

# [***To pass Ukraine aid, 'Reagan Republican' leaders in Congress navigated a party transformed by Trump***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW6-68B1-DYMD-60YM-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — For Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Mike Johnson, the necessity of providing Ukraine with weapons and other aid as it fends off Russia's invasion is rooted in their earliest and most formative political memories.

McConnell, 82, tells the story of his father’s letters from Eastern Europe in 1945, at the end of World War II, when the foot soldier observed that the Russians were “going to be a big problem” before the communist takeover to come. Johnson, 30 years younger, came of age as the Cold War was ending.

As both men pushed their party this week to support a [*$95 billion aid package*](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-aid-israel-gaza-taiwan-c0645ad3f47f9d919c8988a98593e887) that sends support to Ukraine, as well as Israel, Taiwan and humanitarian missions, they labeled themselves “Reagan Republicans” an described the fight against Russian President Vladimir Putin in terms of U.S. strength and leadership. But the all-out effort to get the [*legislation through Congress*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-ukraine-aid-tiktok-senate-8fe738b17e5c4b2636bc0de11b2620b7) left both of them grappling with an entirely new Republican Party shaped by former President Donald Trump.

While McConnell, R-Ky., and Johnson, R-La., took different approaches to handling Trump, the presumptive White House nominee in 2024, the struggle highlighted the fundamental battle within the GOP: Will conservatives continue their march toward Trump’s “America First” doctrine on foreign affairs or will they find the value in standing with America's allies? And is the GOP still the party of Ronald Reagan?

“I think we’re having an internal debate about that,” McConnell said in an interview with The Associated Press. “I’m a Reagan guy and I think today — at least on this episode — we turned the tables on the isolationists.”

Still, he acknowledged, “that doesn’t mean they’re going to go away forever.”

McConnell, in the [*twilight of his 18-year tenure*](https://apnews.com/article/mitch-mcconnell-senate-republican-leader-stepping-down-ba478d570a4561aa7baf91a204d7e366) as Republican leader, lauded a momentary victory Tuesday as a healthy showing of 31 Republicans voted for the foreign aid; that was nine more than had supported it in February. He said that was a trend in the right direction.

McConnell, who has been in the Senate since 1985, said passing the legislation was “one of the most important things I’ve ever dealt with where I had an impact."

But it wasn’t without cost.

He said last month he would [*step away*](https://apnews.com/article/mitch-mcconnell-senate-republican-leader-stepping-down-ba478d570a4561aa7baf91a204d7e366) from his job as leader next year after internal clashes over the money for Ukraine and the direction of the party.

For Johnson, just six months into his job as speaker, the political crosscurrents are even more difficult. He is [*clinging to his leadership post*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-johnson-democrats-vacate-ukraine-e506951def3f78cf637274d230b89152) as right-wing Republicans threaten to oust him for putting the aid to Ukraine to a vote. While McConnell has embraced American leadership abroad his entire career, Johnson only recently gave complete support to the package.

Johnson has been careful not to portray passage as a triumph when a majority of his own House Republicans opposed the bill. He skipped a celebratory news conference afterward, describing it as “not a perfect piece of legislation” in brief remarks.

But he also borrowed terms popularized by Reagan, saying aggression from Russia, China and Iran “threatens the free world and it demands American leadership.”

“If we turn our backs right now, the consequences could be devastating,” he said.

Hard-line conservatives, including some who are threatening [*a snap vote*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-johnson-motion-vacate-marjorie-taylor-greene-3461bd8b95e718e178132ac16f36562a) on his leadership, are irate, saying the aid was vastly out of line with what Republican voters want. They condemned both Johnson and McConnell for supporting it.

“House Republican leadership sold out Americans and passed a bill that sends $95 billion to other countries,” said Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama, who opposed the bill. He said the legislation "undermines America's interests abroad and paves our nation's path to bankruptcy.”

Johnson has been lauded by much of Washington for doing what he called “the right thing" at a perilous moment for himself and the world.

“He is fundamentally an honorable person,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who brokered the negotiations and spent hours on the phone and in meetings with Johnson, McConnell and the White House.

Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, said Johnson and McConnell “both showed great resolve and backbone and true leadership at a time it was desperately needed.”

When McConnell began negotiations over President Joe Biden's initial aid request last year, he quickly set the terms for a deal. He and Schumer agreed to pair any aid for Ukraine with help for Israel, Schumer said, and McConnell demanded policy changes at the U.S. border with Mexico.

On McConnell's mind, he said, was that Trump was “unenthusiastic” about providing more aid to Kyiv. Yet McConnell, whose office displays a portrait of every Republican president since Reagan with the exception of Trump, had a virtually nonexistent relationship with the man he often refers to not by name, but simply as “the former president.”

Still, Trump would prove to hold powerful sway. When a deal on border security neared completion after months of work, Trump eviscerated the proposal as insufficient and a “gift” to Biden's reelection. Conservatives, including Johnson, [*rejected it out of hand*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-aid-border-security-386dcc54b29a5491f8bd87b727a284f8#:~:text=A%20pairing%20of%20border%20policies,election%2Dyear%20politics%20set%20in.).

With the border deal dead, McConnell pushed ahead with Schumer on the foreign aid, with the border policies stripped out, solidifying their unusual alliance. The Senate leaders met weekly throughout the negotiation.

“We disagreed on a whole lot, but we really stuck together,” Schumer said.

“We just persisted. We could not give up on this."

Meanwhile, a small group of GOP senators began working on an idea they thought could give Johnson some political wiggle room. Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Kevin Cramer of North Dakota and Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma took an idea that Trump had raised — structuring the aid to Ukraine as a loan — and tried to make it reality.

Through a series of phone calls with Trump, several House members, as well as the speaker, they worked to structure roughly $9 billion in economic aid for Ukraine as forgivable loans — just as it was in the final package.

“Our approach this time was to make sure that the ***politics*** were set, meaning that President Trump is on board,” Mullin said.

The conversations culminated in [*Johnson making a quick jaunt to Florida*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-speaker-johnson-maralago-congress-c6eaace204882df054795cf70a5fe60a), where he stood side by side with Trump at his Florida club just days before moving ahead with the Ukraine legislation in the House.

It was all enough, with Democratic help, to get the bill across the finish line. The legislation, which Biden [*signed into law*](https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-mike-johnson-ukraine-israel-b72aed9b195818735d24363f2bc34ea4) on Wednesday, included some revisions from the Senate bill, including the loan structure and a provision to seize frozen Russian central bank assets to rebuild Ukraine. Nine GOP senators who had opposed the first version of the bill swung to “yes” largely because of the changes Johnson had made.

The result was a strong showing for the foreign aid in the Senate, even though the decision could prove costly for Johnson.

What comes next on Ukraine is anyone's guess.

While the $61 billion for Ukraine in the package is expected to help the country withstand Moscow's offensive this year, more assistance will surely be needed. Republicans, exhausted after a grueling fight, largely shrugged off questions about the future.

“This one wasn’t easy,” Mullin said.

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