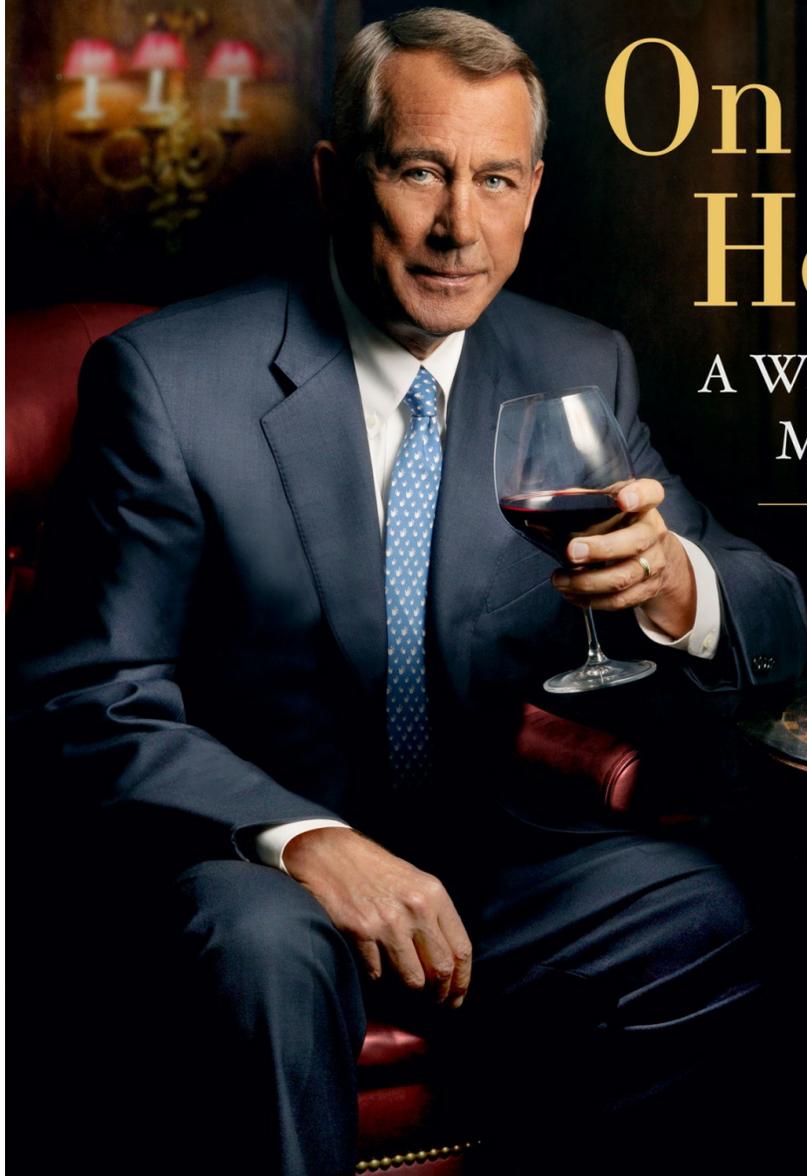


JOHN BOEHNER

On the House

A Washington
Memoir



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JOHN BOEHNER

Former Speaker of the
House of Representatives

St. Martin's Press
New York



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To my grandsons, Alistair and Zak, two people who may one day care about this

INTRODUCTION

When you've been around politics as long as I have, you see a lot of strange things. You may even think you've seen everything. But every now and then something happens that still has the power to knock your socks off, to show you that democracy can be full of surprises. Something like watching Donald J. Trump take the oath of office to become president of the United States of America.

I'd known Mr. Trump for decades. We'd played golf, chatted on the phone, seen each other at various events. But never once in my mind, not for a single second, did I ever think, "There goes the future president of the United States." I never would have even guessed he'd sweep away a crowded field of Republicans—all of whom I knew, and some of whom I even liked—to become my party's nominee.

On that improbable election night in 2016, when he took the stage to the music from the Harrison Ford movie *Air Force One* and declared victory, he taught me something about underestimating people. I was far from the only one who learned a lesson that night—and it wasn't the first time "the Donald" had offered me one.

The first time I met him was on one of his own golf courses: the Trump National in Westchester, New York. This was a high-end kind of place, with a big fountain outside the clubhouse, a grand staircase inside, and a hundred-foot waterfall on the course. Whatever you may think about Donald Trump as a politician, he sure knows how to put together a golf facility.

I was House minority leader then and on a fundraising run, scheduled to play golf with two high-profile insurance executives. We needed a fourth, and out of nowhere, we were informed that Donald Trump himself would be playing with us. I didn't know Donald Trump at all, except from television. But his name was on the door of the club, and if he wanted to come out with us, none of us were going to say no. I had no idea what to think. The big loud

guy I had seen on TV did not strike me as an ideal companion for 18 holes of golf. When we got to the course to hit some warm-up balls, there he was: the man himself, with the shock of bright yellow hair, tanned face, dressed in a typical golfing outfit, ready to hit the links.

He was very friendly, but in an in-your-face, this-is-how-they-talk-in-New-York kind of a way that I was not used to at all. Direct, loud, intense. Pretty much the same guy who got elected to the White House. I can tell you that with Trump, what you saw was what you got—for better or worse.

“Boehner!” Trump said when we were ready to start. “You and I are gonna take these two turkeys on and whip ’em.” That was okay with me.

As we were getting ready to start, Trump went over to John Criscuolo, a young staffer of mine who came out with us and whom we called “BJ,” and asked for the insurance executives’ names. “I think they’re Joe and Jeff,” BJ told him. So Trump said hello to Joe and hello to Jeff and we set off. (Their actual names, by the way, have been changed to protect the innocent.)

Then we went around sharing our handicaps. One of the guys was a 12, one was a 14. I was a 10.

“What’s your handicap?” I asked Trump.

“Five,” he said, matter-of-factly.

There’s no way this guy is a five handicap, I thought to myself. I’m going to have to carry him around on my back all day.

But Trump ended up birdying three of the first five holes—that’s going one under par three times, or one under the standard number of strokes a hole usually needs, for those rusty at golf terms. It absolutely blew me away. *Holy shit*, I thought, *this guy can play golf*. He and I won that day, beating Joe and Jeff soundly. Over 18 holes, we talked about this and that. Nothing particularly memorable, but had I known back then I was walking around with the 45th president, I might have paid better attention.

As we were coming off the course Trump was in a great mood, as winners generally tend to be. We shook hands—“Good match, Joe,” “Well done, Jeff.” Finally, one of the guys stopped us. He had kind of a weird look on his face, and I could see something awkward was coming. “Guys,” he said, “our names are Mike and David.” We had been calling these guys the wrong names over and over, all day long, and they were either too polite or

too shy to correct us the whole time.

All I could do was laugh. Sure, it was a little embarrassing. But was it my fault these guys just let us walk around for 18 holes looking like assholes because we were spouting the wrong names? They could have said something earlier, but they didn't.

But Donald—well, Trump did not laugh. This sort of glower fell across his face. The kind of look I could tell that you didn't want to see too often if you happened to work for him. He marched over to BJ and got right in his face to the point that BJ might have had to take a step or two back. Then Trump shouted, "What are you, some kind of idiot?" He pointed to the rest of our impromptu foursome. "These guys' names are Mike and David!" Then he gave the young man a piece of advice that he—and I—have never forgotten. And I hesitate to put an expletive in the mouth of a former president of the United States, but here it goes anyway. "You want to know how to remember somebody's name?" Trump asked. "You fucking LISTEN!" Poor BJ—he looked like he wanted to melt into the ground and pull the turf over his head.

We laughed about that at the time, and since—BJ still works with me—but there was something dark about it too. I'd never seen anybody treat a staffer like that—not in politics, not ever. This was more than New York bluster. This was real anger, over something very, very small. We had no idea then what that anger would do to our country.

And Trump didn't even take his own advice once he became president. He didn't listen to most people—let alone me. Our conversations became less frequent over the years—maybe he just got busy, maybe he didn't like my advice. But as for me, I've learned that if you want to be successful at anything, it helps for you to pay attention. As Speaker of the House, you don't hold on to the job long unless you do—noticing how a president tells you something so you can see he doesn't really mean it, or a member promises their vote on a tough bill but has a funny look in his eyes when he does, or when a group of rebels always seems to be staring at their feet when you walk by.

Over my years of listening, I've put together my own set of rules—handy sayings and phrases—that have helped to keep me sane no matter what got thrown at me. Some of these I made up myself, others I heard somewhere and

committed to memory. At some point somebody decided to call them “Boehnerisms,” and people started keeping unofficial running lists. You can skip to the end for the official list, but here and there throughout this book, I’m going to share some of my favorite Boehnerisms and how they’ve helped me see the humor, or even the lessons, in some of the weird spots I’ve found myself in. And there have been plenty of weird spots, for sure, but you can learn something from them. One of these Boehnerisms is my own definition of wisdom: wisdom means you’ve made a lot of mistakes in life and you’ve learned from *some* of them.

That’s what I’ve tried to do, at least. So hopefully some of these stories will entertain you, educate you, and maybe even inspire you to take on a leadership role in your own life. Because, God knows, we need good leaders now.

I don’t think it’s a secret to anybody that our country faces unique challenges today. You might even say we’re about halfway through a double-decker shit sandwich, served up to us by an outrage-driven media and a self-interested political class. An unprecedented global pandemic thrown into the mix certainly came as no help. Then there was a close election in 2020 in which red America got redder, blue America got bluer, and President Trump was replaced by Joe Biden, who took office along with a deeply divided House and a 50-50 Senate. America was split smack down the middle. Trump’s refusal to accept the result of the election not only cost Republicans the Senate but led to mob violence. It was painful to watch.

Americans are well aware that our government isn’t working the way that it ought to. In part, it’s because of a cable news world in which controversy sells and outrage and rebellion are rewarded. In part, it’s because of people who come to Washington intent on promoting themselves instead of working together. They claim to be true believers and purists, like the right-wing “Freedom Caucus” or the left-wing “Squad,” but they really are just political terrorists, peddling chaos and crisis so that everyone keeps paying attention to them. And they can embolden *actual* terrorists, like the ones who stormed the Capitol and “occupied” my old office on January 6, 2021. That was a low point for our country, and it made me want to cry.

I’ve seen so many “purists” abandon their principles when it suits their

political needs. After all, the Freedom Caucus, which was supposedly the great conservative bulwark against government spending, barely said a peep as a Republican administration outspent Barack Obama. Some of the self-proclaimed fiscal hawks with the shrillest screeches even joined that administration and presided over significant spending increases and growth of the national debt, which they didn't seem to care about anymore. You can hold your nose tight enough to stomach anything, I guess.

Part of the problem, if we are going to be really honest about it, is that we the people put up with all this malarkey. We prefer the easy outrage over focusing our attention on tough questions that don't have five-second solutions. We reward amateurs who know and care nothing about governing instead of having faith in seasoned officials with experience and patience, who are trying to make some changes to a democracy where change is meant to be hard. The left's promises of a Green New Deal or abolishing the police? They are pipe dreams, I'm sorry to tell you. They're recipes for division and anger. And they're perfect for cable news. But there are more realistic approaches that will help us solve our environmental challenges, or at least move the country in the right direction. One problem is that nobody has enough patience to be realistic. You can't do a quick TV segment on something requiring rational thought by people who actually know something on a subject—that would make for boring television, and no producer in their right mind would set it up.

But the last thing I want this book to sound like is some old guy railing at “these kids today.” There are a lot of shitty things that come from getting older. Sometimes my back goes out and I can't play golf. I don't know what TikTok is, and I probably will never bother to find out unless someone makes me. I see more years of my life in the rearview mirror than are ahead. But age also brings wisdom and lessons and hopefully good humor, and that's what I want to share here.

I want this book to be filled with hope. Because I do think we can solve these problems. I believe in this country and in our system. There wasn't a day that went by when I was in Congress that I didn't feel damn lucky—the son of a bartender who made good, or at least tried to. And I'm going to guess the vast majority of the men and women I served with, Republican and

Democrat, feel the same way about themselves. They aren't *all* trying to rip you off. They aren't *all* charlatans and liars. In fact, most of them aren't. They believe, as I do, that this is a great country and a great democracy. And the same goes for the vast, vast majority of the people that they serve, the American people who really do just want the best for their families and their neighbors. The Americans I've met from all kinds of places over my decades of traveling around the country certainly believe that.

All we need to get back on the right track is maybe just a little tough love. This book is my effort to pass along what I've learned over the years in the hope of helping us do that.

A lot has changed about Washington and the world since I left office. But one thing hasn't changed: yours truly. I walked out of the Capitol the same jackass I was when I walked in 25 years earlier. After serving at the top levels of government—second in line to the presidency, having met kings and queens and every president from Richard Nixon to Joe Biden—I have my regrets. Who doesn't? But I'm proud, at least, that I stayed true to who I've always been.

That's how I'm going to tell my story. I didn't want to write another boring drag through Washington's "halls of power." And I thought the best way to keep that from happening was to do what I've been doing for decades: just be me. That was how I stayed sane all those years in politics (and unfortunately, not everyone makes it out that way). So I'm going to tell it like it is, or like it was, in plain English. And I'll try to use expletives sparingly—but no promises. If you're looking for Shakespeare, or my 15-point plan to save the world, this isn't the book for you. But if you're looking to hear from a regular guy who went from working in a bar to holding a pretty big job, and got to see some incredible things and learn some things that just might help others get through their lives, then have a seat. Get comfortable. Pour yourself a glass of something nice. You're going to enjoy this.

John A. Boehner

Marco Island, Florida

ONE

The Art of (Real) Power

Nancy Pelosi has a killer instinct—something I never had (well, not much of one anyway). In fact, I think she may be the most powerful Speaker of the House in my lifetime, maybe the most powerful ever.

There are many reasons I say this, and some I'll get to in a moment, but one that really stuck with me involves one of her former Democratic colleagues in Congress—a legendary fixture on the Hill, the late, great John Dingell. John was the so-called Dean of the House, the longest-serving member, having been first sworn in under President Eisenhower in 1955. He was a World War II veteran and remained a favorite of both sides of the aisle due to his charm, sharp tongue, and eccentricity—including his punchy embrace of Twitter in his eighties.

He was also chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. To those of you with normal lives who live blissfully outside of Washington, this may not seem like much. But sitting on a big and powerful committee like this one—known as “E&C” for short—is a major deal on Capitol Hill. And becoming chairman? Well, that's what people in Congress live for. You get to hold hearings, and issue subpoenas, and investigate pretty much whatever the hell you want if you come up with a reasonable pretext. And Dingell was ferocious in that job—tough, nasty, powerful. People dubbed him “Big John” and “The Truck.”

Personally, I liked the guy a lot. We met in 1991, my first year in Washington, at—of all places—an NRA press conference. For some reason we quickly struck up a conversation, which turned into a friendly relationship for the next 25 years. He was a great guy to spend a few minutes with sitting