



How Speaker of the House Is Really Chosen

While the House Republicans are trying to figure out who will be their next speaker, it's worth a look back a few decades when this extremely important post was suddenly vacated. After riding high with the 1994 GOP victories he helped engineer, and getting inordinately favorable media attention for his namby-pamby "[Contract With America](#)," [Speaker Newt Gingrich](#) announced his retirement. His bolt-out-of-the-blue decision stunned many. But the selection by GOP House members of little-known Illinois Congressman Dennis Hastert as his successor outdid even the Gingrich departure.



Who after all was [Dennis Hastert](#)? And how did he suddenly become important enough to be named house speaker? He was a former high school teacher and wrestling coach from Yorkville, Illinois, who rose from 16 years of obscurity to win a seat in the U.S. House in 1986. Still, even after serving in the House for a decade, and becoming its speaker for another ten years, hardly anyone outside his Illinois district knew much about the man.

During his quiet years in Congress, Hastert was as middle-of-the-road as anyone could be. Toeing the establishment's line on numerous issues, he favored Gingrich's pro-New World Order preferences when in June 1996, he voted for foreign aid, Most Favored Nation (MFN) status for China, and expansion of NATO. Two years later, he approved more foreign aid, continuance of MFN for China, and a 12 percent increase in food stamp expenditures. Still, his votes on numerous less important matters enabled congressional scorekeepers to label him a conservative.

So how does such a person rise from near anonymity to become speaker? Asked about this somewhat amazing development, then-Congressman Ron Paul (R-Texas) unhesitatingly offered that Gingrich himself had made the choice. And presto, the likeable but quiet man known among colleagues as "the coach" became speaker of the house, even serving in that post from 1999 until he chose not to stand for reelection in 2008.

Lately, Hastert has been back in the news facing allegations of long-ago sexual assaults on students during his teaching years. After he left Congress in 2008, he turned to lobbying and did very well financially. When he suddenly began tapping his bank account for suspicious amounts (withdrawing as much as \$1.7 million), his unusual conduct attracted the attention of federal investigators. He now faces charges of lying about the reason for his many small withdrawals and it appears that he was paying off one or more former victims of sexual abuse from his high school faculty years. It now seems likely that he will plead guilty to making false statements to the federal officials in hopes that the matter won't end up in a trial where additional charges of past sexual misconduct could easily emerge.

All of which brings up further questions. Was Hastert chosen to be speaker by Gingrich and his establishment cronies because knowledge of his past made him controllable? Did Gingrich himself



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suddenly quit being speaker because some sort of misconduct left him vulnerable to controllers? Also, who might these behind-the-scenes individuals be, and what might their agenda include?

It is unfortunately true that much of what goes on in Washington results from blackmail. The still evolving story surrounding Dennis Hastert isn't so much an exception. Sad to say in too many cases, it's the rule. And one can only wonder who will now become the new speaker of the house and why.

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