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## Ousting the speaker: House Republicans' long history of regicide

*The 20th century hasn't been good to GOP leaders in the House, so Speaker John Boehner might have some cause for concern*

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

After a painful rejection by his own party in his attempt to pass a bill to avoid the fiscal cliff, Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) is at the center of ouster talks. While Boehner is undoubtedly still in a strong position, past history might give him some reasons to worry. House Republicans have had a propensity, throughout the 20th century, for periodically getting rid of their leaders.

Tossing out a speaker is in many ways a drastic measure because, unlike other congressional leaders, the Speaker of the House has demonstrable power over the institution. In one of the many ironies of American politics, the House of Representatives, which was intended to channel voters' opinions, has been a top-down, leadership-driven branch of government, in contrast to the historical every-Senator-for-himself model on the other side of the Capitol. Due to this top-down structure, the speaker, unlike the majority leader of the Senate (frequently referred to derisively as the majority pleader), can bend the chamber to his or her will.

Nevertheless, speakers occasionally have had to ward off intra-party threats to their power. These attacks are unusual — in “The Ambition and the Power,” John Barry compares overthrowing a speaker or minority leader to regicide. And, perhaps surprisingly, all of the successful overthrows have been on the Republican side of the aisle.

The most notable of which was Newt Gingrich, who was originally revered for leading the party back to the promised land of the majority after 40 years in the minority, but then had a very rocky tenure. Gingrich was forced out right after the party's unexpectedly poor showing in 1998. It wasn't even the first coup that Gingrich had to deal with — in 1997, other members, including Boehner, looked to toss him out, but failed.

Just as sobering for Republican leaders is the fact that Gingrich's obvious successor, Majority Leader Dick Armey, was passed over for the speakership, a big departure from the historical House practice of setting a regimented path to the upper echelon. For more than 70 years, and 13 straight handovers, ending in 1998, the speaker had previously held the position of either majority or minority leader (or when the minority leader retired, minority Whip).

Republican minority leaders, who would be the speaker if their party took over the House, have been somewhat regularly overthrown, including former Speaker Joe Martin (then in the role of minority leader) by Charles Halleck, who was himself overthrown by Gerald Ford. Gingrich's ouster, therefore, was stunning because he was speaker.

Boehner, now dealing with whispers of an overthrow, not only participated in the first Gingrich coup attempt, but also, during the key moment of his rise to the speakership, Boehner defeated acting majority leader (and then-majority whip) Roy Blunt in 2006, following the resignation of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

The most famous House leadership fight — one that radically reshaped the power of the speaker — was also against a Republican, way back in 1911. The speakership was even more powerful at that time, and Speaker Joe Cannon was viewed as abusing his authority. Still, he held on to his job — with significantly reduced power.

For decades, the reason Republicans were more likely to dump a leader was because they were not the party in power, and the punishment for a revolt was minor. These overthrows were intended to punish electoral failure, and were premised on the hope that the new person could lead the party to success. Boehner, though, was actually successful in holding on to the House (albeit with a big assist from gerrymandering) in the face of a successful Democratic presidential re-election campaign.

What makes the Republicans stand out all the more — and what makes the upcoming House vote intriguing — is that on the other side of the aisle, despite all their perceived disunity, the Democrats have historically stood behind their leaders. No Democratic speaker or leader (either majority or minority) has been removed in an intra-party coup (though Speaker Jim Wright resigned due to scandal). In 2010, Speaker Nancy Pelosi lost the majority, but she held on to the party leadership. Similarly, the party lost the House in 1946 and 1952, yet Speaker Sam Rayburn took over as the minority leader, a pattern that was started by Speaker Champ Clark when the Democrats were swept out in 1916.

Even when the Democratic Party was hit with a political earthquake in 1994, and Tom Foley became the first speaker to lose his House seat in a re-election run since 1859, the Democratic members did not overthrow the rest of the team — Majority Leader Dick Gephardt stepped right up to serve as Democratic Leader. The Democrats have been so serious about an orderly leadership that when John Murtha (with the considerable backing of Nancy Pelosi) tried to jump the line in 2006 by running for Majority Leader against Steny Hoyer, Murtha was crushed nearly two-to-one.

Boehner will probably be burning up the phone lines this weekend, as he works to solidify the votes for his re-election as speaker. Despite his recent legislative failure and his perceived shaky hold over his caucus, Boehner seems to be in a strong position to retain his job. But, if he's thinking at all about history, he would be right to take any ouster attempt seriously.

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