

GOP Taps Ryan To Become Next Speaker

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans embraced a new leader Wednesday and swiftly consented to a major budget-and-debt deal to avert a federal financial crisis, highlights of a day of dramatic fresh starts at the Capitol after years of division and disarray.

Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, the 2012 GOP vice presidential candidate and a telegenic spokesman for conservative priorities, was nominated by his colleagues in a secret-ballot election to serve as speaker of the House, second in line to the presidency. The full House will confirm that choice on Thursday.

“This begins a new day in the House of Representatives,” Ryan, 45, said after the vote. “We are turning the page.”

Immediately after choosing Ryan to chart a new course for their fractured party, Republicans trooped onto the House floor to cast votes on a huge two-year budget deal struck in recent days between President Barack Obama and congressional leaders of both parties.

The agreement, approved 266-167, would raise the government’s borrowing limit through March of 2017, averting an unprecedented default just days away. It would also set the budget of the federal government for the next two years, lifting onerous spending caps and steering away from the brinkmanship and shutdown threats that have haunted Congress for years.

Unmanned Army Blimp Breaks Loose

MUNCY, Pa. (AP) — An unmanned Army surveillance blimp broke loose from its mooring in Maryland and floated over Pennsylvania for hours Wednesday with two fighter jets on its tail, triggering blackouts across the countryside as it dragged its tether across power lines.

The bulbous, 240-foot helium-filled blimp eventually came down in at least two pieces near Muncy, a small town about 80 miles north of Harrisburg, as people gawked in wonder and disbelief at the big, white, slow-moving craft. No injuries were reported.

Fitted with sensitive defense technology, the radar-equipped blimp escaped from the military’s Aberdeen Proving Ground around 12:20 p.m. and drifted northward, climbing to about 16,000 feet, authorities said. It covered approximately 150 miles over about 3½ hours.

As it floated away, aviation officials feared it would endanger air traffic, and two F-16s were scrambled from a National Guard base in New Jersey to track it. But there was never any intention of shooting it down, said Navy Capt. Scott Miller, a spokesman for the nation’s air defense command.

The blimp — which cannot be steered remotely — eventually deflated and settled back to Earth on its own, according to Miller. He said there was an auto-deflate device aboard, but it was not deliberately activated, and it is unclear why the craft went limp.

Sheriff Fires Deputy For Tossing Teen

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A deputy who flipped a disruptive student out of her desk and tossed her across her math class floor was fired on Wednesday.

The sheriff called his actions “unacceptable,” and said videos recorded by her classmates show the girl posed no danger to anyone.

“What he should not have done is throw the student,” Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott said. “Police officers make mistakes too. They’re human and they need to be held accountable, and that’s what we’ve done with Deputy Ben Fields.”

Civil rights groups praised the swift action against Fields, a veteran school resource officer and football coach at Spring Valley High School. Outrage spread quickly after videos of the white officer arresting the black teenager on Monday appeared on the Internet.

Scott Hayes, an attorney for the deputy, said in a statement released to local media that the officer’s actions were justified and lawful. He said Fields wouldn’t have any comment because of the federal investigation.

Iran To Take A Seat Among World Powers

BEIRUT (AP) — Iran will take part in international talks on Syria for the first time this week, giving it a voice in the effort to find a resolution to the more than 4-year-old civil war that has so far defied even the slightest progress toward peace.

A crucial backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad, Tehran has been shunned from all previous talks on Syria. Its inclusion now marks recognition by the United States that no discussion on Syria’s future can succeed without Iran at the table.

News of Iran’s attendance outraged Syrian rebels, who said its participation will only prolong the conflict.

The gathering, which takes place Thursday and Friday in Vienna, will also put Iran in the same room with its most bitter regional rival, Saudi Arabia, raising the potential for tensions. The kingdom, along with other Gulf countries, has been funneling weapons to rebel factions, while Iran has sent financing, weapons and military advisers to ensure Assad’s survival.

Iran’s participation reflects its newfound place in the international community following the nuclear deal reached with world powers earlier this year. It also shows the seismic shift brought about by Russia’s direct military involvement in Syria since launching a campaign of airstrikes on behalf of Assad last month. That intervention has emboldened Assad’s supporters.

Coast Guard Rescues 242 After Shipwreck

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — At least 11 migrants died in the eastern Aegean Sea Wednesday in five separate incidents, including a large shipwreck from which 242 others were rescued by the Greek coast guard.

The coast guard said it remained unclear how many people were on the wooden boat when it capsized and coast guard boats, a helicopter and vessels from the European border agency Frontex searched through the night in stormy seas for more survivors.

Two young boys and a man died in that incident, but their nationalities were not yet known, it said.

The International Organization for Migration said in a statement some sources told it 200 people were on the boat when it went under, while others had told it 300.

Fishing boats and coast guard vessels ferried survivors to the port village Molyvos on Lesbos, a few miles away from the Turkish mainland. In makeshift shelters, volunteers and doctors offered assistance. Many women suffered from shock or hypothermia and received first aid in a chapel at the port.

The accident raised the total death toll in the eastern Aegean Sea Wednesday to 11, as thousands of people continued to head to the Greek islands in frail boats from Turkey despite worsening weather conditions as winter set in.

Greece is the main entry point for people from the Middle East and Africa seeking a better future in Europe.



Former U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert leaves after a guilty plea at Dirksen U.S. Courthouse on Wednesday in Chicago.

Dennis Hastert Pleads Guilty, Acknowledges Hush-Money Scheme

BY MICHAEL TARM

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Dennis Hastert pleaded guilty Wednesday to evading banking laws in a hush-money scheme, averting a potentially lurid trial that could have dredged up sexual allegations by agreeing to a deal with prosecutors that recommended he serve no more than six months in prison.

In the written agreement, the Illinois Republican directly acknowledged for the first time that he sought to pay someone \$3.5 million to hide misconduct by Hastert against that person dating back several decades, to around the time the longtime GOP leader was a high school wrestling coach.

Before accepting the plea, the 73-year-old was warned by the judge that he could go beyond the recommendation and give Hastert up to five years behind bars when he is sentenced in February.

Because the plea agreement has a sentencing range from no prison time to six months, U.S. District Judge Thomas M. Durkin could also decide to put Hastert on probation or home confinement.

The plea helped seal the downfall of a man who rose from obscurity in rural Illinois to the nation’s third-highest political office. During his eight years as speaker, Hastert was second in the line of succession to the presidency.

As he stepped to the lectern to answer a series of questions, he spoke in a voice

so soft that the judge told him to speak up.

The hearing revealed no new details about why Hastert agreed to pay the money. The indictment and the plea language both said the payments were meant to conceal past misconduct by Hastert, but neither document explained the nature of the wrongdoing.

The Associated Press and other media, citing anonymous sources, have reported that the payments were meant to hide claims of sexual misconduct.

At the half-hour hearing in Chicago, a subdued Hastert read from a brief statement that — like his indictment — focused narrowly on how he technically broke banking laws.

By pleading guilty, Hastert avoids a trial that could have divulged the embarrassing secrets he presumably wanted to keep under wraps by paying hush money.

Judges are also generally more likely to give lighter sentences to defendants who accept responsibility for their actions and spare the government the cost of a trial.

Hastert, who was charged with the banking violation and lying to the FBI, also acknowledged in the plea deal that he lied to the agency about the reasons for the withdrawals. The agreement indicates prosecutors will dismiss that charge.

When the judge asked Hastert to describe his wrongdoing in his own words, he read his statement, telling the court that he had been withdrawing

cash, \$50,000 at a time. After banking officials questioned him, he said, he began taking out less than \$10,000 to avoid reporting requirements.

Speaking in a halting voice and losing his place in the text at one point, he described why he lied to officials: “I didn’t want them to know how I intended to spend the money.”

Hastert did not say why he required so much cash or why he sought to skirt reporting requirements. As he finished, the judge immediately asked: “Did you know that what you were doing was wrong?”

He responded, “Yes, sir.”

The 15-page plea deal, which Hastert signed Wednesday, was released after the hearing. In it, he acknowledged the unnamed person and that the two “discussed past misconduct” by Hastert against that person, who is only referred to as “Individual A.” That discussion led to the agreement for \$3.5 million. Sentencing was scheduled for Feb. 29.

Since the plea deal offers a range of punishments, the sentencing hearing could include arguments from prosecutors on why Hastert should spend some time behind bars and from the defense about why he should be spared prison.

Asked by the judge if the government would call any witnesses at the sentencing, lead prosecutor Steven Block left open that possibility, saying the prosecution would decide at a later date.

Prosecutors could theoretically call to the witness stand

the unnamed person Hastert was allegedly paying, a prospect that could make public the conduct Hastert sought to conceal.

The sentencing range is below what some legal experts had predicted. They thought prosecutors would press for six months to two years in prison.

When he arrived at the courthouse, Hastert moved through a crowd of waiting photographers and TV cameras. He walked slowly into court, his shoulders slightly stooped, and peered over his glasses at courtroom benches packed with journalists.

A May 28 indictment accused Hastert of handing as much as \$100,000 in cash at a time to Individual A.

Hastert made 15 withdrawals of \$50,000 from 2010 to 2012. It’s what he did later in 2012 that made his actions criminal. After learning withdrawals over \$10,000 are flagged, he began taking out smaller increments, eventually withdrawing \$952,000 from 2012 to 2014, according to the indictment.

Hastert was speaker longer than any other Republican. After leaving Congress in 2007, he parlayed his connections into a lucrative lobbying career. That career is almost certainly over.

As a convicted felon, “no congressman will want to meet with him about anything. His influence and power will be gone,” said Dick Simpson, a co-author of “Corrupt Illinois: Patronage, Cronyism and Criminality.”

Insurgents VS Mainstream: Debate Highlights GOP’s 2 Tracks

BY JULIE PACE

AND THOMAS BEAUMONT

Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. — Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio fought for control of the Republican’s establishment wing in Wednesday night’s third GOP debate, as insurgent outsiders Donald Trump and Ben Carson defended the seriousness of their White House bids, underscoring the volatile two-track fight for the party’s presidential nomination.

But in an economic policy-focused debate, Trump and Carson at times faded to the background during the two-hour contest.

Bush, once seen as the top Republican contender, entered the debate in the midst of the most difficult stretch of his White House campaign. He quickly targeted Rubio for his spotty voting record on Capitol Hill, signaling that he sees the Florida senator as the candidate most likely to block his political path.

“Marco, when you signed up for this, this was a 6-year term and you should be showing up for work,” said Bush, who is struggling to right his campaign after be-

ing forced to slash spending in response to slower fundraising. “You can campaign, or just resign and let someone else take the job.”

Rubio, who has had a close relationship with Bush, responded sharply: “The only reason you’re doing it is that we’re running for the same position and someone has convinced you that attacking me will help you.”

Three months before primary voting begins, the Republican contest remains crowded and unwieldy. Yet the contours of the race have been clarified, with outsiders capitalizing on voter frustration with Washington and candidates with political experience hoping the race ultimately turns their way.

Trump, the brash real estate mogul, has dominated the Republican race for months, but was less of a factor Wednesday night than in the previous two debates. He largely refrained from personal attacks on his rivals, which has been a signature of his campaign, even taking a light touch with Carson, who has overtaken him in recent Iowa polls.

Carson, the soft-spoken retired neurosurgeon who came into the debate with a

burst of momentum, stuck to his low-key style. He sought to explain his vague tax policy, which he has compared to tithing, in which families donate the same portion of their income to their church regardless of how much they make. And he insisted he had no involvement with supplement maker Mannatech, although he acknowledged using its product and giving paid speeches for the company, which has faced a legal challenge over health claims for its products.

Carson said it was absurd to allege he’s connected to the company. “If someone put me on their home page, they did it without permission,” he said.

Trump bristled when asked by a debate moderator if his policy proposals, including building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and deporting everyone who is in the U.S. illegally, amounted to a “comic book” campaign. And he defended his record in the private sector despite having to declare bankruptcy, casting it as a business technique.

“I’ve used that to my advantage as a businessman,” Trump said. “I used the laws of the country to my benefit.”

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