

POLITICS & POLICY

Max Burns John Boehner blames Trump and Cruz for Republican dysfunction. But he's the problem.

His reinvention as a laid-back marijuana entrepreneur, eye-rolling along with us as the GOP implodes, erases his leading role in this sad state of affairs.



— John Boehner, R-Ohio, then the speaker of the House, at the U.S. Capitol in July 2015.

Bill Clark / CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images

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By Max Burns, Democratic strategist

Whatever the official genre of former House Speaker John Boehner's new book, "On the House: A Washington Memoir," the promotion surrounding its launch Tuesday makes it clear that it should be filed under revisionist history. The erstwhile politician seems to be straining to convince you that, whatever you might remember about the pre-Trump political era, he has always been one of the good guys.

Boehner's decades near the top of Republican power politics weakened his party so greatly that the far right's final takeover was merely a formality.

As he's presented it in the flurry of media availabilities he's **held about his book** and the early excerpts released to a handful of publications, Boehner always opposed what would become the MAGA wing of the GOP. Unfortunately for the country, Boehner apparently chose to keep those concerns tucked

away until publishers at St. Martin's Press waved an advance in his face. His post-Trump reinvention as a laid-back **marijuana entrepreneur**, eye-rolling along with us as the GOP implodes, erases his leading role in bringing about the sad state in which the Republican Party finds itself.

The cancer within the GOP metastasized into its terminal form during the Trump presidency, but Boehner's decades near the top of Republican power politics weakened his party so greatly that the far right's final takeover was merely a formality. After a career shilling the idea that **our government is broken** – and damaging public trust in government by staging **repeated government shutdown crises** – Boehner is shocked, *shocked* that Trump acolytes like Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio want to **burn the whole system down**.

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Perhaps the most damning part of Boehner's long legacy on Capitol Hill rests in the major bipartisan opportunities Republicans failed to seize under his leadership. Twenty years later, America is paying the cost for those early failures to act, which could have resolved some of the thorniest policy disputes with consensus moves that would have kept the issues from festering and feeding extremist GOP fantasies.

Nowhere is that failure more egregious than in Boehner's sabotage of the 2014 comprehensive immigration reform package.

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The situation felt solid: Polls indicated that 6 in 10 Americans and **over half of Republican voters** supported the proposal, which included increased border security while allowing undocumented immigrants to remain in the country. Dozens of House Republicans publicly supported the effort, and even

the slow-moving Senate had approved a similar package the year before with a sweeping **68-vote bipartisan coalition**. Boehner **teased** long-sought congressional action to prominent immigration groups, including the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

And then? Nothing. Boehner refused to move the package to a vote, even though unanimous Democratic support coupled with pro-immigration-reform Republican votes would have yielded a broadly bipartisan, wildly popular bill brought to you courtesy of the speaker himself. An already cautious Boehner froze **after the 2014 midterm primaries**, when GOP reformers like his deputy, **Eric Cantor** of Virginia, **lost their seats in a right-wing populist wave**. So he chose, instead, to kill the package.

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Yet, in a soft-focus interview with CBS News on Sunday, Boehner **bemoaned** the unwillingness of his fellow Republicans to support, well, anything when he was speaker – and he blamed them for his own lack of a backbone. "I've got no position, because my guys wouldn't vote for anything," is how he tells it. "They're against everything, but I've never been able to determine what they're for."

That pretty characterization casts Boehner as the long-suffering compromiser time and again rebuffed by an intransigent do-nothing caucus. He seems to prefer for you to forget about his 2010 pledge to **deny President Barack Obama a single policy victory** on his agenda by doing "everything, and I mean everything we can do, to kill it, stop it, slow it down. Whatever we can."

If that sounds a lot like the gridlock in full bloom across Washington, it's because Boehner provided the party-over-country hymnal that the GOP now harmonizes to. But the guy who once told reporters it was "**not my job**" to stand up to racist rumors painting Obama as a secret Kenyan Muslim is back to give **Americans a \$17.99 lecture** in the importance of bipartisanship.

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Boehner's recent media tour was also filled with condemnations about the rancid tone of politics, with the **former speaker castigating Donald Trump** and reserving special ire for his personal bête noire, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas. Boehner wants you to know, **needs you to know**, that he despises Cruz just as much as you do.

"There is nothing more dangerous than a reckless a**hole who thinks he is smarter than everyone else," **Boehner writes about Cruz's Senate leadership** of the 2013 federal government shutdown. "Ladies and gentlemen, meet Senator Ted Cruz. He enlisted the crazy caucus of the GOP in what was a truly dumba** idea. Not that anybody asked me."

But no one needed to ask Boehner about using government shutdowns as destructive bargaining chips, because he'd already made that strategy famous. From 2011 to 2015, when Boehner was speaker, Republicans created and relentlessly publicized budget crises that risked costly government shutdowns almost every single year.

In 2011, Boehner stonewalled the budget process **until the literal eleventh hour**. Just two years later, the GOP actually pushed federal workers over the cliff, **closing the federal government** for 16 days as the American people waited for Republicans to return to the negotiating table. The next year, Boehner and the GOP **again threatened to lock the doors** after Obama floated possible executive actions on immigration to work around Boehner's inaction in the House.

Whatever Boehner may think today, he was certainly willing to negotiate with "political terrorists" when it meant kneecapping Obama.

Voters hated the theatrics: One poll found that **53 percent of Americans blamed Boehner's GOP** for the economic pain caused by the shutdowns, compared to 31 percent who blamed Obama. The GOP's shutdown antics also split the party: 3 in 5 Republicans disapproved of how their party handled the stunt. But tea party hard-liners **loved the circus**, with 3 in 4 viewing the shutdown favorably and elevating its most extreme performers to celebrity status. Among those new anti-establishment bomb throwers were prominent names like Jordan, whom Boehner now calls a **"political terrorist."** Whatever Boehner may think today, he was certainly willing to negotiate with political terrorists when it meant kneecapping Obama.

The resistance to popular policy ideas and fanatical devotion to party over country that define the Republican Party are children of Boehner's cynical – and largely successful – efforts to cripple the Obama White House. Now those obstructionist tendencies have grown out of control. Sadly, Boehner's self-serving fictionalization of recent history does more good for his bank account than it does for the health of our ailing politics.

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