

# [***Doing 'the right thing' may cost Johnson his speaker's gavel***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTV-18Y1-DY7V-G00J-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; It took less than six months for [*Speaker Mike Johnson*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/politics/mike-johnson-ukraine-aid/index.html) to reach his existential moment.

The Louisiana Republican has arrived at fateful but familiar crossroads where he must either choose to honor a conventional vision of US national interests or side with the wrecking ball antics of his party's far-right bloc.

It's a choice with which his immediate predecessors - Kevin McCarthy, Paul Ryan and John Boehner - wrestled before him. Their refusal to lead the US into debt or financial crises or to compromise America's global role ended up driving them into political oblivion.

Now, as Johnson tries to pass [*billions of dollars in aid*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/politics/ukraine-israel-foreign-aid-bill) to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan - vital to protecting US allies from Russian, Iranian and Chinese totalitarianism and preserving US power and prestige - he's having to put his own job on the line to confront GOP extremists who accuse him of betraying the party's base.

"When you do the right thing, you let the chips fall where they may," Johnson said in an [*interview with CNN's Jake Tapper*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/04/17/the-lead-house-speaker-mike-johnson-foreign-aid-bills-votes-jake-tapper.cnn) on Wednesday ahead of three critical days that could decide whether he can cling to his gavel.

The prospects for the rookie speaker look grim. His tiny majority means he can't afford to lose more than one GOP vote to pass a bill on a party-line vote. And two hardliners, Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Thomas Massie of Kentucky, are threatening to call a vote to oust him if he puts the Ukraine bill on the floor.

Other right-wing Republicans are warning Johnson must make $60 billion in Ukraine aid conditional on tough new border security measures despite the party's trashing of the most conservative immigration compromise in decades at presumptive GOP nominee Donald Trump's behest.

Schism in GOP could drive Johnson out

The schism in the GOP highlights how Trump has eroded the party's internationalist principles in favor of his "America First" creed. Lawmakers like Greene and Texas Rep. Chip Roy counter traditional national security arguments by warning there is no greater US interest than protecting the southern border, following high levels of crossing by undocumented migrants in recent months.

Roy, who is yet to decide whether to back an effort to oust Johnson, told CNN Wednesday that he was "disappointed" in the speaker and was "past the point of giving grace." Johnson's increasing vulnerability on this issue is particularly acute since he was also arguing for months that there could be no Ukraine aid without using the same measure to force the White House to introduce draconian measures at the US border with Mexico.

Rising right-wing opposition to his foreign aid plans has left Johnson in a deeply vulnerable position. To even pass a rule to set up a cascading series of votes on the bills this weekend, Johnson is almost certain to need Democratic votes. The minority party may also have to save him if Greene calls up her motion to vacate the speaker's chair - a step several Democrats say they are prepared to take to ensure that Ukraine aid will pass at a moment when Kyiv warns it will lose its war of survival without urgent help. This could save Johnson in the short term. But a GOP speaker dependent on Democratic votes will be seen by many Republicans as a tool of the minority party and would be on borrowed time.

Johnson's problem is a more extreme version of one that has dogged Republican speakers for years. A strong but small group of right-wing Republicans elected on absolutist platforms in deep-red districts comes to Washington with an expansive agenda and adamant they won't compromise with Democrats. But they lack the power or numbers to force their will apart from in the rare phases when Republicans have a monopoly on Washington power. The frustrated extremists then turn on GOP leaders and accuse them of becoming traitors - simply because they live in the land of political reality.

For example, Greene told CNN's Manu Raju on Wednesday: "I don't know how long people are going to tolerate this because he is doing nothing but serving the Democrats."

'We won't get everything we want'

Johnson, who is facing claims that he's sold out despite being possibly the most conservative speaker in history, tried to explain his constraints in the interview with Tapper. "The Republicans run the House. We have the smallest majority in the House. The Democrats are in charge of the Senate and the White House. So, by definition, we won't get everything we want," he said.

The idea, however, that the party should settle for something less than an absolutist position is not one that flies in the modern GOP, where stunt ***politics*** that play well on conservative media are as important as legislating. "There's certain members that just prefer the minority," Texas GOP Rep. Dan Crenshaw, who supports sending new aid to Ukraine, told CNN's Raju. "It's easier, just, you can always just be against something, you never really have to work."

The speaker had seemed to buy himself some time after traveling to Mar-a-Lago last week to bolster Trump's false claims of election fraud and securing in return about the strongest public endorsement the ex-president is likely to give. Johnson "is doing a very good job," Trump said. Logic suggests that the presumptive GOP nominee has an interest in delaying a third debacle over electing a GOP speaker since the party won the majority in the 2022 midterm elections because it might distract from his own campaign to take back the White House. Yet Greene, one of Trump's top supporters, hasn't taken his hint and is still determined to bring Johnson down. The speaker might be wise not to trust Trump. Loyalty to others is a fungible commodity for the ex-president. Once Trump senses an associate is vulnerable or no longer serves his political interests, he usually casts them loose.

Johnson's push to put foreign aid bills on the floor separately ahead of a possible attempt to jam them together to send to the Senate - another move infuriating hardliners - might be a logical solution in a normal House. In this way, those who oppose Ukraine aid on principle could vote against it, allowing Democrats who support it to ensure its passage. There could be a strong bipartisan vote to help Israel, days after Iran's air attacks, and to support Taiwan, which is increasingly vulnerable to China's massive military buildup. And Republicans could get cover by voting for a separate bill that Johnson plans to put on the floor strengthening border security. But the extreme polarization of the GOP majority - and the lack of maneuvering room Johnson has after the "red wave" failed to materialize in the 2022 midterms - gives individual members the opportunity to create chaos and makes governing all but impossible.

On Wednesday evening, for example, in another defeat for Johnson, the House Rules Committee recessed because it was unable to pass a rule on the border security bill, with Republicans threatening to vote against the measure in committee.

Johnson's tonal shift on Ukraine

One of the most interesting aspects of Johnson's new strategy is the way that he is now forcibly arguing about the need for the US to send billions of dollars in aid to its allies. (In order to placate some Republicans, some economic aid to Ukraine has been refashioned as a loan). As a backbencher, Johnson voted against sending more funds to Ukraine several times and he's been careful in his six months as speaker not to get too far ahead of GOP critics of bankrolling Kyiv's war effort.

But on Wednesday, he was making the kind of foreign policy argument that could have been voiced by any GOP leader from President Dwight Eisenhower to President George W. Bush - one that was a clear departure from Trumpism.

"We are going to stand by Israel, our close ally and dear friend, and we're going to stand for freedom and make sure that Vladimir Putin doesn't march through Europe. These are important responsibilities," Johnson told Tapper. "Since World War II, really, the responsibility for the free world has been shifted onto our shoulders. And we accept that role. We're an exceptional nation."

Johnson added: "We're the greatest nation on the planet, and we have to act like it. And we have to project to Putin and Xi and Iran and North Korea and anybody else that we will defend freedom."

It was not immediately clear what has prompted Johnson's change of emphasis.

The shocking magnitude of Iran's missile and drone attack on Israel last week - even if it was largely repelled by US, Israeli, British and Jordanian military forces - has concentrated minds on Capitol Hill about the urgency of replenishing the Israeli arsenal.

Ukraine's need is even more acute. Russia has continued relentless attacks on civilians and infrastructure, and there have been multiple warnings from top US defense and intelligence officials that without Biden's vitally needed aid package, Kyiv could lose the war. "I think we're already seeing things on the battlefield begin to shift a bit in terms of in Russia's favor," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee Wednesday. The implications for a Russian victory would be grave and create new security threats to the West in Europe. And the possibility that the United States would abandon a fellow democracy under assault from a ruthless leader in the Kremlin would shatter the country's reputation abroad and weaken its power as a result. That may be a stain the speaker doesn't want on his conscience or as part of his legacy.

Johnson, unlike his extremist members, has responsibilities as speaker - one of the great offices of state that go beyond short-term political interests. And he's been under relentless pressure from foreign leaders, as well as the White House. Biden, for instance, warned in a Wall Street Journal article Wednesday that "both Ukraine and Israel are under attack by brazen adversaries that seek their annihilation."

If Johnson can somehow engineer passage of the bills aiding Israel and Ukraine this weekend, he'd be bolstering a global leadership role the US played for decades. It's a measure of how much the GOP has changed that such a role might be considered political apostasy and could cost him his job.

But he told reporters on Wednesday evening, while making the case that military aid for Ukraine was now critical, "I'm doing here what I believe to be the right thing."

"History judges us for what we do."

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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