

Gingrich Urged to Relinquish Speaker

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Role During Ethics Probe

House Republicans appear to be increasingly worried about the political effects of the prolonged ethics investigation of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), and Gingrich loyalists have suggested the speaker step aside until the matter is resolved.

"It's a good idea, and I think it would reduce the amount of rhetoric that we would hear on the floor . . . and allow us to work more constructively and move forward," Rep. Steve Largent (R-Okla.) said yesterday on "Fox News Sunday."

Largent, an ardent conservative easily reelected to a second term last week, said there would be support among his GOP colleagues for such a move "behind closed doors . . . but publicly, people are maybe fearful to say that."

Only Gingrich's own wishes could interfere with his reelection as speaker when the new Congress convenes Jan. 7 and there is no obvious alternative to the man who engineered the first GOP House majority in four decades, House Republicans said.

But the calls for him to step aside reflect the danger signs some lawmakers saw last week when more than a dozen House Republicans—notably House ethics committee Chairman Nancy L. Johnson (Conn.)—barely survived tight races in which their opponents linked them with the unpopular speaker. In addition, 13 of the 70 House GOP freshmen who sought reelection—the lawmakers most closely associated with Gingrich—lost bids for second terms.

Johnson's fellow Connecticut Republican Rep. Christopher Shays, a moderate easily elected to a sixth term Tuesday, said he would not vote for Gingrich to be speaker in January unless the report of the House ethics committee's outside counsel has been made public.

"I will not vote for Newt on the floor before the report comes out," Shays is quoted as saying in today's edition of Roll Call, a Capitol Hill newspaper.

Shays did not return messages left

at his Stamford, Conn., home yesterday.

In August, James M. Cole, the Washington white-collar criminal attorney hired by the ethics panel, submitted a report summarizing his research. Cole had been looking into whether Gingrich used tax-deductible charitable contributions to further his partisan political agenda, which would violate federal tax law.

The inquiry centers on a nationally televised college course Gingrich taught, which was financed by charitable foundations.

In late September, just before the 104th Congress finished its work, the investigative panel expanded its probe and directed Cole to examine whether the speaker provided "accurate, reliable and complete information" to the ethics committee. In addition, the committee is looking into whether Gingrich improperly received gifts and campaign contributions from GOPAC, the political action committee he once headed.

At that time, the panel said it expected to complete its work by early

January, before the House elects a speaker for the new Congress.

Gingrich has steadfastly denied he has done anything wrong. "We fully expect Newt to be speaker in the 105th Congress," said Gingrich spokesman Allan Lipsett.

The investigative subcommittee of two Republicans and two Democrats is likely to meet in the next two weeks as lawmakers return to Washington to reorganize for the new Congress.

If at least three subcommittee members agree there is "reason to believe that a violation has occurred," they can draw up charges against Gingrich. Then the six ethics committee members not on the subcommittee—three from each party—would hold hearings to determine whether the allegations "have

been proved by clear and convincing evidence." If at least four members find that they were, the full committee would recommend a sanction, subject to approval by the House.

Next week, House Republicans are to nominate their candidate for speaker. No opposition to Gingrich has emerged. On Jan. 7, lawmakers will elect the speaker for the new Congress, likely voting along party lines for either Gingrich or House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.).

Beside lawmakers, a call for Gingrich to step aside has come from Kate O'Beirne, Washington editor for National Review, the influential conservative magazine. In the current edition, O'Beirne said he should relinquish the speaker's chair temporarily "to concen-

trate full time on clearing himself of all ethics charges. . . . The man who resigns in his own good time for the sake of the party . . . changes the public view of him."

Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution said such a move would be in keeping with post-election talk of cooperation and bipartisanship coming from each end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Noting that congressional Republicans had taken "the moral high ground with the president" by calling for an end to hearings on Whitewater, Hess said: "It would lower the temperature level all the way around if he stepped aside. . . . Here's the person with the highest negative ratings in American politics. He could use some benign neglect."

Nearly three-fifths of 15,050 voters

surveyed as they left polling places nationwide Tuesday said they had an unfavorable opinion of Gingrich, although about 30 percent of them said they voted for a Republican House candidate nonetheless.

In her column, O'Beirne, a former Heritage Foundation official, said Gingrich "should be particularly anxious to avoid collateral damage to other Republicans" such as Johnson.

Johnson eked out a 2,182-vote victory, of 227,165 votes cast, against a little-known college professor whom Johnson had outspent about 4-1 and defeated 2-1 in 1994. The challenger roundly criticized Johnson for her handling of the Gingrich investigation.

The message from Johnson's surprisingly close race was clear, Shays told

Roll Call: "Newt Gingrich is hated." Shays said he expected Gingrich to be cleared and that he would support Gingrich in next week's closed-door party balloting, the newspaper reported.

Many House Republicans have said they hope Gingrich will be less of a lightning rod in the new Congress than he was over the last two years. The speaker himself has said he has learned to "go slower, you prepare the ground, you make sure people understand."

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) predicted there would be a new Gingrich. "You're going to see Newt Gingrich," he said on NBC's "Meet the Press," "is going to be a lot different in the way he does things."

*Staff writer Stephen Barr
contributed to this report.*
