucus. Perhaps more important was a self-inflicted

wound: in an interview last week, McCarthy blurted out the fact that the Republican-led investigation into the 2012 attack on US diplomatic and CIA facilities in Benghazi, Libya was a politically motivated attack on Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

Unlike the other leadership positions, which are decided by a simple majority of the party caucus, the speaker is elected by the entire House, which requires 218 votes. Given the 247-188 Republican majority, if 30 Republicans refused to vote for the party's candidate for speaker, he would be unsuccessful and voting would continue until some candidate received the necessary 218 votes.

On Wednesday, the House Freedom Caucus, comprising the most extreme right-wing faction of the Republicans, voted to support Representative Daniel Webster of Florida for speaker. Since this caucus numbers about 40 members, it could have blocked the election of McCarthy as speaker in the formal vote, scheduled for October 29, the day before current Speaker Boehner's resignation takes effect.

Similar ultra-right opposition to Boehner fell just short of denying him the leadership position last January, when Congress first convened. Some 25 Republicans voted for a scattering of other candidates, with the result that Boehner barely cleared the 218-vote threshold.

Members of the Freedom Caucus and the Tea Party caucus, another far-right grouping, have been threatening to force another vote for speaker by filing a parliamentary motion to declare the position vacant. They have used this motion to press their demand that Boehner agree to block all spending bills for the fiscal year beginning October 1 and force a partial shutdown of the federal government rather than allow federal funding of health care programs operated by Planned Parenthood.

These threats contributed to Boehner's decision to step down, announced September 25 but effective five weeks

later. Boehner then pushed through a ten-week extension of funding for all federal programs and agencies until December 11. Passage of the so-called continuing resolution, by a 277-151 vote, depended entirely on Democratic Party support. Every Democrat voted for the bill, along with a minority of 91 Republicans. All 151 votes against the bill came from Republicans.

There are more deadlines in the next few weeks for congressional action on key funding measures demanded by major corporations, Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. The temporary extension of federal highway construction funds expires October 29, threatening the shutdown of major projects. A measure to raise the federal debt ceiling and allow the Treasury to borrow through the sale of bonds to fund government operations (and underwrite the financial markets) must be passed before the Treasury runs out of cash, now estimated for the week of November 5. And the continuing resolution merely pushed the federal budget deadline back to December 11.

The ultra-right factions among the House Republicans—with vocal backing from many of the candidates for the Republican presidential nomination—are demanding that each of these deadlines be used for political blackmail. They want to impose deeply unpopular measures, such as further cuts in social spending and policies favored by the Christian fundamentalist right, such as the cutoff of funding for Planned Parenthood, the leading US provider of abortion services.

The impact of McCarthy's comment about the Benghazi investigation underscores the intersection between the 2016 presidential campaign and the crisis of the Republicans in Congress.

There have been a total of nine congressional investigations into the events of September 11-12, 2012, when armed Islamists attacked a US consulate and CIA facility in the city in eastern Libya, killing four Americans, including the ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens.

The current investigation, a special committee chaired by Representative Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, has taken longer than the congressional investigations of the 9/11 attacks, the Iran-Contra affair, and even Watergate, events of greater political and historical significance.

The transparent purpose of the probe from the very beginning has been to damage the presidential prospects of Hillary Clinton, who, as secretary of state in 2012, bore nominal responsibility for security at all US diplomatic

facilities. It was the Gowdy committee that last year discovered Clinton's use of a private email server while she headed the State Department, eventually leaking that information when Clinton was on the verge of announcing her presidential campaign.

In an interview with Sean Hannity of Fox News, a Republican cheerleader, McCarthy spoke an inadvertent truth about the Benghazi investigation—that it was connected to presidential politics. “Everybody thought Hillary Clinton was unbeatable, right?” he said. “But we put together a Benghazi Special Committee, a select committee. What are her numbers today? Her numbers are dropping.”

The statement brought a firestorm of criticism from right-wing media and Republican Party circles generally, and gloating from the Clinton campaign, the Obama White House and the Democratic Party. Entirely covered up by both factions in the US ruling elite is the real significance of Benghazi: it was the byproduct of a CIA operation to recruit Islamist radicals who had overthrown the Gaddafi regime in Libya and send them to Syria to fight the government of Bashar al-Assad.

McCarthy again spoke less guardedly than is typical of American capitalist politicians when he conceded that his Benghazi statement had contributed to his pullout from the race for Speaker. “That's part of the decision as well,” he said.

McCarthy denied that his decision was affected by the letter issued October 6 by Representative Walter Jones, a North Carolina Republican, demanding that any candidate for a leadership position withdraw “if there are any misdeeds he has committed since joining Congress that will embarrass himself, the Republican Conference and the House of Representatives if they become public.”

Jones said his letter was not based on any suspicions about McCarthy or other current Republican candidates, but in response to a series of past scandals that brought down Republicans such as House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his intended successor Representative Bob Livingston.



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