

D'Amato Warns Gingrich His Agenda 'Hurts' GOP

Dole Could Suffer in Campaign, Senator Says

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Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (N.Y.), in an unusually blunt assessment of a fellow Republican leader, has criticized House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) for pushing an agenda that he says the public is rejecting as too extreme.

D'Amato's comments, made in a series of interviews Thursday, took on significance because he is a confidant of Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) and because they gave voice to concerns other party leaders have been expressing privately.

D'Amato indicated that if Gingrich and his charges don't moderate their message, the party and its presumptive presidential nominee, Dole, will suffer at the polls. "It's already hurt Republicans," D'Amato said, according to the Associated Press. "It's not helpful."

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Polls show President Clinton has a double-digit lead on Dole in virtually every crucial state and that there is declining support for the GOP legislative agenda and the job Gingrich is doing. D'Amato's critique of Gingrich comes the same week the speaker was tapped, as tradition dictates, to chair the Republican National Convention this summer—a role that will make the controversial leader the face of the party for several days.

Dole, who spoke at a GOP dinner in New York last night, distanced himself from the views of D'Amato, a co-chairman of his national campaign steering committee. But he did so through a cautious, awkwardly worded statement released by his campaign.

"One of the big things about being in the majority party," Dole

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said, "is that there is plenty of room for a variety of opinions. In this case, Sen. D'Amato and Sen. Dole simply have different perspectives."

"D'Amato was freelancing," added a Dole campaign official. "He was not doing our bidding." Campaign aides were further upset because D'Amato's remarks diverted attention from Dole's New York trip, where he planned to draw distinctions with Clinton. Instead, media attention was focused on internal party dissension.

There has been tension between Gingrich and Dole in the past, and between House and Senate Republicans in this Congress. But the speaker has said that now that Dole is to be the party's nominee, he regards himself as the "junior partner" in their relationship and will defer to Dole on strategic decisions as the two major parties jockey for position on issues heading into the fall campaign.

This latest intraparty flare-up comes as Republicans are backpedaling on the minimum wage issue, squabbling over abortion and are generally in a down-

beat, funky mood over their presidential prospects.

The D'Amato contretemps began when the senator appeared Thursday morning on Don Imus's radio program. D'Amato then went on to do an interview with the New York Daily News and other news organizations. Neither D'Amato, nor a spokesman for the senator, could be reached for comment yesterday.

"People did not vote to cut education and cut funding for the environment and cut funding for programs they care about," D'Amato told the Daily News. "People did vote for change but not for this revolution. They want lower taxes and less spending but not dirty drinking water."

"I think the House Republican agenda, as put forth in the last session, was one that sent the wrong message," AP quoted D'Amato as saying. "If they repeat the same mistakes, we're going to be hurt. . . . If we don't have a message that people feel comfortable with, he [Dole] is going to have a tough time."

D'Amato's comments did not seem

aimed at Gingrich personally. In fact, he described Gingrich as "very smart" and "very capable, but I think he misread the '94 election results."

Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley called D'Amato's critique "utterly and completely wrong" and said the House GOP agenda of balancing the budget, cutting taxes for the middle class, reforming welfare and other elements of the "Contract With America" is supported by the public.

"I think it's fair to say the messenger has been disparaged," Blankley said, adding that Democrats have tried to "sabotage Newt's character" while mischaracterizing "what our policies are."

But polls show Americans have less confidence than they did a year ago in the congressional Republicans' handling of the economy, the federal deficit, taxes, crime and welfare. A recent Los Angeles Times survey showed 39 percent disapproved of the Republican Congress's agenda, while 37 percent approved; 46 percent said the GOP does not deserve to retain control of Congress while 41 percent said it does.

When the Republicans took control of Congress in the 1994 elections, polls showed a majority of Americans approved of their policies. But Gingrich, the architect of this so-called revolution, has become a polarizing figure in the public's mind, polls show. A recent USA Today-CNN survey showed 55 percent disapproved of the job the speaker is doing.

A Senate GOP source, privy to many of the internal party debates, said D'Amato has been saying the same thing for a long time in the kitchen-cabinet strategy sessions for the Dole campaign.

"There are basically two camps around Dole, and this is emblematic of the camp that says blurryour differences with the president and offer yourself as a doer, not talker" as opposed to the other camp, which would do just the opposite, the aide said.

Getting Dole to distance himself from Gingrich and the House Republicans is part of the strategy of the D'Amato camp, he added.

Dole does not appear to have come down firmly in favor of either strategy,

the aide said. "It's still in the assessment stage."

The aide said D'Amato is probably motivated by his own problems in New York.

He sees Gingrich as a drag there for all Republicans, especially in New York City, the aide said. "He's listening to his own pollster."

A recent survey by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion showed D'Amato's job approval rating down to 26 percent—his all-time low. And national surveys are showing diminished interest in the Whitewater hearings D'Amato has been chairing.

The junior senator from New York, known for his acerbic rhetoric, got into trouble once before on Imus's radio program when he lampooned O.J. Simpson trial Judge Lance A. Ito. He was forced to apologize.

"I think for D'Amato's sake," said Blankley, "he needs to keep off the show."

Staff writer Blaine Harden and staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to this report.