


# Substantial Disruption



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## The Empire of Dirt

By Mike Tully

The chorus of the Nine Inch Nails song, “Hurt” (exquisitely [covered by Johnny Cash](#) in 2002) goes like this:

*And you could have it all  
My empire of dirt  
I will let you down  
I will make you hurt*

I thought of these lyrics while watching the shock-opera defenestration of Kevin McCarthy play out on cable TV. McCarthy wanted it all, the palatial office suite, the power, the prestige and the historical bragging right of being Speaker of the House of Representatives. The Speaker is next in line to the President, following the Vice-President. McCarthy really, really wanted to be that significant.

The man who would be king seems likely to be nothing more than a punch line footnote in the history books. He’s like a dog drooling over a steak on the counter he can’t reach. He’s like a would-be lover staring through the window of a room he’ll never enter. He longs for a party invitation that never comes. He’s watching a pot that will not boil.

He was so sure the Speakership was his destiny that he literally had his belongings moved into the office before any votes were cast. There are 222 members of his caucus and he was their leader. Of course, they would elevate him to Speaker.

But they let him down. They made him hurt. And for what?

The current Republican caucus in the U. S. House of Representatives is an empire of dirt. Unlike Nancy Pelosi, who enforced the unity of the fractious Democratic caucus through velvet brilliance, McCarthy has none of the skills needed to lead such a group. Pelosi faced a potential rebellion from House progressives, who wanted to push the party so far left it would clear the horizon. Pelosi let them have their say, introduce some bills that often went nowhere, and then compelled them to vote unanimously to advance President Joe Biden’s agenda. Why did Pelosi succeed when McCarthy failed? The would-be rebels in her caucus respected her. McCarthy does not enjoy the respect of his caucus’ dissidents. Where Pelosi harvested respect McCarthy reaped loathing.

Part of McCarthy’s dilemma is that the House Republican caucus was fashioned in the image of Donald Trump. When your lighthouse is a man who governed like an out-of-control Roomba, the

rocky shoals are never far away. At least the Democratic House progressives had a governing agenda. The Republican dissidents are nihilists who are allergic to governance.

Nonetheless, a person aspiring to be speaker must be able to control them. Instead, McCarthy tried to placate them or buy them off. As his arch nemesis, Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz said on the House floor, McCarthy “sold shares of himself for more than a decade” in his campaign for historical significance. That was part of the problem. When his moment arrived, he had nothing left to sell.

Whoever becomes Speaker of the House will inherit an empire of dirt, specifically of the scorched earth variety. Republicans have exactly the same governing majority the Democrats enjoyed in the last Congress. But the Democrats had an effective leader who held the caucus together. The Republicans have a human dart board.

As I am writing this, McCarthy has suffered six humiliating defeats over the last two days. The nascent House reconvened in the evening to either vote again immediately or adjourn and temporarily cease the political waterboarding. McCarthy, whose name can be respelled to “Kevyn Cram Itch” lives to lose another day, barely winning an adjournment.

The House will reconvene again the next day at noon Eastern time. McCarthy might work some overnight magic and win the Speakership. But it seems like a longer and longer shot. What would he have to give up to break the impasse? Would the Speakership be worth winning if nothing remains of his soul, integrity and self-respect?

Actually, Kevin McCarthy seems to have an aptitude for operating in the absence of a soul, integrity and self-respect. He has done so since he genuflected to Donald Trump on January 27th, 2021. That might equip him to rule over his empire like Ozymandias.

A vast empire of dirt.

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