

Pulp Fiction: Gingrich's Novel A Big-Time Flop

5/21/96
By David Streitfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

It's enough to make you feel sorry for Newt Gingrich. He dared to write a novel at a time when few people even dare to read them. And people sure didn't dare buy "1945," the science-fiction tale written by the speaker of the House and two collaborators. For every 100 copies that his hopeful publisher sent forth into the world, 81 came back, unsold.

They sit now, 97,341 shiny, unloved hardcovers, in a warehouse in Bristol, Pa. "I'm trying to figure out what to do with them," says the publisher, Jim Baen. "No reasonable offer refused."

Barring the unexpected, Baen has two options: Find someone to buy the books for about a buck each, which means they'll eventually show up as \$2.98 specials in the back of bookstores, or, failing that, give the copies away to someone who will convert them to pulp.

In this latter process, Baen explains, "the books first are shredded, then become a sort of book soup, then

See GINGRICH, B4, Col. 1

GINGRICH, From B1

paper." Not paper for new books, but another kind. "Ultimately you would wipe your butt on it," the publisher says sadly.

That would certainly be an ignoble ending to a venture that, only a year ago, had such promise. Rarely has a novel made so much noise before it was even published. The New York Times wrote excitedly about the "pouting sex kitten" featured in an early draft. The Washington Post devoted a front-page story to the flap about a walk-on character, a certain Lt. George Bush, being characterized as "goofy."

Baen, a prominent science-fiction publisher who runs the eight-employee Baen Books out of an office in a tony section of the Bronx, never dreamed of such attention when he signed it up. The book's advance was a relatively modest \$45,000, split equally among Gingrich, co-writer William R. Forstchen and "technical editor" Albert S. Hanser.

During those semi-hysterical days after the 1994 Republican electoral rout, when everything Gingrich said or did was front-page news, Baen couldn't believe his great good luck.

"It was as if Santa Claus had landed on my roof," he said. "This is the book that would have made me a potential player on a big scale." At one point, he was planning to print 200,000 copies. "The

number went down, but not nearly far enough." He calls the experience "basically the biggest disappointment of my life."

The last words of "1945" are "to be continued," but it won't be soon. The sequel, "Fortress Europa," was tentatively scheduled for release this month. But now it exists only in outline.

There are several theories about why "1945," a weapons-heavy novel about America's valiant fight against a triumphant Third Reich, bombed so big. First, of course, is the possibility that it was horrible. Some key words from Jonathan Yardley's review in *The Post*: "moronic . . . techno-babble . . . torture . . . downright embarrassing."

But there were some good reviews, too. *Asimov's*, the leading science-fiction magazine, deemed it enjoyable. "Solid, well-researched and adequately written," said the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "A gripping read," enthused the *National Review*. Apparently none of these helped.

Besides, even horrible novels sometimes sell very well—just take a look at the bestseller list. So another theory is that people just weren't interested in a politician's storytelling skills. It was out of Gingrich's area of expertise, and therefore as unappealing as a political manifesto by Stephen King or John Grisham.

Another possibility, one favored by Baen, is that HarperCollins, the publisher of Gingrich's nonfiction "To Renew America," knew that there were only a limited number of consumer dollars to be spent on books by Gingrich, and used its muscle to make sure its book got the cash. HarperCollins ran Gingrich's publicity tour last August, and got the lion's share of the attention.

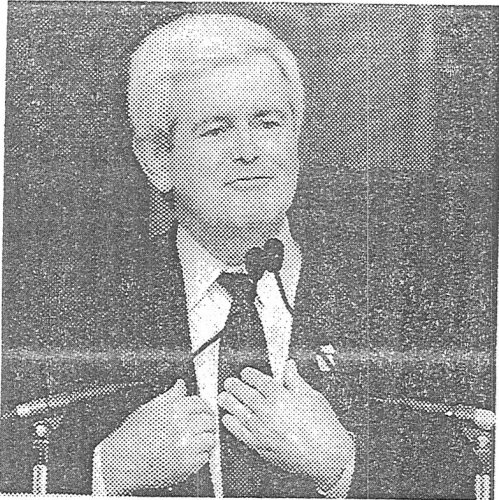
"To Renew America," which like "1945" was published exactly a year ago, certainly did much better than the novel. It was a No. 1 bestseller, and Gingrich made a bundle. But if you really want to feel bad for the speaker, consider the amount of money he forfeited when bad publicity forced him to give up his \$4.5 million advance.

For those who have forgotten: Two weeks before the Georgia Republican became speaker in January 1995, he sewed up a deal with HarperCollins for a \$4.5 million advance for two books, a political treatise and an anthology on democracy. The stupendous sum gave the Democrats a wedge to attack Gingrich for cashing in on his political connections, and provoked disquiet among Republicans as well. He quickly backed off, taking a token \$1 advance instead.

The difference so far to Gingrich? About \$3 million.

A publisher's advance is the minimum that a writer is guaranteed to earn. Even if both nonfiction books tanked, Gingrich would still have had his \$4.5 million. Instead, he was forced to earn his money one book at a time, the way all House members will from now on; late last year, prompted by the Gingrich imbroglio, the House voted to ban advances for its members.

In Gingrich's 1995 financial disclosure state-



FILE PHOTO

With two books out last year, Newt Gingrich was a celebrity at the 1995 American Booksellers Association convention.

ment, he said he had received \$1.22 million in royalties from HarperCollins. So far this year, he's gotten another \$282,000.

Out of this, he agreed to pay his agent the 15 percent commission she would have earned on the \$4.5 million deal, which must be like paying the tip for a lavish but uneaten meal. So subtract \$675,000.

Gingrich also fulfilled a promise to give to charity any royalties from books signed on his tour. That totaled \$47,716. Fees to a co-writer and researcher, plus expenses for the book tour, came to \$140,772 more, according to the disclosure statement.

That leaves about \$640,000 before the ultimate Gingrichian scourge—taxes. More money will filter in—300,000 paperback copies of "To Renew America" were published last month, but the royalty rate is half that of the hardback, and the price is only \$6.99. According to HarperCollins, the book is not on any bestseller lists.

What about the promised anthology? Well, like the second novel, it's on a slow track. The best scenario is that it will be delivered to the publisher in about a year, and published a year after that. Maybe Gingrich will again be hot. But it'll be tough. With the exception of William Bennett and

his "Book of Virtues," anthologies have traditionally been death in the marketplace.

Gingrich's agent, Lynn Chu, says Gingrich has taken the disappearance of the \$3 million philosophically. "He's a conservative. He knows that life is sometimes unfair."

To Chu, this sequence of events underlines the importance of big advances. "It's usually in the writer's interest to get as much money as he can upfront," she says. It's the old bird-in-the-hand philosophy. Or maybe "take the money and run."

Look how nicely it worked out for Mario Cuomo. The former New York governor is said to have received almost \$1 million for his treatise "Reason to Believe."

No more than 70,000 copies were sold, and probably fewer. If Cuomo, like Gingrich, had taken an advance of \$1, his earnings so far would be less than \$200,000, maybe a fifth of what he actually received. These things happen. Maybe the paperback this fall will catch on.

That's what Baen hopes, too. This month he is publishing 110,000 copies of a softcover edition of "1945," hoping that what failed at \$24 will prosper at \$6.99. The destiny of these books will be supermarkets and drugstores, rather than the haughty display tables at Borders and Barnes & Noble.

The cover of the paperback is the same as the hardcover, with the addition of an ambiguous line calling "1945" "the most talked about novel of the year!" On the first page is a double-edged blurb from Time magazine that is Baen's small revenge on those "ruthless creeps" at HarperCollins: "'1945' is a work of art compared to 'To Renew America.'"

Showing the sort of delirious enthusiasm that a publisher has to have just to get out of bed in these trying times, Baen is confident this time the book will be big. Real big. "Surely," he says, "there are 10 million people out there who would crawl over broken Coke bottles for Newt." All he needs is a few of them.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the first chapter of "To Renew America" and 120 other recently published books, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>