
THE FEDERAL

In Return to Classroom, Gingrich

By Stephen Barr
Washington Post Staff Writer

SYRACUSE, N.Y., Feb. 19—House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) took a break from what he called the “nine-second sound bites” and spent an hour today urging graduate students to rethink how they view public service.

Gingrich moved quickly and forcefully through many topics—popular culture, the nation’s first computer, organizational behavior, education, zoos—as he offered a vision of a smaller, more responsive government for the “information age.”

He attacked the modern bureaucracy as a “dysfunctional system” intent on achieving a “fantasy level of accuracy. . . . What’s happened is we’ve built a system that pursues a perfection that it can’t get, and then has to lie about what it is achieving. Then it has to hire people to monitor what it is not doing right, and you end up with a mound of paperwork that doesn’t deal with reality.”

Gingrich, who taught history at West Georgia College before being elected to Congress in 1978, clearly relished his return to the classroom—saying at one point that leaders make symbolic statements by where they go and “define importance by their presence.”

The setting was appropriately high-tech for Gingrich. He sat on a chair before about 50 public administration students at Syracuse University and three television cameras that relayed his remarks to a similar group at the University of Texas at Austin. Gingrich then took questions from students, in person here and via television from Texas.

“Public service is not the same as government service. . . . Public service is finding a way to serve the community,” Gingrich said when asked to explain how various groups could work together. He suggested that the students look at private companies and volunteer groups when they think of careers.

But he also reassured them that Washington would offer plenty of job opportunities, even if Republicans succeeded in substantially reducing the size of the government and shifting Medicaid and welfare programs to the states. “None of us are talking about a small government—this idea that late on Tuesday there might be so few posts left there would be no jobs, I don’t think this is going to happen,” Gingrich said.

The students here listened intently as Gingrich answered questions, taking notes and occasionally nodding their heads. Afterward, several said in interviews that they found the speaker engaging and challenging.

William Russell, 25, who was an intern in the Bush administration, said Gingrich left students feeling optimis-

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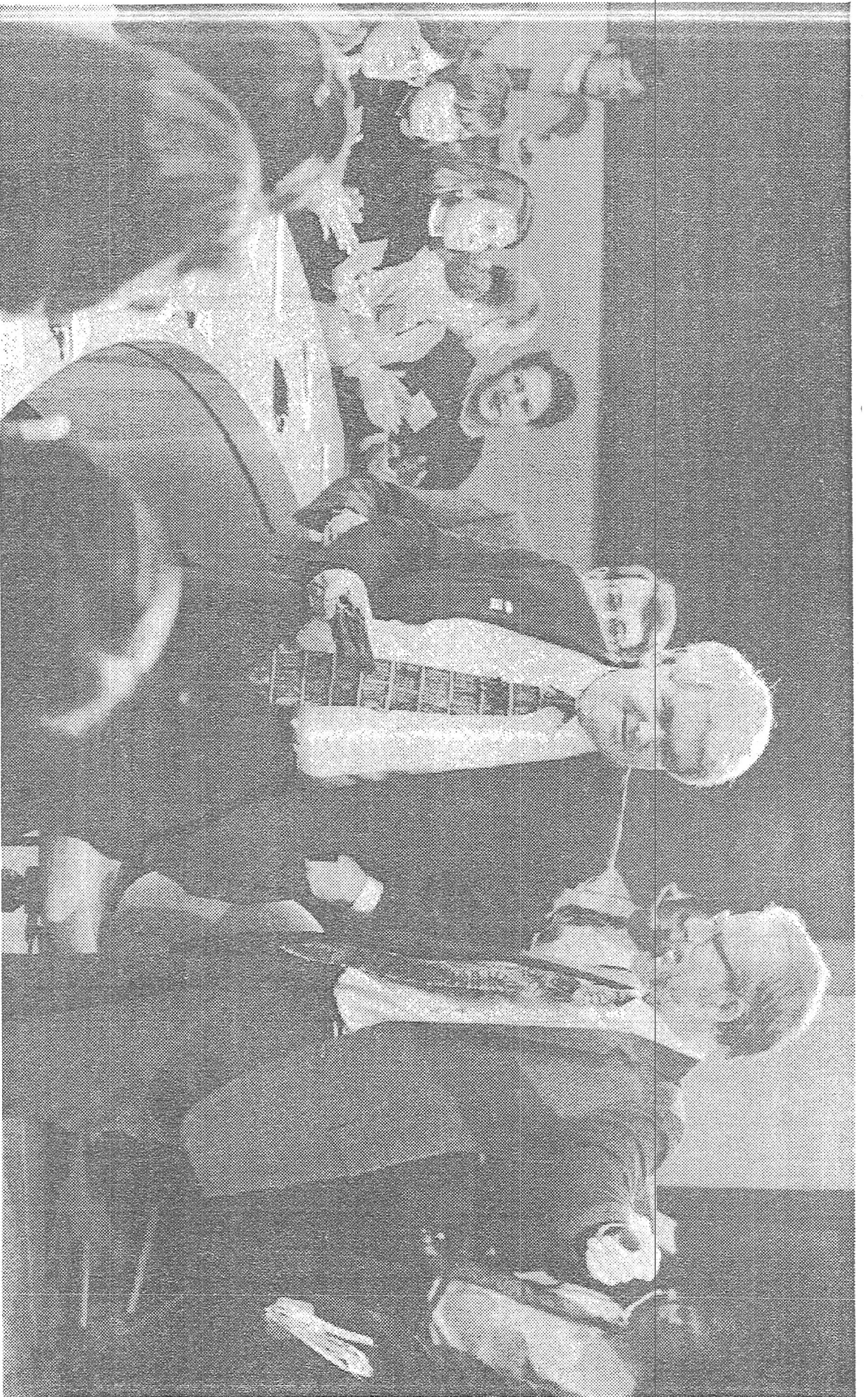
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tic. “He said to find your niche, to find your talent and to go with it, go with it,” Russell said.

“I thought he was great,” said Ling Chan, 22, who liked the way Gingrich blended historical examples to make his case for a less bureaucratic society and government.

But other students said the House speaker did not always answer the questions he was asked or did not explain what steps were needed to achieve his goals of better schools, state control of large social programs and a limited federal government.

“The speaker was convincing in his own universe but I’m not convinced he understands the lives of ordinary people,” said Anita Visser, 32, who wants to manage an arts organization.



Speaker Gingrich, left, talks with John L. Palmer, dean of Syracuse University's Maxwell School, after a teleconference involving public affairs graduate students there and in Texas.

BY MICHAEL OKOENISH—ASSOCIATED PRESS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

She doubted many low- and middle-income Americans would be able to make up for fewer government services through volunteerism, as Gingrich suggested. "It struck me as a logic within its own circle. I don't see how it translates to the ordinary lives of Americans today."

Stephen Lisauskas, 23, said Gingrich "did not answer what we asked. . . . He's a man of ideas, not of a plan." Although Lisauskas praised Gingrich for backing ideas that would shift power to the states, "it's a question of how you do it, and he doesn't say how you are going to do it. He just says, 'Let's do it.'"

Gingrich was the first of a series of speakers, including retired Gen. Colin L. Powell, invited to the university's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs to talk about public service. Earlier in the day Gingrich appeared at a fund-raiser for Rep. James T. Walsh (R-N.Y.) at a downtown hotel, where about 500 demonstrators organized by a local union chanted, "Newt's gotta go."

The Maxwell School is widely regarded as among the nation's top public administration programs. The one-year graduate program usually takes about 100 students

from here and abroad. Over the past two years, about 30 percent of Maxwell graduates have gone to work in state and local government. Nearly 21 percent have taken jobs in the private sector and 18 percent have joined the federal government.

That trend seems certain to continue with this year's class, which has a number of students seeking jobs in state and local government, with private consulting firms or with nonprofit groups.

"I'm not enchanted with the federal level," said Visser, who would like to manage a city-sponsored symphony. "My direction is to work at the local level because I want to be accountable and accessible to my constituents."

Lisauskas hopes to mesh his management and financial training at Maxwell in a city government career. In city government, he said, "You can see the people you help and look them in the eye."

The budget impasse between the White House and Congress, and the accompanying government shutdowns, make the federal government a less appealing employer, some students said.

"When government workers are furloughed, that sends a strong message to people going into public administration," said Chan, who plans to join a Minnesota company that specializes in government consulting. "I think there are a lot of people like me who don't see working in government as the best way to change the government."

Chan favors a downsized government "that provides a limited amount of services."

Russell most recently worked in the campaign of New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (R). If he returns to Washington, he said, it will be to work on Capitol Hill or with a trade association.

Even though he is not interested in a federal job, Russell said he thinks Clinton "came out looking better" after the government shutdowns.

"As a Republican, I wanted our agenda through and through, but at the same time I was a little uneasy about some of the government-bashing that went on," he said. "I think the American people found out that there are services provided by government servants that they depend on."