



GREG NASH

Rep. Justin Amash (I-Mich.) left the House Republican Conference this week. Former Rep. Peter Griffith (R-Ala.) shares his experience changing parties in 2009.

CONTRIBUTORS

A cautionary tale for Amash from someone who knows

By Parker Griffith

The memories had faded, but the feelings came back clear, crisp and sharp.

Rep. Justin Amash (I-Mich.) had just announced that he was leaving the Republican Party and becoming an independent. I knew a little bit about being a congressman during a time of turmoil in my party, about leaving my party over a principled stand and about grappling with the consequences of my decision.

On Dec. 23, 2009, I switched from Democrat to Republican. The proverbial feces flew into the fan and out again, giving me no chance to duck, dodge or kneel to pray.

The reaction was brutal from both sides of the aisle. The Democrats wanted their money back: The Democratic National Committee was going to sue me; the constituents who elected me were still on an Obama high, especially the black voters who were instrumen-

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tal in my victory. I saw tears and hate in their eyes. It was all very heartbreaking.

The Republicans, raw and bleeding from the defeat my team had handed them, were so uncontrollably hysterical that some probably had to be medicated. Rabies, although rare in humans, was diagnosed in both parties. I had contracted Political Ebola.

I was the oldest member of the freshman class of the 111th Congress. I had a long career before entering politics. My background was influential in my decision to switch parties. I am a cancer specialist. Health care for all Americans was important to me. I had seen too many people die because of a late diagnosis.

Because of my M.D., I was often consulted about the divisive Affordable Care Act (ACA). Barack Obama was president, Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was Speaker of the House and Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), who had been my mentor during my run for Congress, was now White House chief of staff.

I was a Blue Dog, one of the last of a dying breed of Democrat. The proposed ACA had ignited the Tea Party. In Alabama, having a black president and a female speaker was like throwing gasoline on that fire. Nobody bothered to see if the proposed health care law was poisonous: The guns came out and the shooting started. I was everybody's target.

The decision to change parties came after a meeting in the Speaker's conference room. I was asked for my opinion of the proposed bill. Here's roughly what I said:

"If this bill passes, it will polarize the country and the newly elected congressmen in this room who vote for it will not be back. We will flip the House to the Republicans. We cannot reform our health care system with a shortage of providers. It would be best if we increased the number of doctors and allowed nurse practitioners an expanded role in care. If we pass this bill, it will be for the leadership's ego not for America's health."

My candid advice was met with frosty silence. Madam Speaker and her team walked out.

The next day, the House floor was buzzing about the Pelosi/Griffith exchange. A longtime friend sat down beside me. "She doesn't forget a slight," he said of Pelosi. "You will never be able to do anything."

Days later, I met with minority leader John Boehner (R-Ohio). "I'll switch if you put me on energy and commerce," I told him.

He did. But nobody cared. The Tea Party beat me like a rented mule in 2010, and both parties were very happy I lost.

Since the switch I got back on the Titanic (the Democratic Party boat), ran for governor of Alabama in 2014, had a wonderful time — and went down in flames.

Benjamin Disraeli famously said, "Damn your principles. Stick to your party." Justin Amash and I fell victim to our egos and thought leadership really wanted thoughtful input.

Wisdom and good judgment in the young are usually an accident and rarely happen. I don't know Justin. I do know he is smart. I also know the world is full of smart dummies and dumb smarties. I know which one I am, politically.

Now Justin Amash gets to find out which one he is.

Griffith is a former U.S. representative from Alabama. A retired physician, Griffith was the first cancer specialist in North Alabama.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Congress must reverse administration's harmful global gag rule

From Melvine P. Ouyo

Since the 1994 Plan of Action in Cairo called for the provision of comprehensive reproductive health care for women around the world, I have only witnessed the deadly consequences of the world's failure to provide, especially that of the United States of America.

The current U.S. administration's withholding of family planning funding for clinics and organizations that provide crucial reproductive health

services is an injustice to people everywhere.

From Trump's expanded global gag rule to the domestic gag rule, to blocking funding to United Nations Population Fund and slashing funding to the Organization of American States, the White House has demonstrated anything but leadership in the arena of sexual and reproductive health and rights funding and support.

I have witnessed, firsthand, the grave harm Trump's policies inflict on the people of Kenya as a reproductive health care provider at Family Health Options Kenya (FHOK).

When Trump signed his global gag rule in 2017, FHOK was forced to

choose between U.S. funding and providing comprehensive health care for our patients. As a frontline practitioner who took an oath to save lives, the choice was clear. Because we wouldn't sign the gag rule, FHOK was forced to shutter three clinics, terminate mobile outreach services and lay off 15 staff.

Since then, FHOK has drastically reduced staff in all of its clinics, including the Kibera clinic, threatening the services that prevent unplanned pregnancies and decrease maternal mortality due to unsafe abortion. Unfortunately, the Kibera clinic will likely be the next facility to close if no alternative financial sup-

port is found.

Women who depend on the Kibera clinic are paying the consequences of an administration they did not elect. In addition to prioritizing reproductive rights at the upcoming Nairobi summit, the U.S. needs to step up.

In order to provide people around the world with comprehensive reproductive rights, the House needs to pass the Global Health, Empowerment and Rights (HER) Act, which would permanently rescind Trump's global gag rule.

Nairobi, Kenya

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