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A portrait of Mike Johnson, a man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking slightly to the right with a subtle smile. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with a faint, ornate architectural detail on the right. The word "TIME" is printed in large, light-colored serif letters at the top.

The Survivor

HOW MIKE JOHNSON
DEALS IN TRUMP'S
WASHINGTON

by ERIC CORTELLESA
& NIK POPLI

TIME Magazine

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How Mike Johnson Became Trump's Speaker

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The Brief August 7, 2025

Mike Johnson wins for the White House, U.K. police plan arrests at a Palestine Action protest, and more

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“Don’t you ever want revenge?” Donald Trump asked Mike Johnson.

It was late May, and the President was in the Speaker’s office venting about House Republicans who were standing in the way of his signature tax-and-spending legislation, the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill. Trump was half-kidding, but he expected allegiance, not agita. Johnson explained that seeking vengeance cut against his Christian faith. When the President gave him a stone-faced look, the Speaker offered a more practical reason: with a narrow majority, vendettas aren’t an option. “We don’t have the luxury,” he told Trump.

Johnson became Speaker of the House in October 2023, emerging from relative obscurity to take what one of his Republican predecessors, John Boehner, calls “the toughest job in America.” It requires managing a conference that has for years been nearly ungovernable, while pleasing a President who expects total obeisance and tends to turn on congressional leaders who don’t deliver on his demands. Expectations for Johnson in Washington were low.

But he has defied them. Since Trump’s Inauguration, Johnson has shepherded a series of wins for the White House: thwarting a vote blocking Trump’s sweeping tariffs, passing the Laken Riley Act expediting the deportation of arrested migrants, averting a government shutdown, and delivering pro-crypto legislation that blesses certain digital assets tied to the U.S. dollar.

[video id=ObiX7D4N autostart="viewable"]

Trump’s megabill was on a different scale, a nearly \$4 trillion supply-side bet that lower taxes for Big Business and the rich can stimulate enough economic growth to offset dramatic cuts in basic services for the poor. It slashes support to states for their Medicaid and food-stamp programs, and enforces work requirements that could strip health care coverage from an estimated 11.8 million people. It allocates \$170 billion to complete a

southern border wall and turbo-charge Trump's deportation operations. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) -estimates the One Big Beautiful Bill Act will add \$3.4 trillion or more to the national debt over the next decade. (Johnson argues it will do the opposite.) In the weeks before it came to a vote, polls showed that more than half of Americans opposed it.

But Johnson got it done. "It was very methodical, step by step," the Louisiana native tells TIME on July 8, sitting in his ornate Capitol office, where a framed LSU football jersey with Mr. Speaker on the back hangs behind his desk. It took quiet negotiations with competing House factions; a high-stakes roll of the dice on the House floor; and, most of all, leveraging Trump's popularity to pressure dissenters. "Getting the One Big Beautiful Bill across the finish line," Vice President J.D. Vance tells TIME, "was a defining moment of his speakership."

As Speaker, Johnson is not a pugilist like Newt Gingrich, nor an iron-fisted vote counter like Nancy Pelosi. As he sees it, Trump won the presidency with a mandate to reshape government, and his role is to execute that vision. Johnson has given the President what he previously lacked: a Speaker willing to turn the House into an instrument of Trump's agenda. "We are a well-oiled machine now," Johnson says. "That's a very different dynamic than what took place in the first term."

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That dynamic, critics say, compromises traditional Republican principles and surrenders the independent power of Congress to placate the President. “Is he a rubber stamp, or Speaker of the House?” Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York tells TIME. Johnson has handed Congress’s constitutional authority to impose tariffs and approve acts of war to the White House, while looking the other way as Trump ignores the law it passed banning TikTok in the U.S. He also sent his members home a day early to defuse a fight over releasing files about the deceased sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein, whose past relationship with the President has led to a rift within Trump’s base. But Johnson has succeeded in Trump’s GOP in part by aligning the Legislative Branch behind Trump’s goals. It’s a collaboration that is changing America.

Not long before he squeaked Trump’s megabill through the House, Johnson feared it all might fall apart. Trump and Johnson had set a July 4 deadline to sign the measure into law. Around 2 a.m. on July 3, the Speaker was still nine votes shy of clearing a major hurdle: passing a rule setting terms for consideration of the bill on the House floor. Tucked in his private hideaway office in the Capitol, Johnson got word from a lieutenant that they might be able to win over an unlikely agitator: Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky.

Johnson was skeptical. Massie was such a perpetual thorn in the side of the GOP that House leaders didn’t bother to whip his vote anymore. But when Representative Tim Burchett brought him into Johnson’s office, Massie was willing to deal. He told Johnson that the attack ads Trump’s super PAC had been running against him in his own district were devastating, according to multiple sources familiar with the exchange. He was open to advancing the bill, though not voting for its final passage, in exchange for a truce.

Johnson got Trump on the phone, and the trio struck a compromise, the sources say: Massie would vote for the rules package, and Trump would stop the ads. (Massie’s office did not respond to multiple requests for comment.) With Massie on board, the procedural motion passed on the House floor an hour later, setting the stage for the bill to pass.

Johnson had prayed for such a breakthrough hours earlier, in the Capitol chapel with his wife. For the Speaker, the product of an unplanned pregnancy, religion has long been a cornerstone of his life. His parents, who were high school sweethearts raised in the Catholic Church, rejected the advice of friends to have an abortion. When Johnson was a 12-year-old growing up in Shreveport, his father Pat, a firefighter, was called to a cold-storage plant because of an anhydrous ammonia leak. An explosion erupted inside the facility, engulfing both Pat Johnson and his partner in flames. Pat Johnson suffered severe burns; at the hospital, doctors gave him a 5% chance of survival. His son dropped to his knees to pray that God spare his father. After dozens of surgeries, Pat Johnson defied the odds. “God kind of miraculously saved his life,” the Speaker says. “Faith became a very real thing to me.”

Johnson became the first member of his family to attend college, and stayed at LSU for law school. He became a constitutional lawyer, working on religious-liberty cases and causes connected to the Christian right. In 2004, for instance, he defended a -Louisiana -constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Then, in 2015, a Louisiana state representative called to say he was leaving his office for a judgeship, and suggested Johnson make a bid for the seat. Johnson ran unopposed. He had been in the gig for only a few months when then Congressman John Fleming called to say he was running for the U.S. Senate, and urged Johnson to replace him. Johnson emerged from a field of seven opponents, entering Congress in January 2017, the same month Trump first took the oath of office.

One morning that April, Johnson answered a call from an unknown number. “Is this Congressman Johnson?” a woman asked. “The President would like to speak with you.” Johnson braced for a tough exchange. Trump had been trying to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Earlier in the week, Johnson told Speaker Paul Ryan that he wouldn’t support the measure because it was projected to raise health care costs in his district by 30%.

Trump didn’t wait to get past the pleasantries. “Mike, you’re going to be a yes on this bill,” he said, according to Johnson. As the freshman tried to explain his position, Trump cut him off. “Mike. You’re going to be a yes.” But Johnson refused until his amendments were added. Far from starting a

feud with Trump, Johnson says the episode laid a groundwork for their future partnership. “I think he actually respected that I had that resolve,” Johnson says.



Because of his legal background, the freshman secured a spot on the House Judiciary Committee. When Trump faced his first impeachment in 2019, he offered Johnson a place on his legal defense team. The next year, Johnson was one of the 147 Republicans in Congress who voted to overturn the result of the 2020 election and declare Trump the winner. When Trump was impeached a second time for inciting the Jan. 6 attack, Johnson again served on his impeachment defense team. His profile in Congress was rising, having served as chair of the Republican Study Committee, a powerful group of House conservatives, and then becoming vice chair of the Republican conference. But he was still relatively unknown until Florida Representative Matt Gaetz orchestrated the ouster of Republican Speaker Kevin McCarthy in October 2023.

One by one, ambitious House Republicans stepped up and took their shot to succeed McCarthy. Conference leaders rallied around Steve Scalise, then Jim Jordan, then Tom Emmer. None could muster enough votes. For three weeks, the job remained open. The situation was becoming untenable. Democrats and Republicans alike wanted to send aid to Israel after Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, but they couldn't pass legislation without a Speaker. Johnson emerged as an unlikely unity candidate—a low-profile figure with few enemies in a fractious conference. After winning an internal poll by the GOP caucus, Johnson went on to win the speakership on the fourth round of voting. One of the least-tenured members to ever hold the job, he was suddenly third in line to the presidency.

Becoming Speaker, Johnson says now, “was like being elected mayor of a town that had been hit by a nuclear bomb.” The challenges came immediately. Johnson passed an aid package to Israel and Ukraine, overcoming objections from members of his own party. Despite teaming up with Democrats to deliver the requisite votes, he pacified an obstreperous group that had booted his more seasoned predecessor after only 10 months.

“His temperament has served him well. He’s a patient guy. He listens and members trust him. That is the essential ingredient to being a successful speaker,” says Boehner, who knows as well as anyone the challenges of corralling the House GOP. “For a guy who doesn’t drink, smoke, or cuss, he’s a very affable guy.” Representative Andy Ogles, Johnson’s Capitol Hill roommate before he became Speaker, notes that he is hands-on: “Taking the criticism, taking notes, and then trying to come to a solution.” It doesn’t hurt, Ogles adds, that Johnson can defuse tension with a good Trump impression.

In February 2024, Johnson traveled to Mar-a-Lago to meet with Trump and his top advisers and devise a playbook to advance his goals through Congress if he won the election. The key was to package Trump’s agenda items into reconciliation bills—budget-related measures that need only a simple majority to pass. In the months that followed, as Trump hit the trail, Johnson and his aides worked on the details. “We planned this very carefully, over that long period,” Johnson says.

Weeks after Trump's election, on New Year's Day 2025, Johnson joined congressional allies and campaign advisers in one of the dining rooms of Trump's Palm Beach mansion. Trump wanted to move quickly to make his 2017 tax cuts permanent, finish the southern border wall, and deport millions of migrants. He went around the room soliciting reactions. Trump's inner circle, including incoming White House chief of staff Susie Wiles, close confidant Stephen Miller, and Vance, were among those who floated breaking up this sweeping legislative agenda into two or three separate bills, according to three people present. Senate Republican leaders, such as majority leader John Thune and Senator Lindsey Graham, were also publicly pushing for multiple measures.

Johnson argued the opposite. "If we break it up, we will do parts of it, and the other parts will never get done," he told Trump. The President sided with Johnson. He wanted the bill passed in the House by Memorial Day. Trump and Johnson quickly cleared procedural hurdles that had blocked past Congresses, funding the government in March and passing a budget framework in April to advance the reconciliation bill. To win over moderate Republicans in purple districts, they raised the cap on the federal deduction for state and local taxes (known as SALT) to \$40,000 a year.

But blue-state Republicans were hardly the only impediment. The bill irked various GOP factions, from deficit hawks to economic populists. The CBO said it would balloon the deficit, offsetting a fraction of the costs through deep cuts to Medicaid, food benefits, and clean-energy investments. Even many diehard Trump supporters grimaced, fearful of punishment at the polls. "There's a lot of MAGA on Medicaid," says Stephen Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist.

The world's richest man was another wild card. Johnson says he collaborated with Elon Musk on the legislation during Musk's tenure running the Department of Government Efficiency. Then Musk called in early June, Johnson says, as electric-vehicle tax credits were on the brink of being eliminated. "He was concerned about the EV mandate going away," Johnson recalls, saying Musk asked for a reprieve. "Elon, it's a little late," Johnson says he told him. "We've already passed the bill out of the House, and I was under the impression that you had fully endorsed all this." Musk did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

When Musk called the President, it did not go well, according to sources familiar with the discussion. The day after, Musk unleashed a tirade against the President on social media. Johnson says he was in the Oval Office when Musk lobbed the first round of attacks, and tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Trump from responding in kind. With Musk threatening to fund primary challenges against Republicans who voted for the bill, the fate of the legislation hung in the balance. “It complicated things initially,” Johnson says.

Many Republicans shared Musk’s concerns, but in the end, few wanted to get crosswise with Trump. After the Senate tweaked the bill, Johnson rushed it back onto the floor. “The longer it delayed, the more negotiation, the more demands of everybody, it would have been impossible,” he says. Johnson and Trump’s aides began working the holdouts who were led by Representative Andy Harris of Maryland, the chair of the right-wing House Freedom Caucus. The talks were no longer about the specifics of the legislation. They were about what the members could get in exchange for supporting it. Most wanted Trump to commit to signing a suite of cost-cutting orders. Then they wanted Johnson to codify them. Others wanted more bills to cut the debt down the road.

By midnight on July 2, they were still deadlocked. Johnson made a gamble, scheduling a procedural vote on the rule before he had the numbers to pass it. The high-stakes tactic had worked before on Trump’s budget resolution and Ukraine aid. The thinking, he says, was to put the holdouts in a pressure cooker, facing the threat of Trump’s ire. “He’s willing to really play hardball with his own internal dissenters,” says Frances Lee, a congressional scholar at Princeton University. “He uses Trump’s popularity and his own procedural authority to really put the screws to them.”

The deal with Massie was the last hurdle. At 3:23 a.m., the vote passed, effectively assuring the bill would get to the President’s desk for his signature. Inside the Speaker’s lobby outside the House chamber, Representative Rick Allen of Georgia lifted Johnson off his feet in a bear hug. “Only you can do this job!” Allen cried. After 14 months of planning and preparation, Johnson had gotten Trump what he wanted. When Trump signed the bill into law on July 4, Johnson gave the President a memento to mark the triumph: his Speaker’s gavel.



Two weeks later, Johnson delivered more wins for Trump: a \$9 billion rescissions bill gutting foreign aid and public broadcasting, and the first-ever law regulating cryptocurrencies, a win for the tech-bro constituency that had helped sweep Trump back to power. Johnson quashed a rebellion from his right flank over the crypto bill: some Republicans wanted additional legislation to give crypto oversight to a friendly regulatory agency and ban the Federal Reserve from issuing its own digital currencies. To win them over, Johnson passed the first on the floor, sending it to the Senate, and promised to include the second in must-pass legislation later in the year. For now, he told them, they needed to give Trump something to herald “Crypto Week” at the White House.

There are other battles still to come: funding the government ahead of the Sept. 30 deadline and passing the National Defense Authorization Act. But the heavy lifting is done for now. The 2026 midterms will test whether voters reward or penalize Johnson’s loyalty to Trump. While many of the safety-net cuts in Trump’s signature legislation won’t take effect until after the next election, some conservatives are skeptical that the popularity of tax

cuts can overcome the unpopularity of less money for Medicaid and the economic disruption Trump has created through his tariffs.

By reducing revenue and increasing spending on marquee MAGA priorities, critics say, Trump's Big Beautiful Bill comes at a steep cost to both the social contract and the nation's long-term economic health. Over time, fiscal conservatives warn, the federal government will spend more on interest paying down the debt than on national defense, with taxpayer dollars covering past borrowing rather than funding current needs. While Democrats plan to run against the legislation in the midterms, Lee says the verdict remains an open question: surveys find that most respondents disapprove of the bill, but that it has components that are popular, from tax breaks to enhanced border security. Johnson argues it will help Republicans on the campaign trail. "We're going to be talking about it," he says. "We can defend it."

Johnson anticipates more challenges from his cantankerous colleagues. Already, there are signs of cracks. Even after Johnson brokered a truce between Trump and Massie, the Kentucky Republican has ramped up his attacks on both men—accusing them of suppressing the Epstein files. "He's the only guy that could do this, because he's a nice guy," the President said of Johnson recently at a White House meeting, according to two sources present. "I couldn't do this." Trump couldn't tolerate the criticism or the insubordination; he couldn't take a punch without counterpunching. In contrast, Johnson is willing to absorb the opprobrium, mediate the meltdowns, and hold together a fractured conference. He is both a punching bag and a psychiatrist for House Republicans who face the choice of either backing the President's agenda or losing their job.

As always, Trump's favor has limits. Johnson has the President's backing only as long as he is loyal and productive. If the Speaker stumbles—if he fails to deliver votes, stifle dissent, or make chaos work to Trump's advantage—he risks the same fate as his predecessors. And even if Trump doesn't turn on him, voters may. A blue wave, or maybe even a ripple, would force him out of the Speaker's office.

On July 18, Johnson hopped into the back seat of his armored car for the brisk ride to the White House for the bill signing. Sirens blared as the

motorcade whizzed down Pennsylvania Avenue. “It’s cool for about half a day,” Johnson says of the spectacle. In the aftermath of the vote on Trump’s megabill, he recalls, one of his colleagues said to him: Are you proud that you made history? Johnson laughed. “No,” he said. “I’m so tired of making history.”

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