

DONALD TRUMP AND HIS SPEAKER-PUPPET

I want to talk about some implications of this Annie Karni story, describing the background to what is plain as day: Donald Trump, who jokes in private that he – not Mike Johnson – is the Speaker of the House, runs the nominal Speaker.

Karni pitches the story in terms of Johnson's "decision" to keep the House on vacation for the entirety of the government shutdown. But it has larger implications of the possibility of peeling Republican Congresspeople away from Trump.

He has argued that the House, which under the Constitution has the sole power to initiate spending legislation, has no reason to meet as long as Senate Democrats are blocking a bill to reopen the government. He has refused to swear in Representative-elect Adelita Grijalva, a Democrat who won election a month ago and has sued in federal court to be allowed to take her seat, claiming he lacks the power to do so.

His strategy of indefinite hiatus means that Mr. Johnson has not engaged in the typical political theater that speakers often employ during shutdown fights to jam the party out of power: scheduling tricky votes on bills to reopen parks or pay certain categories of federal workers, like agents for Immigration and Customs Enforcement or Customs and Border Protection.

[snip]

The absenteeism, people around Mr. Johnson said, is a strategic calculation that the best way to keep his unruly rank and file in line is to place them on an extended leave.

[snip]

Mr. Johnson appears to be using the considerable power of the speakership to render the House irrelevant.

Karni quotes New Gingrich saying that the strategy serves to prevent other issues from “clutter[ing] up” Republican messaging on the shutdown. And while Karni provides an incomplete census of those complaining about this strategy, she doesn’t explain what that other clutter might be.

- Kevin Kiley, who’ll likely be ousted if the CA redistricting passes
- Far right Texan Beth Van Duyne, who thinks they need to come back to work
- Elise Stefanik, who wants to pay the troops
- Steve Bannon, who wants to codify some of what Trump did with EOs

Stefanik’s concern, paying the troops, suggests a potentially much bigger concern, such as that Trump is sending service members into a wildly stupid, illegal war in Venezuela without any legal cover.

Given Johnson’s refusal to swear in Adelita Grijalva, one of those other issues is Epstein.

Johnson’s utter silence on a Trump pardon recipient, Christopher Moynihan, threatening Hakeem Jeffries, and Johnson’s cheerleading for George Santos’ commutation hints at another one: the way that Trump’s corruption fosters crime.

Another thing keeping the House on vacation keeps buried is healthcare, which Karni elsewhere describes as “a political vulnerability for the party.” CNN reports more

members getting squeamish about the impending healthcare increases.

And Trump's selections about what to fund and not to fund – his decision to reopen Farm Services Agency, so it can keep farmers afloat while his trade war kills their markets, but not SNAP, are an attempt to game this process. But thus far he has proven wildly tone deaf about what his members are really exposed to. SNAP may be one such example.

All that's to say that if members were in town, then they might be pushing back more aggressively against Speaker Mike and through him, Trump.

Trump, though, really is trying to neuter Congress. His demands that Republican state after Republican (or, in the case of North Carolina, swing) state redistrict, effectively eliminating democracy and enshrining polarization at the state level would serve his interest in completely defunding blue states which also happen to pay the bills for red states.

Perhaps most tellingly, Trump says that the Big Ugly Bill (Karni focuses on the tax cut part of it, not the creation of a goon army currently invading blue cities) was the only piece of legislation he needed Congress to pass.

Mr. Trump, [] has an iron grip on congressional Republicans and this week told G.O.P. senators that after they pushed through his marquee tax cut law, "We don't need to pass any more bills."

Republicans would do well to consider the implications of this, particularly as Trump and Russ Vought continue to violate funding rules. Congress has funded his army. There's no reason to believe they'll be entirely immune from targeting by it, as LaMonica McIver already has been.

This all underscores one reason voters should be

focusing on Republicans, not Democrats, in the weeks ahead, as SNAP shuts down and a second DOD paycheck arrives. Because Trump really is proposing he proceed without his Republican members of Congress – or without them serving any real function. And at least some of these Republicans do care (or can be made to care) that Trump is destroying their communities.