

# Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

## Minority Leader

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After twenty years of hard work and informal leadership in the House of Representatives, John Rhodes was elected Minority Leader by acclamation on December 7, 1973. He succeeded Gerald Ford, who had been chosen by President Richard Nixon to be Vice President in the wake of Spiro Agnew's resignation (Agnew came under investigation by the U.S. Attorney in Baltimore for allegedly receiving contractor payoffs when he was governor of Maryland) on October 10, 1973.

John Rhodes became Minority Leader at a very difficult time for both the Republican Party and the United States. Political pundits had declared the Republican Party dead following the landslide Democratic Presidential victory in 1964, and although Richard Nixon had been reelected to a second term by a large majority in 1972, the country was about to be plunged into the Watergate scandal that followed the break-in at the Democratic Party National Committee headquarters on June 17, 1972.

Because John Rhodes assumed the Minority Leadership in the midst of the Watergate scandal (which consumed the first nine months of his tenure), we have chosen to separate this part of his career into two sections: [Minority Leader](#) and [Minority Leader: Post Watergate](#). A third section, [The Watergate Era](#), deals with Rhodes's extensive involvement in bringing the Watergate debacle to a calm and orderly conclusion. Please choose a destination below:

<a href="#">Back to Previous Page</a>	<a href="#">Minority Leader: continued</a>	<a href="#">Minority Leader: Post Watergate</a>
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In John Rhodes's 1995 autobiography, *I Was There*, he recounted his experiences as Minority Leader in the U.S. House of Representatives - its duties and responsibilities, as well as its benefits and drawbacks. Please click below to read his essay.

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John Rhodes's low-key style during his Congressional career rendered him virtually unknown to the general public or the media outside of Arizona. Therefore, upon his election to the Minority Leadership, the national press was forced to do some hasty research regarding who this new Minority Leader was and what role he was likely to play in the Watergate crisis, which was, by early 1974, monopolizing the country's attention.

The best of these profiles was written by George F. Will and was published in the *Washington Post* on January 8, 1974. Will effectively captures both the character of the Minority Leader and the state of the nation at the time Rhodes began his tenure.

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[Back to Previous Page](#)

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## Leader of the Minority

*Excerpt from "I was There" (Rhodes & Smith), © 1995.*

When I became Minority Leader of the House in December, 1973, I made two major assumptions: first, I assumed the position would be helpful to me politically, especially in paving the way to success in forthcoming elections. Second, I assumed that as Minority Leader I would have instant access to all White House personnel, up to and including the president.

I soon discovered that I was wrong on both counts.

[Jerry Ford](#) burst the first bubble. He confided that when he became Minority Leader he had to work all the harder on constituent relations. Home folks get the idea that since you are now a “big shot,” you will have no time for them. So you had to work even harder to assure them that you still loved them. It did not take long for me to discover that Jerry was right.



*[Click image to enlarge.](#)*

I discarded my second assumption even sooner. The Nixon White House was just as impregnable as before. Despite those early disappointments, I soon learned that there were some very nice advantages attached to my new job as Minority Leader. The Washington Post’s Richard L. Lyons was almost right,

but not quite, in describing some of them:

"Rep. John Rhodes (R-Ariz.) acquired a chauffeured limousine, a \$7,000 pay raise, larger staff, and a Capitol office overlooking the Mall when he was elected House Minority Leader yesterday."

The new office in the Capitol was nice, and so was the staff that went with it. (I kept my old office and staff to do my Arizona constituent work). And I was appreciative of the chauffeured limousine. But my pay did not go up \$7,000. That figure represented the additional expense budget I was allotted to perform my new duties. With the position, too, came the knowledge that, should the Republicans become the majority party, I would almost certainly become Speaker of the House. (It was 21 years later, in the election of 1994, that Republicans captured a majority of the House seats. I had retired 12 years earlier.)

Along with the new job, however, came a mountain of new responsibilities and duties. I now needed to know everything of note that happened in all House committees. I became, and continued to be, the first person the press approached about matters concerning House Republicans. Speaking and social invitations snowballed. So did requests to travel to various parts of the country to support Republican candidates.

Any leader of a congressional minority has several goals in sight. First, he wants to lead a majority, not a minority. Second, he wants to lead a cohesive, effective minority.

These aims require many of the same efforts. To become a majority, the minority must have certain objectives it would try to accomplish if it had the votes. These aims must be made known to the public. For them to be credible, they must be presented and backed consistently by a cohesive minority—its efforts and its votes.

The Minority Leader is expected to be on the on the floor of the House when the sessions begin. The first order of business, after the prayer and the waiving of the reading of the Journal, consists of recognition of members to make one-minute speeches. These speeches are usually heavily laden with political statements, some of which are important enough to require a reply. If no Republican member makes such a reply, the leader should do it.

After the preliminary business of the House and one-minute speeches are over, the legislation for the day is ready for consideration. The first legislative task is to adopt the Rule, which outlines the terms and conditions to be followed in debate and votes on the bill to be considered, and any amendments. The Rule is issued by the Rules Committee and the members of the Rules Committee bring it to the floor. The debate on the Rule lasts for an hour. Quite often, someone in the leadership will take time to comment on the overall political situation and on the party position concerning the bill to be considered.

If a bill is very controversial, sometimes the House will refuse to adopt the Rule, which almost always results in the proposed legislation being killed. Therefore, if the minority party is dead set against the legislation, the first point of attack will be against the Rule.

Assuming the Rule is adopted, the House goes into the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union. The Speaker appoints a member of the majority to be the chairman of the Committee of the Whole, and the chairman and ranking members of the legislative committee which considered and reported the bill control the debate. Debate time, as provided by the Rule, is divided equally between the parties.

Usually, after the House goes into the Committee of the Whole, the leaders leave the floor either to go to a quick lunch or to their offices. It is at this time that members drop in to bring comments and proposals to their leader. It is a busy time of day. Among other tasks, the leader is responsible for appointing members to special and select committees. There is a temptation to appoint members who are particularly responsive to the leader's wishes. This is a temptation which any leader should resist. Naturally, he would like to reward loyal friends and adherents, but he should find other ways to do that. If he is not fair to the various segments of the minority, he will not find them responsive when he needs their support.

During the Ford administration, we had so few Republican members that about all we could do was sustain vetoes. Had we not had a loyal and cohesive group, this would have been impossible. In fact, I used to say proudly that the Republicans in the House were outnumbered by Democrats, but we were the largest cohesive group on Capitol Hill. Due to the fact that there were so many divisions in the Democratic majority, my assertion was not only true, but could have been proven to be true. Several times, every Republican member voted to sustain President Ford's vetoes.

Anita Welch, writing in Phoenix magazine, described my typical day as the new Minority Leader of the House. Among her observations:

- 7:30 A.M. His driver, Willie, picks him up at his Maryland home and drives him to a breakfast meeting.
- 8 A.M. Arrives at his Rayburn Building office. Reads and signs mail, confers with staff.
- 11:30 A.M. He dons his other hat as Minority Leader, and goes to his Capitol office.
- 12 noon. On the House floor for the opening hour of the session.
- 1 P.M. Off to two or more luncheon meetings, where he rarely eats. He usually has a quick bite in his office or at the House restaurant.
- 2 to 5 P.M. Meetings in his Capitol office. If his presence is needed on the floor, he can rush there in minutes.
- Evening. Meetings two or three nights a week. He often drops in for a brief stay at politically-oriented cocktail parties, where as Minority Leader he is co-host. Embassy and other official dinners sometimes have him and his wife Betty in attendance.
- 10:30 P.M. Home at last.

There were many observers who said that no House Minority Leader had ever assumed that office at a more difficult time than did I. The reason: the ever-darkening cloud of Watergate.

I had for several months expressed my faith in President Nixon's innocence of the cover-up charges, but mounting evidence of his complicity was troubling me.

Upon my election as Minority Leader, I repeated my assertion that the doubts occasioned by the Watergate problem needed to be cleared up as soon as possible, and I urged a prompt investigation by the House Judiciary Committee.

In January, 1974, just a month thereafter, Don Shirley of the Washington Post asked me if I was still a Nixon loyalist.

"Not as much as Jerry Ford," I answered. "I don't have the personal acquaintance Jerry had with Nixon from the time they were in the House together."

Shirley then asked if it might be conceivable that I would vote to impeach the president.

‘Yes,’ I told him, “if the investigations reveal what I consider a crime—something punishable by imprisonment. Obstruction of justice would qualify”

Not long after that, Betty and I attended a dinner at the home of Bill and Peggy Whyte. Also included were Bryce Harlow of Procter and Gamble and his wife Betty, Jerry and Betty Ford, Congressman [John Byrnes](#) of Wisconsin and his wife Bobby, and Mel and Barbara [Laird](#). Soon the conversation turned to “what we could do to save Richard Nixon.” The consensus was “not much.”

We did, however, ask Mel and Bryce to volunteer to go onto the White House staff. Neither of them, nor their wives, much relished that prospect, but Mel and Bryce did offer their services, and they remained on the White House staff for some three months.

By that time, there was not much anyone could do to salvage the Nixon presidency.

[Click Here to Close Essay](#)

*On January 8, 1974, George F. Will wrote the following column about John Rhodes entitled "The Scramble for Survival," which encapsulates both the times and the character of the Minority Leader.*

### **The Scramble for Survival**

One glance tells you: God had a congressman in mind when He made John Rhodes. And he is just what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they designed the House of Representatives, the body intended to be closest to the common man. Rhodes looks every inch like a House member ought to look. A little shorter than average, perhaps a little heavier than he ought to be, he dresses in business suits that are almost flamboyantly nondescript. His name is not a household word, and probably never will be. To his credit, he probably doesn't mind a bit.

But there is one house where he is well-known and closely watched. It is an important house, the big white one, sixteen blocks down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol Building. There they know the importance of the fact that Rhodes recently was elected to replace Gerald Ford as House Minority Leader. Rhodes, 58, born in Council Grove, Kan., and a Harvard Law School graduate, is the first Republican elected to the House from Arizona. He was elected in 1952, the year the name Richard Nixon became a household word. Rhodes represents 442,589 souls in the Phoenix area. That is Nixon country, if anything still is.

But what complicates Rhodes' life, and makes him a potential maker of history, is the fact that as minority leader he has a second constituency: the Republican membership in the House. That used to be Nixon country, but loyalty to Mr. Nixon, which has never been reciprocated, has been superceded by a pervasive concern for self-preservation. Many Republican Congressmen know that a significant portion of the voters they must have to win re-election are hard-core Nixon supporters. These voters will brook no criticism of Nixon. But a comparable portion of the voters will insist on a forthright disavowal of Nixon as a precondition of receiving their support. Republicans with constituencies divided in this way—and there may be several score of them—are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. What will they do? Don't ask; read Thomas Hobbes.

The life of every congressman is dominated by a categorical imperative. In the Hobbesian world of American politics, the first rule governing (and excusing) all behavior is the one Hobbes recommended: save yourself. At the federal level, American political nature is red in tooth and claw. Representatives must scramble for survival every two years, so they scramble all the time. They have worked so hard to get to Washington that they are not going to sit passively while Nixon drags them to their political graves. If having Nixon in office will cost the GOP, say, 40 House seats, at least 80 GOP members will feel vulnerable. And even those members who do not face defeat will fear an election that threatens to produce a Democratic majority swollen by 40 more members. In that case both the vulnerable and the alarmed members will insist on leadership from the man they just elected Minority Leader. They will petition him to petition Nixon to resign. Rhodes does not think it will come to this. He does think the House Judiciary Committee, which is handling the impeachment investigation, is a nest of extreme liberals. He observes the traditional congressional courtesies, offering perfunctory praise for the chairman, Peter Rodino of New Jersey. But he knows Rodino joined with the tiny band of fanatics who voted against the confirmation of Gerald Ford as Vice President. So Rhodes admits that one must be "a hell of an optimist" to doubt that the Judiciary Committee will vote for impeachment. But Rhodes thinks he can influence the timing. He believes he has a commitment from Rodino to bring the matter to the House floor for a vote by April.

This timing is crucial. Most Republicans, Rhodes included, think there will not be a full house majority for impeachment in April. They believe that only prolonged public committee hearings, producing panic among Republican members as the November elections approach, could produce a majority. Republicans say that a quick April vote, with impeachment losing, would be viewed in the country as a vindication of Nixon. Rhodes believes this would "settle" Watergate, "in a political sense." But Rhodes has too much political sense to really believe that Democrat Rodino will allow any April vote that will get Republicans off the hook.

*Will, George F. "The Scramble for Survival." Washington Post, 8 January 1974. Printed by permission of the publisher.*



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# Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

## Minority Leader: Post Watergate

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In 1976, John Rhodes published a book entitled *The Futile System*. At the time the book was written, Rhodes had been in Congress for twenty-four years — twenty-two of those spent in the minority party and three as Minority Leader. The book not only gives the reader an insider's look at how Congress works, but also examines the mechanics of the legislative process and forecasts the agenda of a Congress in the hands of a Republican majority. Rhodes's contention was that prolonged control of Congress by either party leads to bureaucratic stagnation and gridlock; therefore, periodic changes of party control are necessary and in the best interest of the nation.



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The *Futile System* is a document remarkable for its prescience and continued timeliness, having preceded the “Contract with America” and “compassionate conservatism” by nearly two decades. Excerpts from *The Futile System* are presented here for their historical value and as an illustration of John Rhodes's foresight.

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[Back to Previous Page](#)

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## On the Outside Looking In...

*Excerpt from "The Futile System" (Rhodes), © 1976.*

The bells resound—two bells, loud and sharp—signaling that a vote has begun on the Floor of the United States House of Representatives. I am only vaguely aware of them. After 22 years in Congress, the ringing of the bells (two bells for a recorded vote, three bells for a quorum call, etc.) has become as much a part of life as breathing. Members respond to them naturally, effortlessly, almost unthinkingly, like Pavlov’s dogs.

It takes a good five minutes, often longer, to reach the House Floor from one of the three House Office buildings. One of the good things about being Minority Leader is having an office in the Capitol. The proximity to the Floor enables me to read and sign a few more letters and return a few more telephone calls before having to leave to vote.

My secretary sticks her head inside my office to inform me that there are two minutes remaining. I sign one more letter and slip out the rear door.

The trip from my office to the Floor is a quick one—between 45 seconds to a minute, depending on my pace.

I slip through a pair of large doors and onto the House Floor. The vote is on an amendment that I have decided to oppose. From my wallet I extract my voting card. It is roughly the size of a credit card. It bears my photograph and several punched holes, which is my personalized code. I insert the card into one of many electronic voting terminals affixed to the back of the seats and depress the button labeled “nay.” A red light appears next to my name on the huge tote board above the press gallery.

I am about to leave the Floor when I notice a Republican Member striding earnestly towards me.

“Hello John,” he greets me. “Do you have a minute?” We find a couple of unoccupied seats and sit down. “This may come as a shock, John, but I’ve decided to retire,” he says.

It is a shock. Since I had been in his district the week before, I had naturally assumed that he was going all-out for reelection.

“You mean you’re not going to run?” I ask incredulously.

“Right,” he answers. “As a matter of fact, I’m going to quit Congress at the end of the month.”

My initial surprise is compounded. There is always a list of incumbents who decide not to seek reelection. But it is very rare for a Member to step down before his term has expired.

Thinking that he may be in some political trouble back home, I ask, “Is everything all right?”

He assures me that everything is fine. “I’ve just had it,” he explains. “I got tired, tired of being in the minority. We have to work twice as hard to be heard as those guys (he gestures towards the majority side) and I can’t see things changing. I’ve simply had enough.”

“You know what I mean, John,” he adds, stating a point rather than asking a question.

I express my regret that he is leaving Congress. I wish him well and start back towards my office. Along the way, I think . . . about my friend and his decision, and the heavy pressures faced by many of my other Republican colleagues.

Being in a congressional minority for a long period of time is depressing. To be sure, there is some solace to be derived from working to improve the program of the majority. Sometimes during a vote on a key amendment or an attempted veto override, the minority can band together to influence the outcome of events. But such cases are rare. For the most part, Members of the minority grow tired of being constantly against proposed bills and of never being able to enact anything of their own.

I fully understand the futility that comes from being locked into the minority. During my 22 years in Congress, all but two of these years—my freshman term—have been spent in the minority. Twenty years of having to be against things.

We have remained in Congress because the country needs a responsible minority as much as it needs a responsible and effective majority. It is our duty to do what we can to improve the legislative program put forth by the majority. When we are successful, we perform a useful service to the country.

There is a second responsibility of the minority. It is to try to become the nucleus of a new majority. There is always the hope that our political fortunes will improve in time, and it is this hope which gives us our real motivation.

Congress has changed greatly during my career. It has changed physically. When I arrived in 1953, there were two House office buildings. Today, there are 3 with a fourth being planned. In 1953, the Senators were all crowded into one office building. They now have two and are building a third.

Most everything in those days was done on a smaller scale. The staffs were smaller. The workload was smaller. The pressures were lighter.

In the early days, I received an average of ten to twelve constituent letters a day. Now it is a rare day that I do not receive at least 150 letters from home. A typical session usually lasted until July or maybe early August. When the time arrived for Congress to adjourn, my administrative assistant would pack up

office supplies and files and we would all move back to Arizona for the remainder of the year. It was unusual for a Congressman to be able to afford a permanent district office in those days, so I would set up a makeshift office in some downtown Phoenix office building or anyplace where I could hold office hours. Today I have two permanent and fully staffed offices in my congressional district. Some Members have as many as four.

These are some of the physical changes. Congress has changed atmospherically as well.

A certain club atmosphere has long pervaded both Houses of Congress. This feeling of camaraderie among most of the Members comes from being engaged in a common task and having to face common pressures. It has—this spirit—always been an integral part of congressional life and has traditionally transcended party lines. In fact, some of the rules of Congress are specifically aimed at ensuring that Members treat each other with both courtesy and respect. While speaking on the Floor, for example, a Member is strictly prohibited by the rules from referring to another Member by name. He must refer instead to “the gentleman from Arizona” or “the distinguished gentleman.” If one Member speaks ill of another Member on the Floor, the rules provide that a motion can be made for his remarks to be “stricken” from the Record. Outside of censure, having one’s words stricken is the greatest rebuke a Member of Congress can receive.

When I was a young Congressman, I learned very quickly that one should never regard a political disagreement with another Member as a personal confrontation. Things just didn’t work that way. I also learned that a good Member of Congress never, NEVER, loses his temper on the Floor. In the privacy of one’s office or home, it is perfectly normal to rant and rave about the S.O.B. who did you in that day. But when you run into him the next day in a corridor or in the cloakroom, you treat him as though he is one of your best friends.

This spirit of congeniality and goodwill has helped the system work for the benefit of the people. In years past, Members went out of their way to help a colleague in need, even if the colleague belonged to the other party. When I was a member of the Appropriations Committee, it was not at all unusual for a Member to request my assistance in obtaining financing for a project in his district. If the project had merit, I usually did whatever I could to accommodate him. And if for some reason I couldn’t help him, he almost always understood.

Members of Congress still strive to help one another, but not nearly to the extent that they once did. And Members still treat each other with civility, but not anywhere near the civility of earlier days. Congress has changed. Of this there can be no question.

The atmosphere in and around Congress today is far more acrid than at any time during my career. The Members are louder, more uptight, hostile and devious. The average Congressman has always been partisan, but never so partisan as he is today. Today’s Members—particularly many of the newer Members—have failed to master the art of disagreeing without being disagreeable.

It is certainly not my intention to hand down a blanket indictment of the entire membership of Congress. After all, there are 535 individual Members, many of whom are conscientious, hard working, intelligent and unselfish. I am speaking only in terms of broad trends and averages, with the hope that things may yet change for the better.

The average Congressman of yesteryear was congenial, polite and willing to work with his colleagues whenever possible. Most important, his main concern was attending to his congressional duties. Today, a large number of Congressmen are cynical, abrasive, frequently uncommunicative and ambitious to an inordinate degree. In their eagerness to draw attention to themselves—and advance politically—they

frustrate the legislative process.

What can be done to ensure that Congress is made up of individuals whose principal interest is legislation and not reaching some other office? Closer scrutiny by the voters is one obvious answer. When evaluating a candidate for the House or Senate, the voters should demand to know his or her opinions regarding issues that Congress can affect. They should also demand that he possess a working knowledge of the legislative process. It is surprising how many Members really do not understand even the basics of the system. I had a freshman Member, a bright young rising star, come up to me on the Floor during one of the opening days of a recent session and ask, "Just how many Members are there in this body?"



*[Click image to enlarge.](#)*

It is such basic ignorance that leads me to conclude that many Members run for Congress not because they have any great interest in legislation, but because of the opportunities for future advancement that service in Congress presents. They are here because they enjoy the publicity that comes from being a Member and because there is always the possibility of a higher office opening up for them. As far as the day-to-day business of being a legislator is concerned, too many of them couldn't care less.

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