

NATIONAL POLITICS | By Charlie Cook, January 10, 2017

## Trump Flips the Bird to House Republicans



*This story was originally published on [nationaljournal.com](http://nationaljournal.com) on January 6, 2017*

Regular readers of this column can probably guess that I am fairly skeptical about the success of Donald Trump's upcoming presidency, but that doesn't stop me from giving him a huzzah for calling out House Republicans for their attempt to gut the Office of Congressional Ethics. In a closed-door meeting of the House GOP Conference, both Speaker Paul Ryan and Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy spoke in opposition to defanging OCE and creating a toothless Office of Congressional Complaint Review that would in turn answer to the perennially worthless House Ethics Committee. Once upon a time, the leadership could kill such an egregiously bad idea, but sadly those days have passed.

For all the talk of "draining the swamp" in Washington, Republicans instead did a clumsy cannonball right in the middle of it, though it could be argued that one person's swamp is another person's waterfront property. Rep. Robert Goodlatte defended the effort with the ridiculous argument that it "builds upon and strengthens the existing Office of Congressional Ethics," which was created after three House members were sent to federal prison for bribery.

But one of the strongest political undercurrents this year is that voters hate Washington, loathe career politicians, and completely distrust the entire political process. Having a professional OCE staff that doesn't answer to the law makers and can respond to tips without a formal complaint is exactly what voters want. To them, relying on the House Ethics Committee is like having foxes guard the chicken coop.

Electing Donald Trump was the voters' way of flipping the bird to Washington and politicians. So it was only appropriate that the president-elect gave the middle finger to GOP House members, tweeting at 10:02 Tuesday morning: "With all that Congress has to work on, do they really have to make the weakening of the Independent Ethics Watchdog, as unfair as it," followed five minutes later by ".....may be, their number one act and priority. Focus on tax reform, healthcare and so many other things of far greater importance!"

Within two hours of the first tweet, an emergency meeting of the conference was convened to strip out the offending provision before it was voted on by the House as a whole. Here was a case of Trump stopping House Republicans from stepping on a political landmine, preventing an embarrassment from becoming hundreds of Democratic television ads next year. Whether Trump opposed the OCE change or just thought the timing was particularly inopportune doesn't matter much. More importantly, Ryan and McCarthy among others can say, "I told you so," theoretically giving them a little more leverage the next time the rank-and-file boneheads come up with a clunker like this one.

What is disappointing is how Trump critics, who are quick to pounce on his every perceived transgression, didn't

acknowledge that he did the right thing here. To say that someone did one right thing is not to embrace his every thought, word, or deed. It just gives him credit for making the right call at that time. But that's not where we are in politics today. Everything is binary: Everyone in politics is either all good or all evil. The former can't do anything wrong, and the latter can do nothing right.

What Republican lawmakers are discovering is that the same bully pulpit that Trump uses to bludgeon big companies to keep jobs in the U.S. can be used against them, and that one or two tweets can change the course of action on Capitol Hill within two hours. In the past, a president-elect might well have been advised to steer clear of this issue in fear of alienating lawmakers whose support will be needed within a matter of weeks or months. But the devil-may-care Trump doesn't play by the normal rules. Every day is a new day for him, and political handicappers can throw out their past-performance charts. Trump makes up the future as he goes along.

Not many months ago it was widely expected that Republicans would lose the presidential race and very possibly their Senate majority. In a lot of ways they are like the dog that finally caught the car. As The New York Times' Carl Hulse pointed out early this week, Republicans unexpectedly will have the White House, the Senate, and the House for the first time in a decade, and nearly two-thirds of current GOP House members have never served under a Republican president. They have complete responsibility for governing, a prospect that many have never had and didn't anticipate—and may be unprepared to handle.

Quite a few House Republicans have spent the last eight years throwing rocks at President Obama, investigating things big and small, and passing legislation that they knew had little if any chance of becoming law. Now they have to govern, earning their keep by making tough decisions. Whether they like it or not, Trump just reminded them of what they were elected to do, and it wasn't to cover their own rear ends.