

Bill Kaplan: House Democrats save nation from shutdown

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The GOP-led House has been in chaos for months. It took 15 votes to elect California GOP Representative Kevin McCarthy as speaker. McCarthy was so beholden to GOP nutcases that he gave them unprecedented vetoes on his powers, and launched a nonsensical impeachment inquiry into President Biden. No Wisconsin GOP representative objected. Chaos led to a GOP-led House rarely in session and unable to pass appropriations bills. Florida GOP Representative Cory Mills said: “We allowed ourselves to basically get so distracted with all the other shiny objects that we didn’t actually get ahead of our real job, which is to be appropriators.”

An imminent September shutdown forced McCarthy to turn to House Democrats to pass a stopgap funding bill to keep the government open until November 17. The GOP nutcases retaliated and deposed McCarthy. It took weeks for House Republicans to elect Louisiana GOP Representative Mike Johnson as speaker. Soon he confronted the November 17 deadline: “The House GOP lacks the political will to keep the government funded, forcing its leaders, operating with only a tiny majority, to rely on Democratic votes to do so or face the political backlash for a shutdown” (NYT).

Johnson put forward a bill to keep the government open at current spending levels until January 19, 2024 for 20 percent of the federal government, and the other 80 percent until February 2, 2024. 209 Democrats and 127 Republicans voted yes to avert a shutdown (93 Republicans voted no). Wisconsin Democratic representatives and most state GOP representatives voted to keep the government open. However, Wisconsin GOP Representatives Mike Gallagher and Tom Tiffany voted for a shutdown. Gallagher’s disingenuous press release, complaining about Congress not passing appropriations bills and kicking the can down the road, lacked mention of the failure by a GOP-led Congress.

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The stopgap spending bill buys time, with two threatened shutdowns in January and February. But it was the only train leaving the station. Idaho GOP Representative Mike Simpson said: "I just think people realize it's (shutdown) not a good idea. Not a good policy, not good politics." Even Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson voted with state Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin, as well as 85 other senators to avert a shutdown. Baldwin said: "Today, we passed a bipartisan package to fund the government into next year, avoiding an unnecessary shutdown which would have threatened our economy and Americans' safety."

However, dark clouds are ahead. Speaker Johnson will have to continue relying on Democratic support for legislation that can pass the House, the Democratic-led Senate and be signed into law by President Biden. Keeping the government open, approving emergency funding to defend Israel and Ukraine and improving security at the U.S.-Mexico border require bipartisan support. But hardline GOP representatives and senators will obstruct such a deal.

The danger of economic chaos and misery for regular folks from House Republican instigated shutdowns early in 2024 is real. Closer to home, hardline GOP representatives' opposition has prevented a House-passed farm bill. Throw the GOP bums out.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.