

The Rage of the Toddler Caucus on Capitol Hill

Not even a Biden impeachment can soothe them out of a government shutdown.

By [Susan B. Glasser](#) September 14, 2023

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has a majority so slim that he's effectively a prisoner of his party's most reckless extremists. Source photograph by Kevin Dietsch / Getty

If there is any lesson to take from the past few years of American politics, it is that things can always get worse. This is worth remembering as Washington begins another fall of self-made and yet painfully real crises—the political prologue to a 2024 campaign season unlike any other, as the ex-President turned criminal defendant Donald Trump threatens to return to the White House after challenging core tenets of our democracy. The word “unprecedented” is no longer sufficient. We've run out of synonyms, analogies, and time to escape the mess.

The questions now are of a different sort, about the exact details of what we will face and when. To wit, as Congress returned from its protracted summer recess, the Trumpified, radicalized House Republican Conference was preparing to shut down the federal government when funding runs out at the end of this month and to impeach President Biden, both for no apparent reason. Speaker Kevin McCarthy has a majority so slim that he's effectively a prisoner of his party's most reckless extremists. On Tuesday, he sought, in effect, to make a bargain—to buy their acquiescence to measures for keeping the government open, the Speaker agreed to their demand for a dubious impeachment inquiry into Biden and his son

Hunter's overseas financial dealings. But, by Thursday, having failed entirely to placate his tormentors, McCarthy was reduced to throwing F-bombs at them, daring them to follow through on their threats to file a motion to oust him. "If you think you scare me," he reportedly fumed, in a closed-door meeting of his caucus, "[move the fucking motion](#)."

Make no mistake: this is a crisis born out of weakness. Imagine any other Speaker agreeing to embark on an impeachment inquiry as a mere bargaining chip—and a failed one at that—in his struggle to control his own party members. The way Republicans talked about the latest unsuccessful effort to manage their own faction of nihilists was so telling. "Maybe this is just Kevin giving people their binkie to get through the shutdown," one Senate Republican [told *The Hill*](#) of McCarthy's impeachment announcement. I immediately thought of perhaps the most infamous quote of the post-2020-election period, when Washington was in a collective state of denial that Trump was doing what he was doing to overturn Biden's victory. An anonymous "[senior Republican](#)" had told the *Washington Post*:

What is the downside for humoring him for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change. . . . He went golfing this weekend. It's not like he's plotting how to prevent Joe Biden from taking power on Jan. 20. He's tweeting about filing some lawsuits, those lawsuits will fail, then he'll tweet some more about how the election was stolen, and then he'll leave.

Proof that the binky would not soothe the House Toddler Caucus was swift in coming. Matt Gaetz, the Florida Republican whose threats against McCarthy helped prompt the Speaker's abrupt decision to open an impeachment inquiry despite saying just eleven days earlier that he would not take that step without a vote of the full House, took to the floor soon

after the announcement to say that it did not matter. It was, Gaetz insisted, just a “[baby step](#).”

And so the rage of the toddlers now threatens to take the entire government down. For what? To prove, once again, that these are not serious people on whom we have bestowed great power? On Thursday morning, McCarthy told a reporter that he himself had no idea why this was happening. Some of his Republicans were refusing to pass a defense-funding bill, without objecting to what was in it. They were also opposed to McCarthy’s preferred option of passing a continuing resolution to keep the government open, while negotiations continued with the Biden Administration and Senate Republicans. And they didn’t want to make a big omnibus deal, either. “I’m not quite sure what they want,” [he concluded](#). He soon adjourned the House for the week, having made no progress at all. The impeachment process that the Speaker has unleashed in his weakness, meanwhile, will likely roll on throughout the remainder of 2023, offering Trump a campaign issue to throw at Biden and tying Congress in yet more knots.

For now, Biden and his defenders are putting the most positive gloss they can on this development. While it’s hard to see anyone welcoming an impeachment inquiry, no matter how questionable or nakedly partisan, there is essentially zero risk of conviction in the Democratic-majority Senate. And the President’s defenders are not wrong in suggesting that there may be some benefit for him. The unfolding mayhem in the G.O.P.-run House would seem to reinforce the folly of entrusting the country to the fickle rule of the *MAGA* Republicans. At a fund-raiser in Virginia, on Wednesday night, Biden even joked about this. “First they just wanted to impeach me,” [he said](#). “Now, best as I can tell, they want to impeach me because they want to shut down the government.”

Democrats, meanwhile, are having their own crisis of weakness, finally succumbing to a semi-public panic about Biden's age and unpopularity headed into the election as a spate of alarming new polls show him essentially tied with Trump. (In fact, [Trump is currently polling stronger](#) against Biden than he ever was in 2020.) Establishment types, such as the election handicapper [Charlie Cook](#) and the *Washington Post* columnist [David Ignatius](#), have, in recent days, called on Biden to step aside in hopes of Democrats turning to a stronger standard-bearer for the existential fight against Trump and Trumpism in 2024. There is no indication that Biden will heed this advice, however; nor are there obvious stronger candidates for Democrats to coalesce behind. Plenty of Party strategists argue that Biden's record is both consequential and popular; qualms about his age are just another example of the usual Democratic "[bedwetters](#)" who reliably freak out every four years about the Party's prospects. Other White House defenders take the "he's running so shut up and deal with it or risk damaging him for the battle with Trump" approach, as the Democratic strategist David Axelrod [put it](#).

But an exchange this week on "Morning Joe," between Ignatius and the show's co-host Joe Scarborough, captured the genuine concern that's been bubbling up about the President's standing. [Scarborough told Ignatius](#) that, in "every political discussion" he's been having lately, when the subject of Biden running again comes up, "People say, 'Man, he's too old to run.'" And, Scarborough added, "When I say every discussion, I don't mean ninety-nine per cent of the discussions. *Every* discussion." This certainly has been my experience, as well. And, unfortunately for the White House, the anecdotal data are confirmed by actual data: in independent public polls lately, it's not just fervently anti-Biden Republicans but even as many as [two-thirds of Democrats](#) who say that they consider Biden too old to serve a second term.

It seems to me that respondents are saying this not because they want Trump to win but because they want him to lose—and aren't convinced that Biden can make that happen. Filing deadlines for the 2024 primaries are coming up soon, starting with Nevada's in mid-October. If Biden were to drop out, he would have to do it very, very soon; the final moment of decision is at hand. It's still not inevitable, but the Biden-Trump rematch that America seems to be dreading is very close to assured. ♦