

House speaker's retirement signals further crisis for Republicans

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12 April 2018

House Speaker Paul Ryan announced his retirement from Congress Wednesday, exacerbating the political crisis of the Republican Party, which is threatened with historic losses in the November 6 mid-term election. Ryan told the Republican caucus of his decision at a closed-door session Wednesday morning, then disclosed it publicly at a Capitol Hill press conference.

Despite the ritual declarations about wanting to spend more time with his family and the routine denial that his decision had anything to do with the crisis of the Trump administration or the dismal prospects of the Republicans in the upcoming elections, there is little doubt that Ryan is leaving office to avoid going down with a sinking ship, preserving his own viability in some future national political campaign.

Ryan was Mitt Romney's running mate for vice president in 2012, when they lost to the Obama-Biden re-election campaign. He moved up from chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, the chief tax-writing panel, to the speakership in October 2015, when then-Speaker John Boehner unexpectedly resigned amid mounting opposition from the ultra-right Freedom Caucus.

The Freedom Caucus also clashed with Ryan but never directly challenged his authority, joining forces enthusiastically in the tax cut for business and the wealthy enacted in December 2017, which was Ryan's sole major legislative "achievement" as speaker as far as the financial aristocracy was concerned.

Ryan's political career was a demonstration of the rapid and continual shift to the right on the part of the Republican Party, in particular, and the US two-party political system as a whole. First elected in 1998 as one of the youngest congressmen ever, he was notable mainly as an unreconstructed adherent of the ultra-right philosophy of Ayn Rand, whose books he would

recommend with enthusiasm.

Over the years, he became part of the Republican Party establishment, elevated to head the Ways and Means Committee, where he drafted what were considered ground-breaking plans for the demolition of Medicaid and Medicare. In particular, his plan for privatizing Medicare was hailed as a breakthrough by the ultra-right, since it for the first time proposed the outright repeal of one of the core "entitlement" programs established under Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s.

While disguised with claims to advocate sharp reductions in the federal budget deficit, Ryan's targeting of social programs was simply aimed at destroying benefits on which tens of millions of working people rely. When it came to tax cuts for the wealthy and big business, or gargantuan spending on the Pentagon, there was no such concern for the deficit.

This was demonstrated most clearly over the past four months, as the Republican-controlled Congress, with Ryan playing a major role, enacted first a \$1.5 trillion tax cut for business and the super-rich, and then a budget that pumps an equivalent amount over two years into the military. This is what Ryan was referring to when he said he felt free to retire now, based on the "accomplishments" of the current Congress.

After the passage of the tax cut, Ryan declared that the 2018 session of Congress should be devoted to "entitlement reform," i.e., cuts in Social Security and Medicare. However, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell rejected the suggestion, declaring that no such action was possible in an election year. In other words, the Republican Party—and the Democrats—will take up cuts in these entitlement programs, but only in an odd-numbered year.

Commenting on Ryan's retirement, Senate

Democratic Leader Charles Schumer adopted a conciliatory tone, praising this advocate of savage attacks on the poor and elderly as “a good man who is always true to his word.” Schumer continued, “Even though we disagreed on most issues, in the areas where we could work together I always found him to be smart, thoughtful, and straightforward.”

Schumer expressed the hope that Ryan would negotiate with the Democrats more openly than in the past, during his final eight months in the leadership. “With his newfound political freedom,” he said, “I hope the Speaker uses his remaining time in Congress to break free from the hard-right factions of his caucus that have kept Congress from getting real things done. If he’s willing to reach across the aisle, he’ll find Democrats willing and eager to work with him.”

Whatever the personal motives involved—the soon-to-be former speaker can expect to reap a huge personal financial reward from his two decades of political service to the wealthy, far more than a congressional salary—the deteriorating prospects for the Republican Party in the mid-term elections were clearly a factor in Ryan’s departure.

Dozens of Republican representatives have already announced their decision to retire, including at least half a dozen committee chairmen, wielders of considerable personal authority, who did not relish passing into a minority role next year. Ryan faced his own re-election challenge, with Democrat Randy Bryce, an official of the ironworkers union, having raised nearly \$5 million for his campaign in Wisconsin’s First Congressional District.

The speaker’s retirement announcement was followed an hour later by another Republican congressman, Representative Dennis Ross of Florida, who will retire from the Tampa-area seat he has held for six years. Ross’s departure likely opens the door for yet another in the wave of Democratic candidates from a military-intelligence background, who comprise the largest single group of Democratic challengers in competitive seats now held by Republicans.

Andrew Learned, an eight-year veteran of the Marines with three Mideast deployments, is the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination in the primary election set for August 28. According to his campaign website: “He served as an officer in the US Navy for four years on active duty and remains an

officer in the US Navy Reserve with Special Operation Command Central’s reserve unit at MacDill AFB. He’s led teams on boarding missions combating Somali piracy and led planning efforts with the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade during the crisis in Yemen and Syria.”

The next contest in the 2018 congressional election cycle is a special election April 24 in Arizona’s Eighth Congressional District, vacated by the resignation of Republican Representative Trent Franks. The ultra-right congressman was forced to step down after it became known that he had been pressuring female staffers to become surrogate mothers to bear his child, which his wife was unable to do because of medical issues. Former Republican State Senator Debbie Lesko faces Democrat Hiral Tiperneni, an emergency room doctor, in a district in the Phoenix suburbs that is heavily Republican.



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