

House Speaker Urges 'Unity'

U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan on Wednesday called on his fellow conservatives to unify in an election year, warning them to refrain from the kind of infighting that frustrated and eventually drove out his predecessor, the more moderate John Boehner.

Ryan, in remarks to Heritage Action, one of the influential conservative groups that vexed Boehner with constant demands for more spending curbs and smaller government, said divisions among Republicans played into the hands of Democrats.

"Let's not fight over tactics. Don't impugn people's motives," said Ryan, the Wisconsin congressman who took over the top post in the Republican-dominated U.S. House of Representatives last October.

But as he spoke, discontent was brewing among conservative Republicans in the House over the U.S. budget for the coming year. Late last year, more than 160 Republicans out of 246 voted against a two-year budget deal Boehner reached with the administration of Democratic President Barack Obama.

On Wednesday, Ryan did not mention Boehner by name. He urged conservatives not to use their disagreements, including over appropriations, as a litmus test for supporting each other.

"It's fine if you disagree ... But we can't let how someone votes on an amendment to an appropriations bill define what it means to be a conservative," Ryan said. He cautioned conservatives against standing in "a circular firing squad."

Heritage Action is an affiliate of the conservative Heritage Foundation research group. Boehner blamed such outside groups for pushing him into a 16-day government shutdown in 2013. He retired last September, weary from fighting with more conservative members who have increased their numbers in the

chamber in the past few years.

Ryan could soon see Republican unity tested over decisions on fiscal policy, also a theme in the campaign for the November presidential election.

The budget deal reached late last year exceeded strict spending caps by \$80 billion over two years, to pump up defense and domestic programs. It is to be used as a framework for budget and appropriations legislation this year.

Members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus did not vote for it. Ryan, trying to allay concerns, hosted the Freedom Caucus in his office Tuesday evening for “‘budget and beers,’” a spokeswoman said.

Freedom Caucus member Representative John Fleming of Louisiana said the meeting was cordial, with Ryan listening to the group’s objections to higher spending. “We didn’t walk out with any agreements,” Fleming said.

Also on Tuesday, Obama and Ryan had their first formal meeting as they search for areas where they may be able to overcome policy differences.

(Editing by Grant McCool)

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