

## POLITICS

# Newt Gingrich's Self-Renewal Strategy

*In the eyes of many House Republicans, the speaker is on a precarious*

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**A** month after his reprimand for violating the rules of the House, Speaker Newt Gingrich has put in place a strategy to rehabilitate himself personally and politically. But Republicans in and out of the House say his standing remains precarious and that, if it has not improved noticeably by summer, he will have trouble remaining in power into the next Congress.

## CONGRESS

Gingrich's missteps since the House voted to reprimand him on Jan. 21, including a public outburst aimed at the news media and liberals, have further shaken the confidence of fellow Republicans, who have grown weary defending the speaker to their constituents.

"The well is dry," says one leading House Republican, who calls the speaker's hold on power "tenuous."

Another Republican with close ties to the House says many of Gingrich's once-loyal followers distrust his political instincts. "They have no faith in his judgment," this Republican says. "They have no faith in his management. It's management by college professor in the House. They have no idea where we're headed."

The disarray among House Republicans has been evident in recent weeks: They mustered fewer votes for term limits than they did two years ago; saw 44 of their colleagues defect to help President Clinton win release of foreign aid for family planning groups; and could not push a constitutional amendment to balance the budget out of the Judiciary Committee, even though it is a cornerstone of their agenda.

Gingrich's strongest supporters say the speaker's condition, while difficult, is far from dire and predict that if he follows the plan for what one called "self-renewal," he will emerge as strong as ever. That plan includes rebuilding relations among his colleagues in the House, speeches to friendly Republican audiences and, most important, a public demeanor of cooperation rather than confrontation—all of which were on display when the speaker addressed a party luncheon in Georgia on Feb. 15.

"He's been through hell," says Republican Rep. Bill Paxon of New York, citing Democratic attacks throughout 1996 and the ethics battle. But he says Gingrich has "an unbelievable level of fortitude . . . and a deep set of core beliefs" that will carry him back to power, both as the leader of the House and as the articulator of a conservative vision for the party.

Another close friend says: "The truth is, Newt is a natural leader. He is the most optimistic person I know, bar none. He has a remarkably strong will and the ability to do the work required to get the job done. . . . Mentally he's in pretty good shape. Emotionally he's in pretty good shape. Intellectually he's in pretty good shape. He's a great student of history and understands the situation he's in now."

Despite those assets, some House Republicans worry that it is less of a question of whether Gingrich missteps again than it is when. His outburst last month, these lawmakers say, illustrates his greatest weaknesses—his inability to discipline himself and to see the impact of his words and actions.

Concerns about Gingrich reflect a broader loss of confidence among Republicans about the direction of the party in the aftermath of Clinton's reelection and the ethics controversy, in which the speaker admitted he had given false information to the House ethics committee and failed to seek proper legal advice in setting up a college course financed with tax-exempt funds. Gingrich agreed not only to accept a reprimand but also to pay a penalty of \$300,000, an eye-catching punishment that transformed what his allies had been describing as a minor traffic violation into a major problem for the speaker and his fellow Republicans.

Gingrich still has not decided how to pay the penalty and has made clear to some members that he is resisting recommendations that he use personal funds, rather than campaign contributions or a legal defense fund. Gingrich has complained bitterly that, despite the proceeds of his best-selling book, he cannot afford to use his own money.

His allies say the issue is in the hands of Gingrich's lawyers and that the speaker is concerned not only about his own situation but also about the precedent of his decision on future cases involving other members. But other Republicans say his only political choice is to pay the money out of personal funds. Many Republicans agree with the view of a House Democratic leadership aide, who says, "Paying with campaign funds would be the end of him."

Moreover, Gingrich could face further problems from the Internal Revenue Service—which is looking into the tax-exempt, charitable groups that have funded his activities—and from House Democrats, who are likely to renew unresolved ethics charges after a moratorium imposed by the bipartisan leadership.

A NUMBER OF REPUBLICANS SAY Gingrich helped himself among his House colleagues at a pre-recess meeting Feb. 13 and at a GOP retreat in Williamsburg, Va., the previous weekend. "Coming out of Williamsburg the mood is much better," says one person who stays in close touch with the mood of House Republicans. "They got to see him as the grand, master visionary, strategist and tactician. Those who were there were feeling much better about it."

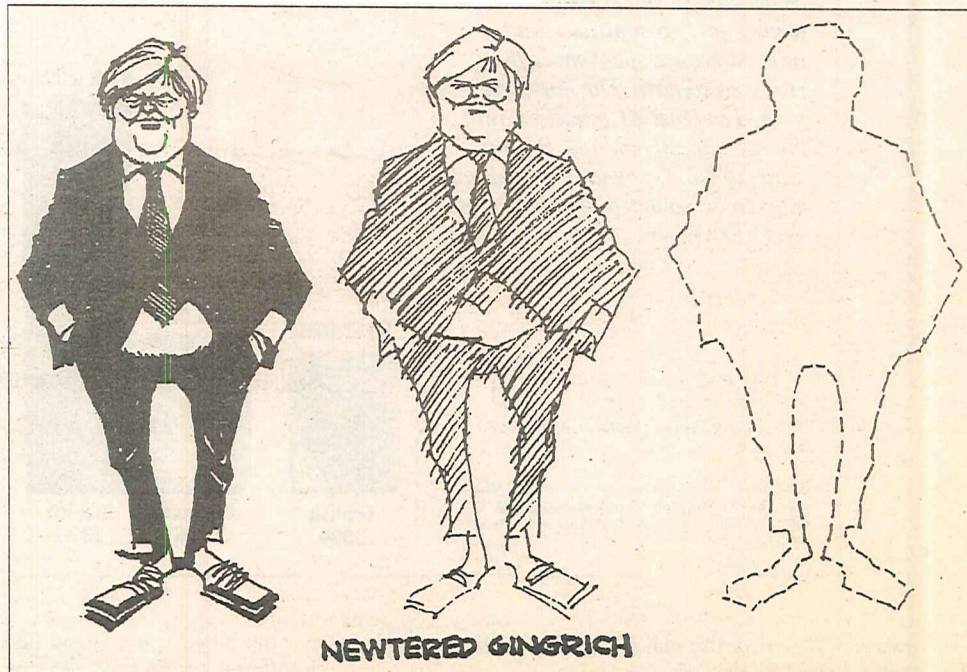
Those positive assessments contrast with the perceptions of others who have crossed paths with Gingrich in the days since his reprimand. They have found a shaken leader who has drawn inward. He has ignored the advice of some longtime allies and failed to reach out for advice from others, notably former Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour.

"He's not the old Newt," says one Republican who knows Gingrich well. "He's not the 'I've-got-confidence-in-myself' Newt."

Gingrich's plan for self-renewal appears all-encompassing, from the personal to the political. Friends say he is determined to lose weight, through a more disciplined program of exercise and diet, while striking a better balance between his private and public lives.

Politically, Gingrich appears determined to rebuild his relationships within the House and draw strength from his enduring popularity among grass-roots conservatives, hoping a

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BY CONRAD FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

record of accomplishment in the House and a gradual softening of his image eventually will improve his standing nationally.

"There's a game plan in place," Paxon says. "It includes a renewal of member relations and a renewal of relations out in the outside world. . . . There is a tremendous respect and enthusiasm for Newt at the Republican grass roots. That's the piece you've got to take advantage of."

Gingrich's popularity among GOP activists was evident Feb. 15 at a party gathering in suburban Atlanta, which set a fund-raising record for the state GOP, and a week earlier, when he spoke to a Lincoln Day dinner in Ohio in the home county of House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner. The dinner quickly sold out its 1,200 tickets—at \$50 apiece—and had to be moved to a larger facility.

Yet Gingrich's closest friends and advisers believe there is little he can do reverse the reality that he is the least-popular Republican on the national scene. "The numbers have been horrible for a long, long time," one close friend says. "They never started high. We're not going to expend any energy on it—not any dollars either."

His argument was that Gingrich's unpopularity predates the ethics controversy and that it proved not to be a silver bullet for Democrats in 1996 when they attempted to use the speaker's low standing to tar other GOP candidates. But some Republican strategists doubt GOP House candidates want to go through another election cycle with Gingrich as a drag on their campaigns.

Gingrich has a new chief of staff, communications director and press secretary. But his plan calls for minimal contact with the news media. During the current recess, Gingrich has decided to forgo his usual practice of flying around the country raising money for candidates and the party and plans to spend the time on vacation with his wife, Marianne.

The fragility of his position was reinforced by two recent events. The first came in his home district last month when he said what had happened to him in the ethics fight was an example of a double standard that treated con-

servatives more harshly than liberals. Gingrich's outburst came after he had been warned to maintain a low profile and a contrite public posture.

"We wanted to go on to the next thing and he wanted to go back to the last thing," says Republican Rep. Mark Edward Souder of Indiana, a conservative who sometimes differs with Gingrich.

One close friend of the speaker's believes he was, in part, the victim of bad reporting, noting that Gingrich had prefaced his criticisms of the news media by saying he did not intend to minimize his mistakes. "My opinion notwithstanding, I am not worried that it will be like a pattern of stuff," the friend says. "I think he's taken to heart what people said."

Linda DiVall, who does polling for the speaker, agrees that Gingrich has learned a lesson. "He has to be very careful because the threshold is lower and lower," she says. "He doesn't have much room to make errors in judgment like that because people aren't willing to take much more."

**MANY CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICANS** also were upset when Gingrich invited Jesse L. Jackson to sit in the speaker's gallery during Clinton's State of the Union address—and outraged when the speaker appeared to take Jackson's side during a public spat with Rep. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, the lone Republican African American in the House, over a Watts quotation decrying "race-hustling poverty pimps" that appeared aimed at Jackson.

Gingrich's actions drew a sharp rebuke from conservative William J. Bennett, whom Gingrich allies had been attempting to muffle for weeks. He and others say Gingrich should have invited Ward Connerly, the author of the California Civil Rights Initiative, rather than Jackson.

The speaker addressed those critics on Feb. 15 in Georgia, arguing in conciliatory tones that Republicans need to build bridges to the minority community and urban America as part of their effort to become the majority party in the country.