

By Robert Draper July 13, 2011 [Link](#)

Most mornings when he is in Washington, the House majority whip, Kevin McCarthy, wakes up at 6 a.m. on his office sofa — which is a slight improvement over the air mattress he once slept on, and probably better than the houseboat that a fellow Republican congressman, Lynn Westmoreland, has half-jokingly tried to convince him to share. McCarthy pulls on some ratty gym clothes, descends three flights of stairs and exits the building, where, when the weather is agreeable, he meets up with about a half-dozen other G.O.P. members on their mountain bikes. Together they cruise along the Mall, past the Lincoln Memorial, across a bridge and along the Potomac River. An hour later, McCarthy will shower in the House gym, head off to breakfast with some other gaggle of Republicans, attend the morning management meeting with Speaker John Boehner and Eric Cantor, the majority leader, huddle throughout the day with his whip staff and committee chairmen and conservative advocacy groups and random needy or disgruntled members until it's finally evening and time to round up a bunch of other Republican colleagues for a dinner that can go on for several hours because McCarthy takes it upon himself to draw the others out from their professional shells with questions like, "What's the most embarrassing thing that happened to you at college?" or "What was the first concert you went to?" By 11 at night, he is back on his office couch with his BlackBerry and the next day's briefings, some 2,300 miles from his wife and son and daughter in Bakersfield, Calif. — and then asleep, in a federal building, by 1 a.m.

One of McCarthy's morning cycling mates is Sean Duffy, a 39-year-old freshman and Tea Party sensation from Wisconsin who was once a county prosecutor and, before that, a professional lumberjack and star in MTV's reality series "The Real World." Several of the freshmen live in their House offices so as to pronounce themselves detached from the culture of Washington. Duffy also does so because he has six young children and thousands of dollars of debt accumulated during the seven months he spent without a salary before being elected to Congress.

McCarthy says that Duffy has more pressure on him than any other freshman. He arrived as the savant of the political season, a novice who forced the retirement of the 41-year Democratic incumbent and House Appropriations Committee chairman, David Obey. Within weeks of taking office, the Democratic attack ads began and now seem to accompany Duffy's every vote. In June, Duffy became a "patriot," the National Republican Congressional Committee's euphemism for its most vulnerable incumbents. His town-hall meetings have been edgy. His young family misses him while he spends weeknights on a cot in the Longworth building. After Duffy delivered a painfully unfunny speech at the annual Congressional Dinner in February, McCarthy consoled him by saying, "I did really badly at that same event two years earlier." Duffy

had actually seen McCarthy's speech on cable TV and thought it was pretty awesome.

McCarthy knows who the resident whiners are, and Duffy is not one of them. But the lumberjack who pledged in his campaign ads to "take the axe to Washington" occasionally looks as if a tree has just fallen on him. "Don't overbook yourself," McCarthy tells him. "Get more sleep. Are you doing things in person that you could do on the phone? Are you doing things that your staff ought to be doing?" But Duffy's fretfulness stems in part from the path his own party is taking. He expressed discomfort to McCarthy over the votes in January to repeal aspects of Obama's health care bill. The Republicans, he said, should have solutions of their own. McCarthy assured him that "there'll be replacement legislation after the repeal, trust me." Duffy stayed with his party on those votes. But he couldn't vote to defund NPR, given his rural district's reliance on public radio for weather updates and news.

"Then vote that way," McCarthy said. And so with the whip's blessings, Sean Duffy sided against his party.

The job of House Republican majority whip — which is to gather sufficient votes to pass the party's agenda on the House floor — would seem, at first blush, inappropriate for someone who is approximately as menacing as a summer-camp counselor. The word "whip" implies coercion and brings to mind the dark, backroom persuasions of Tom DeLay, known as the Hammer (who, truthfully, was never that much of a knuckle-breaker, though apparently he loved having that reputation). In the end, there's only so much control House leaders can exert over a congressman who answers to voters back home. Whips tend to recognize this and, at least in recent years, have relied more on cajoling than threats. McCarthy, who is 46, represents the affable extreme of this philosophy. In his sunny view, "A conference united around policies creates better legislation than using intimidation."

Actually achieving that sort of unity is easier said than done — and particularly so because of the House majority's freshman class. The 87 new members constitute more than a third of the 239-member Republican caucus and are the reason that the G.O.P. now controls the House. Nearly 40 percent of them are self-styled "citizen politicians" who have never held office and who rode into Washington on the Tea Party wave. Taken as a group, the freshmen are at least as conservative as the foot soldiers of Newt Gingrich's 1994 Republican revolution, a 73-member mixed bag that would eventually produce eight U.S. senators, one TV star (Joe Scarborough), one felon (Bob Ney) and one correctional officer (Jim Bunn). The difference is that the class of 1994 was thoroughly beholden (for a couple of years, anyway) to Gingrich, while this year's group harbors no particular allegiance either to Boehner or to the well-being of the Republican Party. As Tim Griffin, a freshman from Arkansas, put it to me, "A lot of us feel

that we're here on a mission, and the mission is now, and we're not that concerned about the political consequences." That mission — to throttle the role of the federal government in general and Obama's progressive initiatives specifically — may seem more like a kamikaze pursuit to some of the freshmen as the 2012 elections get closer and their constituents become increasingly impatient for government solutions. For now, however, they and their Tea Party backers constitute the most formidable power bloc on Capitol Hill.

Boehner has responded to these realities with the laissez-faire mantra "Let the House work its will." But neither he nor Cantor (who clearly intends to occupy Boehner's post someday) nor the caucus's comparatively moderate senior members want to see the G.O.P. freshmen vote the party over a cliff. And so to hold the caucus together, McCarthy's delicate approach has been to acknowledge the independence of the hot-blooded new charges while instilling in them a sense of team loyalty — and thereby moving them, ever so gently, to a victory that will be enduring rather than Pyrrhic.

"Kevin probably has a better handle on the freshmen than anybody else here," Boehner told me. It's an unlikely bond that McCarthy has forged with the new arrivals. His own rise to power was enabled by years of grooming in Bakersfield by his mentor, the former House Ways and Means Committee chairman Bill Thomas, whose retirement allowed his ambitious young aide to claim his seat. Once in Washington, McCarthy networked and fund-raised his way up the food chain, and in four short years became the third-ranking House Republican. His ascent, in other words, involves the very type of Beltway scheming that the class of 2010 plainly abhors. McCarthy has only attended one Tea Party rally — in Bakersfield, with Boehner in tow, though neither of them spoke at the event — and as a congressman has certainly been willing to turn the federal spigots to assist his farming constituents in the San Joaquin Valley. When I asked Duffy if he had a sense of where McCarthy lay on the ideological spectrum, he said, "That's a good question," adding, "the ideas that are coming to the conference — he believes in them. You can't talk so passionately and . . . I mean, Kevin lives in California, but he's not an actor."

McCarthy is a man of indistinct calculations — "I don't think being a congressman is going to define me," he says cryptically — but he has won over the freshmen by making his own goals and beliefs beside the point. He recruited many of them, anointed them Young Guns and nurtured them during the 2010 midterm election cycle. Rather than being pawns in some kind of Karl Roveian überstrategy to achieve lasting Republican pre-eminence, the freshmen represent McCarthy's more entrepreneurial approach to politics: seize upon a trend (in this case, government phobia), put all your money on it and then work hard to make the trend last. And like an entrepreneur, he casts the considerable strategic risk — that his troops are unseasoned, volatile and perhaps far out of the mainstream — as a virtue: "I believe we're serving in a different time and place. Unconventional is positive. Unconventional gets rewarded."

Sometimes late at night, the freshmen will drop by McCarthy's other office, the one reserved for the majority whip behind a door marked H-107 on the first floor of the Capitol. The whip's office is the unofficial retreat for the House Republicans — but particularly for the freshmen, 19 of whom bunk in their own offices across the street. Ostensibly, they amble into H-107 to filch one of McCarthy's granola bars or to get some information on a pending legislative matter. The likelier reason is to relieve boredom or loneliness or the desire to duck out of sight for a while. At times the corporate--flopouse panorama resembles an airport frequent-flier lounge, complete with beer and wine. "This is what I want," McCarthy told me. "I want them living in this office." More to the point, he wants them to feel a connection to what his office and the Republican leadership are up to. The walls of H-107 subliminally reinforce this sense of belonging, covered as they are with framed images of freshmen alongside senior members, all in black and white like statesmen from some nobler era.

McCarthy suspects that he has an addictive personality, and it's probably for the better that he shuns caffeine. Still, the substance he craves is human interaction. He never sits alone in his whip's office with the door closed so as to summon thoughts or shut out the world. He never eats alone. If invited to a social function, he never fails to drag along at least one colleague. The floor of the House is his neighborhood bar: he sits down to chat with the freshmen women, then jumps into the aisle to receive Duffy's volley of rabbit punches, then collars the liberal Democrat Dennis Kucinich to compliment him on his appearance on "The Colbert Report." ("I didn't know you were a ventriloquist! Pretty cool!") Bill Thomas, McCarthy's mentor, spent many hours talking with McCarthy about the tax code. But, Thomas says, "he was more interested in people — that was his forte, you could say."

Routinely, during the day, McCarthy gathers some of his Republican colleagues in the conference room of H-107 to decide how they're going to save America. In previous months, these "listening sessions," as McCarthy calls them, focused on the Republican budget legislation written by Paul Ryan and taken to the House floor in April. The initiative would shrink the percentage of federal government spending (relative to gross domestic product) to pre-Great Depression levels, convert Medicare to a sort of voucher system, shift more of the cost of Medicaid to states and preserve the Bush tax cuts for wealthy Americans. Several of the more senior members worried that the Medicare provision in particular was going too far. (McCarthy's chief deputy whip, Peter Roskam, says, "One of them said, 'It's been great serving with you — I'm going to be a former member of Congress.' ") The freshmen overwhelmingly supported what Ryan was up to — to the extent that McCarthy and the House Budget Committee chairman would murmur to each other: "Wow. We can go further on entitlements. If we don't, these guys probably won't even support the bill."

In the end, all but four Republicans voted for the Ryan budget plan. Immediately after the vote on April 15, Ryan sought out the whip on the House floor, shook his hand and told him, "Your listening sessions made the difference." But a month later, a reliably Republican seat in the 26th District of New York fell in a special election to Kathy Hochul, a Democrat who campaigned relentlessly on her opponent's support of the Ryan plan. Exultant Democrats (and some moderate Republicans) think that the House conservatives disastrously overreached and that the 2012 election will now be about — as Nancy Pelosi brazenly put it a few weeks ago — "Medicare, Medicare and Medicare." The Republican leadership sees it differently. A recent Bloomberg poll shows that a majority of Americans support cutting government spending and taxes. (The same poll indicates that far more Americans fear a full Republican takeover than a second Obama term.) With few exceptions, the freshmen have shown surprising poise and resolve after encountering anti-Republican "Mediscare" activism at their town-hall meetings. It's for this reason that McCarthy believes the public will ultimately reward his party's show of political fortitude. "We put our ideas out there," he says. "They haven't. That gives us protection."

Of course, the current topic in H-107 has been the debt ceiling, the legal limit that the federal government is authorized to borrow, and which Congress has raised largely without incident 10 times in the past decade alone. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has said that the government will be unable to meet its financial obligations by Aug. 2 unless Congress permits it to borrow more. The freshmen have not been shy on this subject, either. McCarthy informally polled them when they first came to town in November for orientation. All but four of them said they would vote against raising the ceiling, under any circumstances. Then McCarthy (along with Ryan and the House Ways and Means chairman, Dave Camp) began conducting more listening sessions. The whip recognized that it would be counterproductive to lecture the freshmen about the economic hazards of not raising the debt ceiling. He also realized that it's one thing to pass a budget — which in the end is a nonbinding political document — and another thing to throw America into default. And so McCarthy has urged them to consider raising the ceiling under certain conditions and thus to view this moment as a golden opportunity to force significant changes from the White House. "We all ran for a reason," he tells them. "What's most of concern to you? What is it that we think will change America?"

As a result, the freshmen have begun to move away from a hard "no" on raising the debt ceiling to a "yes, if." In the conference room, several freshmen have said they'll vote to raise the ceiling only if the president agrees to repeal his health care legislation. Or if Obama signs into law a constitutional amendment to balance the budget, after all 50 states have ratified it. Or if he'll agree to mandatory caps on all nondefense spending. Or if he'll enact the Ryan budget. The whip writes down all their ideas on a notepad. He never tells them that they're being unrealistic — that two-thirds of the Senate and three-fourths of the state Legislatures are unlikely to pass a balanced-budget amendment. McCarthy's indulgence of their ideas isn't just a patronizing gesture, however. Already in the budget talks supervised by Vice President Joe Biden, the Democrats have signaled that they'll agree to deep cuts and possible entitlement reforms — the

kinds of concessions they would never have made on their own. By staking out a position far to the right, the House Republicans are tugging the White House and the Senate much farther in their direction than almost any Washington insider would have predicted. They're winning, in other words. The question is whether McCarthy can convince the freshmen and their Tea Party benefactors to see it that way.

McCarthy's tenacious optimism has been crucial to his party's resurgence. On the night of Obama's inauguration in 2009, he told beleaguered Republicans over dinner: "Let's not act like the minority. Let's challenge them on every single bill and on every single campaign — and let's do it right away." Before some of the newly elected Democrats could get comfortable, McCarthy began raising money to run attack ads in their districts. Later he oversaw the drafting of the Pledge to America, which became the de facto Republican campaign script for 2010. McCarthy's gift for salesmanship proved decisive when Boehner appointed him the party's chief recruiter for the midterm elections. Sean Duffy spoke with McCarthy constantly throughout the campaign. So did a South Dakota farmer named Kristi Noem — though she received what she calls "good messaging advice" covertly, as Noem's entire campaign was based on her wholesale rejection of Beltway orthodoxy. McCarthy's signature discovery was a folksy but canny cotton farmer and gospel singer from Frog Jump, Tenn., named Stephen Fincher who had never run for elective office but who would later acknowledge to me, with pitch-perfect understatement, that he "was blessed with the ability to raise money."

McCarthy also went to work on another Tennessee recruit, a bald physician named Scott DesJarlais, and instructed him to shave his goatee. DesJarlais wanted to know why that was so important. "Michael Phelps shaves his entire body to gain one-tenth of one second," McCarthy replied. "I think that goatee is costing you 5 percent of the vote." The next time the men encountered each other, DesJarlais had shaved, and McCarthy decided he was serious.

Today the whiskerless doctor who campaigned against Obama's "socialist" agenda and "the destructive consequences of unnecessary government meddling" is a congressman. Barely three months into his tenure, DesJarlais found himself signing a joint letter to President Obama to request "crucial" federal assistance for flood victims in his district. McCarthy's whip office helped throw together a manual for DesJarlais and other freshmen representing disaster-stricken districts. The document, which includes contact information for FEMA and other federal agencies, implicitly strikes a note of caution: the government you bashed in 2010 is the government you may need in 2011.

One of the first freshmen to encounter a natural disaster was Renee Ellmers, a former intensive-care nurse. The North Carolina congresswoman texted McCarthy on the afternoon of

Saturday, April 16, to inform him that she wouldn't be able to make it back to Washington the next morning to be on ABC's "This Week With Christiane Amanpour" with a panel of freshmen because a tornado had struck in Wake County. While Ellmers tended to victims at a Red Cross shelter late that evening, McCarthy suggested to her that she have ABC send a satellite crew to her in North Carolina instead.

Ellmers is one of the handful of freshmen whom McCarthy and the National Republican Congressional Committee didn't recruit and didn't assist but who won anyway — a fact she says she has since reminded him of "numerous times." McCarthy, who can't stand the sight of blood, appreciates the ex-nurse's toughness. Ellmers is one of nine women in this high-testosterone freshman class and has to find her own way of being heard. She barraged McCarthy with e-mails and phone calls saying she saw little sense in the G.O.P. leadership's decision in June to send the White House a message by bringing to the floor a "clean" (or condition-free) debt ceiling and then resoundingly voting it down. Sometimes when Ellmers is talking to the whip and doesn't think she's getting through to him, she claps her hands loudly in front of his face. Sometimes McCarthy giggles and claps back.

In contrast to Ellmers, Jon Runyan, of New Jersey, an immense former offensive lineman, is shy and ideologically temperate. One night, while hosting a dinner with several freshmen at an Italian restaurant on Capitol Hill, McCarthy sat next to Runyan and got him to open up. Runyan had been noticing how certain G.O.P. cable-TV perennials were bashing Boehner for negotiating with the White House and the Democratic Senate to avoid a government shutdown during the springtime budget battles. It was hard enough for Runyan and other freshmen to support the leadership without their own colleagues stirring ill feelings. "You know, when I was playing for the Philadelphia Eagles, we didn't start losing 'til Terrell Owens joined the team," he told McCarthy. "It only takes one guy to bring down a locker room."

"You've got to tell that story to the conference tomorrow morning," McCarthy urged him. Runyan did, and after he was finished, Michele Bachmann — who was guilty of the very infraction that Runyan was referring to — went up to the microphone to praise his speech.

Where McCarthy has prodded Runyan to speak up, he has cautioned Michael Grimm to exercise more restraint. Grimm is a natty former F.B.I. undercover special agent — the mobsters he infiltrated dubbed him Mikey Suits — who shares his Congressional office with a Yorkshire Terrier named Sebastian and as a result has needlelike teeth marks all over his hands. Grimm won election to his Staten Island and Brooklyn seat with significant Tea Party support. But some of his stands, like defending the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, have infuriated the right, and when the Heritage Action group gave him a low score,

Grimm says he got angry. "I said, 'Kevin, who's our contact at Heritage Action, because I'm gonna call them.' " The pugnacious freshman later went on Fox to denounce the "extremists" in his party. "Within the conference, a lot of people came up to me and said, 'Thanks for having the guts to say that,' " he says. Other colleagues, however, think Grimm's outburst amounted to self-immolation. McCarthy has warned him: "Don't do press for press's sake. They'll bring you up, and they'll also bring you down."

McCarthy nonetheless sees value in Grimm's zealotry — "I'll bet that guy eats an ice cream passionately" — and has deputized Grimm to keep tabs on the voting inclinations of a handful of other freshmen. Grimm was hesitant to join the whip team. "If there's something I think is going to hurt my district or my country — whip team or no, I'm gonna vote my conscience," Grimm says he told McCarthy. "I know as a whip you need to rely on me for certain votes. And I don't know that I'll be able to do that for you."

"That's not what our whipping is going to be about," McCarthy responded, according to both men. "It's not going to be about forcing leadership's will on the members."

Grimm put the whip's assurances to the test April 1, when the Republican majority brought to the floor a transportation bill that would have removed prevailing-wage protections for federally financed construction projects. "We'd really like to have you on this," McCarthy told Grimm.

"Kevin, I can't do it," Grimm replied. He reminded McCarthy that his father had been a union man for 45 years. "I'm not gonna turn my back on my father's friends that I grew up with and respect."

McCarthy is aware that some senior members might not be amused by the freshman class's willingness to go its own way. He organizes dinners that include old and new members. Hal Rogers, a 30-year congressman and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said the dinners were a way "to disabuse them of the view that we're ogres and help them understand what we do and don't do." Still, the old bulls can deliver some comeuppance to the insurgents. Grimm's vote to include a pro-union amendment in the transportation bill made the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee chairman, John Mica, "very upset," Grimm says. "And I get his point: You want me to help you and work with you on things — but you can't work with me?" Another committee member says: "They're starting to wake up. I've had a bunch come to me and say, 'I have a horrible flooding problem, I have a bad bridge.' And I say, 'Well, then, you shouldn't have voted for the earmark ban!' "

Even McCarthy's light touch can send a signal of reproach or reward. Last month, the entire G.O.P. House conference traveled to the White House to meet with the president. After Obama's remarks, McCarthy, Boehner and the other leaders each asked him a question. Then one question came from a pre-selected freshman. It was Reid Ribble, a former roofing contractor from Wisconsin. McCarthy had heard Ribble tell a story over dinner about a seemingly absurd regulation forbidding laborers from drinking water out of a plastic bottle while up on a roof — necessitating that they make frequent trips up and down the ladder, where accidents most often occur. The whip loved it and pushed for Ribble to have the chance to address the president.

There was, however, something else for the majority whip to love about Reid Ribble: he had never crossed the G.O.P. leadership on anything important. There was not a chance that leadership would award this moment to someone like Justin Amash, the only freshman to vote against all four of the continuing resolutions; or to Allen West, who in a press release expressed "disappointment in my own leadership" over a financing bill that appeared to be using U.S. troops as a political pawn; or to Raúl Labrador, who in a closed-door conference accused Boehner of "abandoning" conservatives. They and other dissidents are, of course, perfectly free to visit on their own with the president at the White House anytime they wish — if they can.

At 6 o'clock on the afternoon of May 24, just before the polls closed in the western New York special election, where it looked as if the Democratic candidate Kathy Hochul was going to eke out a victory, I dropped by H-107 to see if the whip was experiencing any misgivings over where the Republicans were headed. I found the freshman Rick Berg and Jason Chaffetz, a sophomore, in McCarthy's office, taking turns tossing a foam ball into a basketball hoop fixed to a door. Chaffetz lobbed me the ball, and I badly misfired. "The way we play," Berg consoled me, "just hitting the wall counts as a basket."

My next shot missed the wall. McCarthy let out a high-pitched cackle. By then it was clear that New York's 26th Congressional district was going to fall to the Democrats, in no small measure because of Hochul's attacks on the Ryan budget plan. But McCarthy didn't seem worried. We walked together out of his office, and he took me into the conference room to admire a painting that covered its northern wall. It was a work on loan from Steve Penley, an artist celebrated by Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and other conservatives for his patriotic themes. The canvas depicts a take on Emanuel Leutze's classic rendering of George Washington crossing the Delaware River on Christmas night 1776, before the Battle of Trenton.

"Now, you know why this was famous," McCarthy said to me as he pointed to the characters in the painting. "This guy is an African-American. And this is a woman. And this is a Native American. Now, no way would they be able to vote, right? But it symbolizes everyone in America rowing in the boat together. So when we do our meetings here," he concluded, referring to the freshmen as well as senior Republicans, "we're all in the boat together!"

I had to ask him, though: where exactly was the boat headed? And who, for that matter, was navigating it? In April, when the Republican leadership decided to back a continuing resolution to keep the government functioning, 59 Republicans defected. The Democratic minority whip, Steny Hoyer, told me with barely disguised pleasure, "The back-benchers were leading, not the leaders."

Even if Boehner, Cantor and McCarthy were content with the ideologically drastic direction their boat was taking, a number of their Republican colleagues were clearly not on board. One of them was the Ohio Republican Steve LaTourette, a member of the Tuesday Group, the House G.O.P.'s moderate coalition. LaTourette expressed to me his fear that the Republican majority has misinterpreted its mandate from the 2010 midterms. "In the three majority shifts I've been a part of, everyone has misread the tea leaves," he said. "We lost in 2006 because 58 percent of the independents voted Democrat, but we had some in our party saying it was because we weren't conservative enough. Then Pelosi's crowd got tossed out, and you had Kucinich and the progressives saying it was because they weren't bold enough. And now here we are, voting every week on abortion or to do away with NPR. I refer to it as feeding the alligator. You stop feeding them, and then they eat you."

So was McCarthy really all that sanguine about the boat's journey? He listened to my skeptical questioning — nodding indulgently, as if I were one of his apple-cheeked Young Guns. Then he gestured to the wall-length canvas. "Just as they planned the surprise attack on the Hessians on Christmas, we've got a plan, too," he insisted. "And we believe where we're going is where people want us to go. The thing is, history has already judged these guys in the boat favorably. We'll be judged in the long term and in the short term"— meaning, next year at the polls.

"I do know the final place that we're getting to," McCarthy said. He would not say where that place was. I followed him up a staircase onto the second floor of the Capitol, and thereupon he waded into the sea of Republicans convened on the House floor. It was a sound-and-fury kind of afternoon, legislatively speaking: there were two Democratic amendments to strike down, a couple of other bills to set aside as unfinished business and ultimately nothing to send over to the Senate that would stand a chance of becoming law. That was the fruit of the day's paddling — and beyond that lurked the invisible destination. Maybe they would get there, or maybe along

the way an alligator would make a fine dinner of them all. Until then, at least one man in the boat was smiling.

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