Mike Johnson as House Speaker: A Christian fascist now second-in-line to White House

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The election of Republican Representative Mike Johnson as Speaker of the House of Representatives puts a Christian fundamentalist supporter of Trump's January 6 coup attempt into the third-highest position in the US government.

In the succession prescribed by the Constitution, Speaker Johnson follows Vice President Kamala Harris in the line of succession to the presidency, should anything befall the 80-year-old and visibly deteriorating Joe Biden.

While the corporate media has presented Johnson as a less threatening face of fascism, compared to bully-boys like Representative Jim Jordan and Matt Gaetz, or Trump himself, his political record is just as reactionary. His elevation marks a further deepening of the US political crisis and the threat of authoritarian rule.

Moreover, in his legislative capacity as the chief decision-maker for the proceedings of the House, Johnson will have enormous influence to dictate government policy to the vast majority of the American people who do not share his authoritarian and regressive views.

Johnson, 51, was first elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 2015 when he ran unopposed for a recently vacated seat. He served in the state house until 2017 at which point he ran for the federal House of Representatives and won. While serving in the House, Johnson is also a professor at Liberty University in Virginia, the evangelical college founded by the Reverend Jerry Falwell. He has preached online classes there since 2018, for which the university has paid him $120,000.

Johnson rose from a minor leadership position to the top of the Republican House Conference after three weeks of vicious infighting, precisely because of his authoritarian and anti-democratic politics, which are characterized above all by his leading role in supporting Trump's failed coup.

Ex-president Donald Trump, who boasted that he "killed" Republican Tom Emmer's speakership bid prior to endorsing Johnson, played a decisive role in Johnson's rise. Unlike Emmer, who voted to certify the 2020 election following the attack on Congress, Johnson led the effort in the House to object to the Electoral College vote following the attack.

Johnson's "legal" interpretation provided a pretext for 139 House Republicans to vote against certifying the election without having to embrace Trump's more farfetched claims that the election was stolen by "Chinese communists" or manipulated using Italian spy satellites. The *New York Times* recently called him "the most important architect of the Electoral College objections" on January 6, 2021, offering Republicans a "third option" that allowed them to vote against certification by citing changes to mail-in voting procedures adopted by states due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the morning of January 6, Johnson tweeted, "We MUST fight for election integrity, the Constitution, and the preservation of our republic! It will be my honor to help lead that fight in Congress today. The statement I drafted summarizes our position and the legal analysis that supports it."

Prior to January 6, Johnson helped craft the December 2020 Texas lawsuit which sought to invalidate the electoral votes of "battleground" states Trump lost. Johnson along with over 100 House Republicans, including then Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (California) signed an amicus brief, which was also co-written by Johnson, in support of the Texas lawsuit which the Supreme Court refused to hear.

After the coup failed, Johnson served on Trump's legal defense team in the 2021 Senate impeachment trial. Johnson was also on Trump's legal team for the 2019 impeachment trial over Ukraine. Trump was acquitted in both trials, although seven Republicans joined 48 Democratic senators and two independents in voting Trump guilty of incitement of insurrection in the 2021 trial.

In the last week, reports uncovering previous interviews given by Johnson have shed more light on his authoritarian politics. In a 2016 interview that has since gone viral online, Johnson claims, "You know, we don't live in a democracy... it's a constitutional republic and the founders set that up because they followed the biblical admonition on what a civil society is supposed to look like."

In the same 2016 interview, which was apparently filmed at billionaire Harlan Crow's private library, Johnson argued that there is not a "separation of church and state" in the US Constitution. Crow is the "friend" and bankroller of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and notorious for his collection of Nazi artifacts.

In addition to serving as a willing tool of Trump's bid for president-dictator and his defender after the fact, Johnson is a typical capitalist politician, bought and paid for many times over by Wall Street.

An October 26 article in Bloomberg notes that Johnson "has already reported donations this year from the political action committees tied to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, defense contractor Northrop Grumman, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, timber company Weyerhaeuser, Visa, Microsoft, Koch Industries, the Boeing Company and the American Bankers Association."

In multiple interviews and statements in the last week, Johnson has affirmed that one of the first orders of business in the Republican House will be passing a multi-billion-dollar military package for Israel so that it can continue to carry out its genocide of the Palestinian people.

"There are lots of things going on around the world that we have to address, and we will. But right now, what's happening in Israel takes the immediate attention, and I think we've got to separate that get it through," Johnson told Maria Bartiromo on Fox News this past Sunday.

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Johnson's zeal for Israel, while consistent with US foreign policy objectives, is rooted in his Christian dominionist outlook. The Louisiana Republican is a "young earth creationist," who believes that the earth was created 6,000 years ago and that in order for Jesus Christ to return to earth from heaven, Jews must be "in-gathered" to the Holy Land where they will engage in an apocalyptic war (and all be slaughtered, according to some interpretations).

In a report on the new fundamentalist speaker, *Mother Jones* wrote that after growing up in a rural area outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, Johnson, "entered the world of Christian conservative policymaking by volunteering for the Louisiana Family Forum while he was still in law school at Louisiana State University."

The Forum is the Louisiana state affiliate of the Family Policy Alliance, the lobbying arm of Focus on the Family. Both the Family Policy Alliance and Focus on the Family were founded by James Dobson, an evangelical leader has worked closely with the Republican Party for decades. After graduating from law school, in 2003 Johnson began working for Alliance Defense Fund, another group created by Dobson, who envisioned the group as a Christian conservative answer to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ADF, which has since been renamed to Alliance Defending Freedom, has ballooned since Johnson started with the organization from a revenue in the single digit millions in the 1990s to over $100 million annually by 2022. Its international subsidiary, Alliance Defending Freedom International, operates in over 100 countries and the *New York Times* has described the organization as the "largest legal force of the religious right."

An investigation by Media Matters for America found that over 100 current and former staff members at ADF worked, or are currently working in the US government.

In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center designated the ADF as an anti-LBGTQ hate group. The SPLC cited the group's support not only for criminalizing homosexual conduct between adults in the US and abroad, but also the group's defense of state-sanctioned sterilization of transgender people.

As senior lawyer and spokesperson for the ADF until September 2010, Johnson spent years fighting against efforts to expand LGBTQ rights, access to abortion and to allow non-profit churches the ability to donate to political candidates.

The ADF, working with right-wing billionaires such as Richard and Helen DeVos and the Koch Foundation, writes model legislation for Republican lawyers and files carefully tailored lawsuits in right-wing districts in order to advance their Christian nationalist goals to the Supreme Court. *Mother Jones* reported that the ADF has advanced 15 cases to the Supreme Court in this fashion, including the lawsuit that is seeking to invalidate the FDA approval for the abortion pill mifepristone.

A report in *Rolling Stone* notes that today ADF has nearly 400 staff members and 3,200 allied attorneys. "The whole point is to have a Christian takeover of the government," Paul Southwick, a lawyer who litigates against ADF frequently told *Rolling Stone*. "In ADF's eyes, God has dominion over the church, but he also has dominion over the state."

"They believe that Christianity will always trump human rights," Southwick said. "Their main goal is to instill biblical and anti-LGBTQ values in government. And that's extremely dangerous when you believe theology is more important than democracy."

In 2003, as chief legal counsel for ADF, Johnson wrote several amicus briefs in favor of the upholding Texas's reactionary anti-gay law in *Lawrence v. Texas*. After the law was overturned by the Supreme Court in a 6-3 decision, Johnson decried in an op-ed the "unelected Supreme Court" for overriding proscriptions against "sodomy."

"States have always maintained the right to discourage the evils of sexual conduct outside marriage, and the state is right to discriminate between heterosexual and homosexual conduct" Johnson wrote, adding, "Homosexuals are capable of changing their abnormal lifestyles."

Johnson left ADF in 2010 to become dean of a religious law school that never materialized after it failed to gain accreditation. In 2015, Johnson founded Freedom Guard, a legal practice in which Johnson, as chief legal counsel, catered exclusively to Christians.

Johnson represented Kentucky county clerk Kim Davis, a zealot who refused to issue marriage licenses to gay couples. Johnson also represented the Ark Encounter project, a Noah's Ark theme park in the city of Williamstown in northern Kentucky that features a "to scale" wooden ark.

As chief counsel for Ark Encounter, Johnson filed multiple lawsuits to ensure the "non-profit" maintained its tax-exempt status. Prior to the construction of the theme park, Johnson wrote an op-ed defending the decision of the Williamstown city council to vote to sell 100 acres of land to Answers in Genesis, for $1.

Answers in Genesis is a fundamentalist Christian creationist group led by Ken Ham, who opened the Ark Encounter theme park in 2016.

In a 2021 interview, Johnson hailed the Ark Encounter as "one way to bring people to this recognition of the truth that, you know, what we read in the Bible are actual historical events, and that there are implication to what you do with all these stories in the Bible there."

In addition to claiming the earth is 6,000 years old and that God punished humanity with a global flood, Ham's theme park claims that humans and dinosaurs lived side-by-side with Noah building the ark big enough to accommodate "up to 85 kinds of dinosaurs."

Since becoming a public figure in the late 1990s and through today, Johnson has blamed mass shootings and increased suicide, not on skyrocketing inequality, the evisceration of any social safety net, or the some 30 years of war waged by US imperialism. Instead, Johnson has blamed teaching evolution in schools, no-fault divorce, and lack of prayer.

As a legislator Johnson has repeatedly backed and sponsored bills that would restrict or defund abortion, including on a national level. In 2022, he co-sponsored federal legislation based on Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law that would prohibit any discussion in public schools for children 10 or under on sexual education or identity.

That Johnson is now second-in-line to succeed the 80-year-old Biden as president of the United States is a sign that large sections of the American ruling class, in the face of enormous opposition by large sections of the population to war, inequality and attacks on democratic rights, have embraced Christian fundamentalism as the ideology that will serve as the governing framework for the neo-fascist Republican Party.

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American capitalism has no use for Enlightenment values such as reason, science and equality. Johnson is a figurehead of a fascist movement that represents a turn to religious obscurantism, authoritarian hierarchies of all kinds, and the destruction of democratic rights.

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