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Philip Elliott

Mike Johnson won the worst job in Washington: speaker of a broken house

Майк Джонсон отримав найгіршу роботу у Вашингтоні: спікер розбитого будинку

Старший кореспондент «Time» Філіп Елліотт повідомляє, що Палата представників США обрала спікером Майка Джонсона, відомого поглядами, близькими до екс-президента США Дональда Трампа. З 2022 року М. Джонсон виступав проти надання Україні військової та будь-якої іншої допомоги, наполягаючи, що допомога Україні не має переважати над внутрішніми питаннями США. М. Джонсон повідомив, що насамперед у Палати представників буде захід із підтримки Ізраїлю в його війні проти Хамаса. Як Білий дім, так і лідер меншості в Сенаті Мітч МакКоннелл закликали Конгрес поєднати фінансування Ізраїлю з грошима для України.

<https://time.com/6328654/mike-johnson-speaker-broken-house/>

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Finally, after 22 days and four nominees, House Republicans on Wednesday finally picked Mike Johnson to replace deposed Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Finally would be the most important word in that previous sentence. Mike Johnson, a largely unknown figure in the GOP and a surprise choice, may be the least.

The embarrassing intra-party squabble that stretched for three weeks and paralyzed Congress grew more perilous with each passing day as government funding deadlines raced closer, a war between Israel's government and Hamas erupted in the Middle East, and Ukraine's defense against Russia became more iffy. The elevation of Johnson, a Louisiana lawyer who arrived in Washington the same month Donald Trump was inaugurated, came so suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere that Johnson's wife couldn't even make it to the Capitol in time to see her husband be elevated to just behind the Vice President in terms of constitutional power.

"She couldn't get a flight in time. This happened sort of suddenly," Johnson said in his first speech as the new face of House Republicans, a fractured collection of competing agendas, ideologies, and personalities that may prove ungovernable in short order.

With a margin of no more than five votes, Johnson is starting his attempt at governing with one of the smallest majorities for a new Speaker in a century. Even his fellow Republicans have doubts about his longevity in the role. The fourth-term lawmaker from Shreveport, La., told his colleagues he would run the chamber by not really running it himself. He promised a decentralized power structure and pledged that lawmakers themselves would have as much autonomy as they believed they needed. Yet he has no plans to change the rule that allowed McCarthy's ouster at the hands of just a handful of troublemakers, leaving Johnson in an equally precarious position and at the mercy of the same mercurial whims of raconteurs.

To listen to Johnson's address on Wednesday, it's tempting to think Republicans had settled on a middle-of-the-road figure who could bridge the deep divides between the parties and even fellow Republicans. "I do look forward to working with you on behalf of the American people. I know we see things from very different points of view," Johnson said, addressing both his new playground and specifically Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries. "But I know that in your heart

you love and care about this country and want to do what's right. So we're going to find common ground."

But it also quickly became clear that Johnson's optimism is matched only by his hard-right credentials. "I don't believe there are any coincidences in a matter like this. I believe that Scripture, the Bible is very clear that God is the one that raises up those in authority. He raised up each of you. All of us," Johnson told the House. "And I believe that God has ordained and allowed us to be brought here for this specific moment in this time."

Johnson's right-wing views will draw plenty of attention in the coming days but he is not an extreme outlier among his fellow House's Republicans. In fact, he became the vice chairman of the conference and earlier served as the chair of the Republican Study Committee, the conservative ideas factory inside the House. Colleagues described him as cordial, even to political opposites. Whereas some in the MAGA wing of the GOP delight in being in-your-face aggressive, Johnson takes a choir-master's lilt and lies in wait until the right moment. All of which, of course, makes for an entirely unpredictable Speakership.

But it's indisputable that Johnson is a different flavor of Republican than his predecessor. While McCarthy dabbled in his share of election denialism after Joe Biden's 2020 victory Johnson was among the biggest—if not loudest—defenders of Trump. Johnson circulated a friend-of-the-court brief in the House, collecting more than 100 signatures during a campaign that some found to be menacing, and on Jan. 6, 2021, he led the effort to keep Trump in power. He has told colleagues that the Biden presidency is one that will have an asterisk attached to it.

Asked about his election denialism on Tuesday, Johnson did not answer. His colleagues told the reporter to "shut up" and booed her.

Around the Capitol, Democratic staffers quickly settled on their theme that Johnson was merely a softer spoken version of Jim Jordan, one of the contenders who sought to follow McCarthy but was deemed too extreme or caustic to be palatable to enough Republicans. Democrats were quick to point out Johnson's opposition to abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, even funding for veterans and Ukrainians. But for now, Johnson is working with the slightest of national profiles, giving him something of a blank slate with the American public. At least for now, he is no Nancy Pelosi or Newt Gingrich, the kind of Speaker who members of the opposite party could invoke and be confident that the ka-ching of fundraising would follow.

Johnson told his colleagues that the House's first item of business would be a measure to support Israel in its war against Hamas, setting the chamber up to do its job for the first time in three full weeks. But that's just one of the pressing items facing this neophyte Speaker who comes to office with one of the thinnest political resumes in decades and with the least experience in 140 years. The White House and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell alike have urged Congress to couple funding for Israel with money for Ukraine. The government is also due to run out of money in mid-November and Johnson has told colleagues to expect another stopgap spending resolution, likely into the new year to avoid a holiday-time threat of a shutdown.

During previous votes on Ukraine and on government funding, Johnson was a nay. But a rank-and-file lawmaker's no—even one he says is mischaracterized—is seldom predictive of what he will allow to come to the floor as Speaker. Or at least that's what lawmakers desperate for the House to return to what passes for functionality are counting on. Then again, the last three weeks

have shown not just how broken the Republican Party has become, but how much Congress is hobbling from crisis to crisis. More than specific pieces of legislation, Johnson's legacy-in-making could well be to fix the half of the Capitol he now controls. Or at least find some spackling to patch the cracks in the plaster.