

Even as House Speaker, Paul Ryan Sleeps in His Office

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER, *The New York Times* online, November 10, 2015



CreditGOLDEN COSMOS

WASHINGTON — The speaker has no house.

Of all his unusual traits for his new role — relative youth, a love of Clif Bars for lunch and an excessive interest in tax policy — the most notable may be Speaker [Paul D. Ryan](#)'s insistence on sleeping in his Capitol Hill office.

Like scores of other members of Congress, most of them Republican, Mr. Ryan chooses to bed down on a cot in his office every night the House is in session. He chooses this over the speaker's official palatial suite in the Capitol, which Mr. Ryan has pointed out stinks thanks to smoke from its prior inhabitant, John A. Boehner.

So it is that he sleeps in his far smaller office in the Longworth House Office Building, one of three such buildings that over the years have become veritable homeless shelters for members of the House.

For the lawmakers, the choice is fiscal, practical and political. Many say they find Washington rental prices too high. Others say it allows them to work longer and harder hours, unfettered by commutes and the distraction of Jimmy Fallon.

Photo



Speaker Paul D. Ryan leaving his office in the Longworth House Office Building last month. He also sleeps in the office. Credit Zach Gibson/The New York Times

Still others, like Mr. Ryan, say Washington is simply not their home, so why get a basement apartment and a few lamps and pretend?

“I live in Janesville, Wis.,” Mr. Ryan said in an interview with CNN last weekend, referring to his 5,800-square-foot Georgian (locally referred to as the Parker Mansion because it was built by George Parker of Parker pens). “I commute back and forth every week. I just work here. I don’t live here. I get up very early in the morning. I work out. I work until about 11:30 at night. I go to bed, and I do the same thing the next day.”

He added, “I can actually get more work done by sleeping on a cot in my office, and I’m going to keep doing it.”

The cot club has at least 50 members. No one keeps an official tally, and many are loath to talk about a practice that some groups and other members have criticized over the years as essentially taxpayer-subsidized housing. Its members include the most senior Republican leaders, Mr. Ryan and Representative Kevin McCarthy, Republican of California and the majority leader, as well as a handful of women.

(Only one Republican senator, Jeff Flake of Arizona, is believed to sleep in his office, but he declined to confirm this as he smiled sheepishly before slinking into an elevator last week. He did once provide [shirtless photos](#) of his adventure on a tropical island. But we digress.)

“I watched the boys do it,” said Representative Lynn Jenkins, Republican of Kansas, who decided to bed down in her office two years ago after a few terms in a nearby apartment. “You buy a bed. You buy a couch, and then all of the sudden you think, ‘I’m getting too comfortable here.’ I don’t want to get too comfortable in this town.”

Mr. Ryan occasionally stays with extended family in Bethesda, Md., when his wife and three children are in town. But most nights, he does as most office sleepers do — stays out late at a benefit or dinner, comes home, pulls out a cot and goes to sleep. (Mr. Ryan, unlike many members, aims for a 9 p.m. bedtime.)

Photo



Representative Jason Chaffetz, Republican of Utah, demonstrated the setup of his sleeping quarters in January 2011. Mr. Chaffetz has gone through three beds since he arrived in Washington in 2009. CreditDrew Angerer/The New York Times

He is up before 6 a.m. Like most of the cot club, he schleps to the House gym in workout clothes, exercises, then takes a shower there.

(Mr. Ryan is apparently perplexed by all the interest in the fact that the speaker, the man second in the line for the presidency after the vice president, brushes his teeth in an efficiency kitchen sink in his office.)

The gold medal of office sleeping, however, goes to Representative Jason Chaffetz, Republican of Utah, now on his third bed since he arrived in Washington in 2009.

First there was the blowup bed, but “I must be too fat,” he said, “because I woke up one morning on the ground.” After too many midnight deflations, he moved on to a Coleman cot (\$44) but its springs were too weak. Lately he has settled on a more sturdy frame and mattress from Walmart (\$69).

He keeps sheets in a closet along with a warm blanket, which is especially important, he said, because the heat goes off from roughly midnight to 4 a.m. In another closet he has several suits and the rest of his clothing. He also keeps a small vacuum cleaner on hand for last-minute housekeeping, and frozen pizzas that he can heat in his toaster oven.

“For me the No. 1 driver is money,” he said. “I have two kids in college.” He conceded that the arrangement was “not for everybody. It’s uncomfortable, and it’s just lonely.”

Yet some like a final solitary escape from a day of endless jawboning. “I love it,” said Representative Kristi Noem, Republican of South Dakota. “If I can’t sleep I get up and work.”

Is it at all creepy?

“My mother worried about that,” she said. In fact, most members find the omnipresence of the police and cleaning crews assuring.

Office sleeping first became a thing in the 1980s, shortly after Dick Arme, Republican of Texas, was elected to the House and decided to make the Cannon House Office Building his Sheraton. Speaker James C. Wright, Democrat of Texas, ended the practice, saying essentially that it was gross.

Over the years, some watchdog groups have argued — to no legal avail — that the practice is something of a tax dodge, noting that employer-provided lodging is usually subject to taxation.

“I never did it,” said Representative Justin Amash, Republican of Michigan and a member of the super-frugal House Freedom Caucus. “It costs taxpayers money.”

Critics aside, members have continued the practice quietly in recent years. In at least one case it is a kind of tradition.

“My predecessor slept on his couch for 18 years,” said Representative Bill Huizenga, a Michigan Republican elected in 2010, referring to former Representative [Peter Hoekstra](#), also a Republican, whose couch is now in a local museum in his home state. “When I was running for election, people asked me three things: What are you going to do about spending? What are you going to do about Obamacare? Are you sleeping on your couch like he did?”

Those who imagine slumber parties and members padding in their slippers down dark hallways would be disappointed. Most say they arrive “home” after 11 p.m., attack a pile of papers and go right to sleep. Former Representative Tim Griffin, who used to sleep next door to Mr. Ryan, said he was a bit nostalgic for the late-night vending machine runs.

“You can’t beat the late-night sausage biscuits or a microwave hamburger,” he said. (Fact check: False.) “I am sure the Delicious Police would ban just about everything down there if they could.”

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