

Why Paul Ryan's Ultimatum Is a Genius Move

What Paul Ryan has done is very smart: He's set up a game where if he doesn't take the speakership, it's only because he's proven that no one in their right mind should want the speakership.

In context, Ryan's conditions—endorsements from all Republican caucuses, rules changes that make it much harder to challenge a speaker midterm, and a lighter travel and fundraising schedule—verge on the ridiculous. He's demanding the House Freedom Caucus give up its power to do to him what it did to John Boehner even as he promises to be less accommodating than John Boehner.

The idea of the House Freedom Caucus is that the House should be run more, well, freely—their critique of Boehner is that he centralized power in ways that stopped House Republicans from carrying out the conservative will of their people, and their proposed rules changes would decentralize power away from the speaker. But now Ryan is saying he will only take the job if the House Freedom Caucus endorses his effort to further centralize power—a betrayal of everything they stand for.

"What Paul Ryan is asking for is even more power and less responsibility," Rep. Tim Huelskamp told the *National Review*. That's basically right.

You can read Ryan's demands two ways, and both of them may be right. One reading is that he actually doesn't want to be speaker, so he's drafted conditions that ensure he won't actually have to be speaker. Given that Ryan firmly and repeatedly refused to run for the position and only reconsidered after massive pressure from his colleagues, that seems the likeliest explanation—these conditions let Ryan

avoid the speakership but put the blame on the House Freedom Caucus.

The other way to read the demands is Ryan is trying to split the House Freedom Caucus by testing what their insurgency was really about in the first place. Boehner, though a well-liked figure in the conference, wasn't considered an ideological warrior in the way Ryan is. While some conservatives believe Ryan has been tainted by fame and establishment acceptance in recent years—they liked Ryan before he was cool—there are plenty who still idolize the man who reoriented the Republican Party around budgets that privatize Medicare, block grant Medicaid and take a chainsaw to discretionary spending. Many of them might have opposed Boehner without ever expecting him to resign—they wanted to be heard by the regime, not to overturn it. Like the dog that caught the car, some of them may not even really be sure what a good-enough outcome of their insurgency would be, and they may be looking for a way out; Ryan is giving them that way.

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