April 11, 2024 / Speaker Johnson’s next test

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Whizz-o>

NOEL KING (host): Tomorrow, Friday, House Speaker Mike Johnson will travel to Mar-a-Lago to give a joint speech with candidate-slash-defendant Donald J. Trump on election integrity.

Trump likes Johnson. A lot. But on Capitol Hill, Johnson is stuck. He wants to pass legislation to fund the war in Ukraine but hardline members of his caucus are blocking him.

*<CLIP> CONGRESSWOMAN MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE (R-GA), CNN: Mike Johnson has completely betrayed our conference. And his leadership cannot be allowed to continue going forward.*

NOEL: His main antagonist Marjorie Taylor Greene sent a letter to House Republicans Tuesday tearing into Johnson for “surrendering to Democrats” - by which she meant working with them to prevent a government shutdown.

Greene is threatening to call a vote to oust Johnson, and if she does, well, look what happened to Kevin McCarthy.

*<CLIP> HOUSE CLERK: The office of Speaker of the House of the United States House of Representatives is hereby declared vacant. <slams gavel>*

NOEL: Coming up on *Today, Explained*: Speaker Mike Johnson.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> Speaker VOX.*

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*, I’m Noel King, with *New Yorker* staff writer David Kirkpatrick, who’s been writing about Mike Johnson for years. So you might remember that when Johnson became speaker, a lot of people were very surprised, they were like, who is this guy? David Kirkpatrick was NOT surprised because he’d interviewed Johnson.

DAVID KIRKPATRICK (*New Yorker* staff writer): Well, I'll tell you to be honest, I left those conversations and I thought, ‘Wow, this guy is going someplace.’

NOEL: Huh!

DAVID: At that time, he was nobody I'd ever heard of before. But it was clear that he was an extremely capable politician and a charismatic figure. He was a mover inside the conference, if you will.

NOEL: I asked David for Speaker Johnson’s lore.

DAVID: So Mike Johnson grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana.

SCORING <Swampland Blues>

DAVID: His father was a firefighter, a firefighter whose specialty was hazardous materials. And when Mike Johnson was about 12, I believe, in 1984, his father was called to a, a fire at a cold storage facility. And there was a huge explosion. His partner was killed. Johnson's father was very, very badly burned across pretty much all of his body. He narrowly escaped from that fire by crawling through a tiny hole, reportedly just 12in wide. And he was a big guy. So around Shreveport, if you spent any time there, everybody knows the story. Pretty much everybody believes that only a miracle could have saved Mike Johnson's father.

SCORING BUMP

DAVID: After that accident, as his father was slowly, and painfully recuperating, he changed. You know, he was advised to seek a place to live where the air might be a little bit drier, a little bit less humid for his recuperation. And that set him off somehow on a kind of voyage of discovery. And so while young Mike Johnson and his mother and his siblings became more and more committed to their evangelical church in Louisiana, his father drifted into kind of New Age circles…

NOEL: Hmm.

DAVID: … and was married and divorced a few times and became something sort of very different and drifted away from the family. So Johnson – young Mike Johnson went through the kind of shock and trauma of his father's accident, followed by his father's kind of abandonment.

SCORING OUT

DAVID: He becomes, for lack of a better word, a leader in his school community, the kind of boy who the teacher says, ‘Please, you watch the class while I have to go run an errand.’ You know, somebody who, for better or worse, other children look up to. And he takes on that role, you know, and within his own family, his mother begins to treat him like a kind of surrogate father to his three younger siblings.

NOEL: Um, tell me about his time as a theater kid?

DAVID: His friends from Shreveport say that back in the day when he was in high school, he was almost as interested in theater as he was in politics. And as you might guess from the current Mike Johnson, he ran for every student office he could and was involved in the, you know, statewide student government and all that stuff. But he was also a very avid actor. And when he was actually selected by the Republican members of the House to be the new speaker, his mother told an old friend of his like, ‘Oh my goodness, I thought it was just another play that Mike was in. I could hardly believe that it was true.’

NOEL: <laughs> So he likes theater. He likes politics, you know, childhood politics, teenage politics. And then after graduating from high school, where does Mike Johnson go next?

SCORING <Momentum>

DAVID: So Mike Johnson goes to Louisiana State University. I believe he's the first in his family to attend college. And then on to Louisiana State Law School, and begins practicing law. You know, he's grown up in Louisiana as a Southern Baptist, and he has grown up committed to his family's church, very much in tune with the values of that church and of his state. And he's drawn right away to conservative Christian causes. He becomes a protegé of Tony Perkins…

*<CLIP> FORMER LOUISIANA LEGISLATOR TONY PERKINS, CNN: Americans understand: the definition of a marriage is what it’s been for 5,000 years. It’s the union of a man and a woman.*

DAVID: … who's now the head of the Family Research Council and was then a Louisiana state legislator. And right out of law school, he's involved in a very high-profile case against a Baton Rouge abortion clinic.

*<CLIP> REP MIKE JOHNSON (R-LA) Abortion care – the stated topic today – is of course an oxymoron.*

DAVID: It was sort of an exposé where people who had worked at the abortion clinic were trying to expose what they considered poor practices there. And that became the grist for some legal battles and for some legislation to try to place restrictions on abortion clinics in the interest of safety. And also, of course, in the interest of reducing the availability of abortion.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON: There is no right to abortion in the Constitution. Period. Never was. Not in its text. Not in its structure. Not in its meaning.*

SCORING OUT

DAVID: Around the time he was finishing up law school, he was volunteering with an evangelical Christian youth group. And as a volunteer, he would drive his SUV into downtown Baton Rouge and pick up a bunch of kids from what he called “inner city neighborhoods” when he talked to me. And he got to know one young boy whose name was Michael James. One day he goes to pick him up, and he learns from the boy's siblings that he's moved out. He's living in a trailer, I think, crowded with several siblings and a single mother, and they say he's gone. And Mike Johnson says, as he told me, like, ‘What's going on? Where is this kid?’ And they say, ‘Oh, he's out behind the Walmart.’ So Johnson drives over there and sure enough, this young man, at the age of about 14, had set himself up in a cardboard box and was planning just to take up residence behind the Walmart. So Johnson says, you know, ‘Get out of there, get in the car.’ Takes him home. And, the young man effectively moves in with Mike Johnson and his young wife.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON: We took custody of Michael and made him part of our family 22 years ago, when we were just newlyweds, and Michael was just 14 and out on the streets and nowhere to go and on a very dangerous path.*

DAVID: He didn't live with them continuously. I think from time to time he would make an effort to move back in with his birth mother, always unsuccessfully. But he went back to the Johnsons, and he lived with them off and on for, I think, three years before Mike Johnson moved back to Shreveport, his hometown. And his son, as Johnson refers to him, James, moved out on his own to Florida at the age of 18.

NOEL: This story that you told in 2024 is a bit of a Rorschach test. How does the, the now-adult Michael James – how does he tell this story when he speaks publicly?

DAVID: He doesn't often speak publicly. He declined to talk to me. But the *Daily Mail*, the intrepid British tabloid…

NOEL: <chuckles>

DAVID: …did reach him by phone at his home in Los Angeles, where he's now a father himself with a few kids. And, he was very grateful. He feels like the Johnsons – Mike Johnson and his wife – really saved his, his life. That he would have ended up in prison or worse had it not been for the Johnsons’ intervention. So I know a lot of people on the left are prone to all kinds of conspiracy theories about Mike Johnson and his adopted black son…

*<CLIP> “SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE”, BIDEN: So how did you end up Speaker?  
JOHNSON: No one knows! And this is my adult Black son. <crowd laughs> Also named Michael.  
JAMES: Hey guys, I’m his adult Black son. I’m only 11 years younger than him and I’m kind of a secret. <laughter>*

DAVID: … but the adopted black son gives Mike Johnson a lot of credit.

NOEL: All right, so Mike Johnson is now a young lawyer. He goes on to have four children of his own. So add father to it. When does he add politician to the resume?

DAVID: Well, I think, if we're being frank, it was always clear that he was gonna end up in politics.

NOEL: Hmm.

DAVID: You know, he went into practicing law as an advocate for conservative Christian causes, at what is now the Alliance Defending Freedom. His colleagues there said even then they used to refer to him as the Senator from Louisiana.

NOEL: <laughs>

DAVID: You know, his political – his political interests and his political skills were evident from the get-go. And he was always sort of poking around in that direction, you know, it was not a surprise to see him later run for office, initially as a member of the Louisiana state legislature.

*<CLIP> MSNBC-W: Louisiana is the latest state to introduce a controversial religious freedom bill.   
JOHNSON, 2015: Religious freedom – and the protection of religious freedom against government intrusion – is a state interest of the highest order.*

DAVID: So he ran for office, around 2014. So that's a period when gay rights are a big issue around the country. The United States is moving towards legalization of gay marriage and acceptance of gay marriage. He was coming from a background as a conservative Christian legislator. And so some of his signature issues were opposing gay rights, you know, and trying to put forward legislation that would protect, as he put it, conservative Christians from having to accept gay marriage.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON, MSNBC-W: None of us here in this warm welcoming state are in favor of discrimination, but we are in favor of protecting our freedom.*

DAVID: It didn't become law in Louisiana, but that's what he was most known for.

SCORING <All Thumbs>

DAVID: It's a winner for him. You know, he's from northwest Louisiana, which is the part of Louisiana that's culturally very much like Texas, a conservative Protestant Southern Baptist area. And he is – he's very much in tune with a majority of his constituents in that district. And so he, he, he was, I think, quite popular and successful and well-positioned to, to move on to national office.

NOEL: *The New Yorker*’s David Kirkpatrick. He’ll be back with us. Coming up: Mr. Johnson goes to Washington.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> “SNL”, JOHNSON: No, I’m not an aide. I’m new Speaker of the House Mike Johnson.   
BIDEN: Oh, I see. Alright. Who?   
JOHNSON: Mike Johnson. <laughter> No one’s gonna forget that.*

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. We’re back. As is David Kirkpatrick of *The New Yorker*. As is Mike Johnson. We’re going to pick up his story in 2017. That is the year he gets into national office – and that is ALSO the year President Donald Trump gets into national office.

NOEL: What is that relationship like initially?

DAVID: You know, it's interesting that you should ask. When Donald Trump rode down the golden escalator and first appeared on the national stage, Johnson was very skeptical. You know, he wrote on Facebook, you know, this guy is problematic.

*<CLIP> TEX SENIOR PRODUCER AVISHAY ARTSY READING FACEBOOK POST: The thing about Donald Trump is that he lacks the character and the moral center we desperately need again in the White House… I am afraid he would break more things than he fixes. He is a hot head by nature, and that is a dangerous trait to have in a commander in chief.*

DAVID: But, you know, as the primaries went on and as Mike Johnson himself, entered the primary for a Republican congressional seat from Shreveport, he came around. And he became an early and steadfast Trump supporter. You know, that class of lawmakers, all the class of lawmakers who were elected in the Republican Party with Trump at the top of the ticket kind of bear the mark of Trump. They tend to be a little bit more Trump and a little bit less Reagan than their predecessors. And that's very much true of Johnson.

NOEL: How does Johnson then begin to build his own political power in Washington?

DAVID: So Johnson arrives in Washington with a lot of connections.

SCORING <All these pieces drifting into place>

DAVID: Because he's come up through the Alliance Defending Freedom, which is an increasingly important part of the Christian conservative movement. He was actually on a kind of leadership panel of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest Protestant denomination in the US, advising the convention on politics. He was sort of one of the heads of its political arm. So he shows up really well-connected on the right, especially the Christian right. And that's kind of his foundation. So early on – actually, in his second term – he's elected the chairman of the Republican Study Committee.

NOEL: Hmm.

DAVID: It's kind of a quasi establishment conservative movement and in fact includes a majority of Republican House members. So already in his second term, Mike Johnson is the chairman of a body that represents most of the conference. It's become a frequent springboard to leadership. And he's already clearly in the running.

SCORING OUT

DAVID: When you look on paper and when you lay out his career as we just have, he looks like he's on a rocket ship to the top. And he's terrifically ambitious, which is true. But he comes out of his southern, and conservative Christian upbringing with a terrific set of manners.

NOEL: Huh!

DAVID: As some Democrat said to me, he is by far the most polite member of the far right that you will meet in the US Congress.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON: Hakeem Jeffries and I are colleagues and friends, and I have a good relationship with him. <fade down>*

DAVID: He has a very humble, deferential manner that he brings to his rise through Republican politics. And that sets the stage for 2020.

SCORING <Scanning the Horizon NO DRONE>

DAVID: After the 2020 election, when Trump becomes embroiled in challenging his loss, his defeat to Joe Biden, he reaches out right away to Mike Johnson. Initially just to vent, but as the weeks go on, it becomes clear that Trump is calling on the Republican members of Congress to try to reject the outcome of the vote. This puts the Republican lawmakers in quite a bind, because Trump's arguments were mostly bogus, right? There's no evidence to show that the vote was rigged. So what is the thinking lawmaker to do? And in this moment, when Republicans in the House are feeling quite a bit of squeeze, right – Trump is demanding one thing and their constituents are all with him. And on the other hand, any sense of rationality or integrity is demanding something different – Mike Johnson presents a solution.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON, CBS: The argument that we presented to the court - which is our only avenue to do so – was that the constitution was clearly violated in the 2020 election.*

DAVID: He says, basically, and I'm kind of paraphrasing loosely here. ‘Hey guys, we don't need to worry about the question of evidence because there's a purely legal, purely constitutional argument we can use to try to find fault with this electoral outcome. And that is that many states, because of the pandemic, took emergency measures to make it easier to vote. In fact, in many places, state officials, election officials or secretaries of state or even judges ordered or imposed these rule changes. But look, we find in the Constitution, in one of the earlier articles, it says that election rules are supposed to be set by the state legislature.’

*<CLIP> JOHNSON, CBS: The constitution was violated in the run-up to the 2020 election. Not – not always in bad faith, but in the aftermath of covid, many states changed their election laws in ways that violated that plain language. That’s just a fact.*

SCORING OUT

DAVID: On the eve of January 6th, when it's usually the job of the house to kind of ceremonially certify the results of the Electoral college, he stands up at a meeting of the Republican caucus, and he says, ‘I think that on the basis of these usual infirmities, we have an obligation to reject the results from several states.’ Now, that's an argument that is novel, you know, has never really been exactly tested by the Supreme Court at that time. And politically, it's very convenient for the lawmakers. And quite a few, a majority of the Republican conference, follows him and votes to reject the electors from several states, all states that Biden had won with Republican legislatures.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON: We have a responsibility today. The slates of electors produced under those modified laws are thus unconstitutional. Given these inescapable facts, we believe we have no choice today but to vote to sustain objections to those slates of electors.*

DAVID: And so it’s – comes as a surprise to the public, but maybe not so much of a surprise to the members of the Republican caucus when he emerges out of nowhere to become the speaker after the fall of his predecessor, Kevin McCarthy.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON, SPEECH: First, a few words of gratitude. I want to thank Leader Jeffries. 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, but I know that in your heart you love and care about this country and you wanna do what’s right. And so we’re gonna find common ground there, all right? <applause, fade under>*

NOEL: How would you characterize his tenure since he's been speaker? Is there anything that Johnson is just doing better than McCarthy? Like, simply just out-politicking his, his predecessor?

DAVID: Well, he's definitely different than McCarthy. And I guess it's too soon to say better or worse. You know, Johnson's critics would say lawmakers want to be led. They want a strong hand. They want decisions. They want risk-taking. If you tell them what to do, they want to follow. Johnson and his supporters would say, well, maybe in ordinary times, but we're talking about a 1 or 2 vote majority with a lot of differences within the conference, and that's just not going to fly. The only way to lead the Republican Conference is through consensus.

*<CLIP> JOHNSON: I think that the conference is really not that far apart. Look, we all want the same things. Whether you’re Freedom Caucus or you’re from a district that President Biden won, all Republicans want the same things. We want lower spending <fade down>*

DAVID: The big difference with McCarthy is Johnson is able to say, ‘Look, I am a hard line conservative. You know, these conservatives are criticizing me and saying, oh, you're compromising too much. But look at my record. Look at who I've been and where I've come from. Look at the attacks I'm receiving for the left. I am one of you.’ And so his shtick, if you will, as speaker, is a kind of a “Nixon in China” act.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: We have at times in the past been enemies. We have great differences today. What brings us together is that we have common interests, which transcend those differences.*

DAVID: So he's able to say, ‘Look, I'm a conservative. You can trust that. In my heart, I am as conservative as they get. In fact, there is no one further to the right than me. And that's why you can trust that, absolutely, I wouldn't be compromising unless I have to, but I have to.’ And so that's the position that he’s in, and that's the style that he's tried to put forward.

NOEL: I wonder if you can take an informed guess at where Speaker Johnson might be heading. It doesn't sound like this is a man that we've – we will have seen the end of if things don't work out for him in the speaker role.

DAVID: I think that's right. He's a young man. He's in his early 50s. He's become the speaker of the House after very few terms. I think only one previous speaker has risen to that role as quickly. So he's got somethin’. I think that he is going to try to move some bill to try to provide funding to Ukraine. I think that he and his friends would say that's because he is still a Reaganite believer in peace through strength. And he's not going to let Putin walk through Ukraine. Cynics would say it's also political suicide to let Republicans be blamed for losing Ukraine. So I don't think he's going to do that. Will he be removed? I don't know. And nobody knows.

SCORING <All Thumbs>

DAVID: What happens next? Cynically, I noticed that one of the measures that he's brought up to try to attach to the Ukraine funding would remove restrictions on natural gas, which would be a big perk to his home state. Is there a part of him that's thinking, ‘Look, if I get booted as speaker, I could be governor, I could be senator?’ I don't know, but I do think it's safe to say that we have not seen the last of Mike Johnson.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: We have seen the last of *The New Yorker’*s David Kirkpatrick. For now. Today’s episode was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and edited by Amina al-Sadi. David Herman is our engineer. Laura Bullard is keepin’ ‘em on their toes. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

The rest of the team includes Hady Mawajdeh, Victoria Chamberlin, Jesse Alejandro Cottrell, Haleema Shah and Avishay Artsy, Rob Byers, Patrick Boyd, supervising editor Matthew Collette who is coll-out this week. Miranda Kennedy, EP. Sean Rameswaram, co-host. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder and Noam Hassenfeld.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]