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A Second Chance for Gingrich

11/17/96

ATLANTA—Next to President Clinton and Bob Dole, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) was the man with most at stake in the 1996 election. Like the president, he has survived to fight another day. But it is a tough fight he faces—as no one understands better than Gingrich himself.

Had the Republicans failed to hold onto their House majority after a campaign in which Gingrich was the main target of Democratic challengers, he would have seen his leadership career cut short. He acknowledged as much himself, by saying before Election Day that he would not seek the position of minority leader if Democrats recaptured the House. He would have retreated to the back benches, inevitably blamed by his colleagues for costing them their chairmanships, and I doubt he ever would have made his way back into the speaker's office.

But now Gingrich has a second chance to show that the skills that brought him and his party to power in 1994 were not overrated.

He faces a two-part challenge—the House ethics committee investigation and the battle of public opinion. There is trouble on both fronts.

The ethics committee has had Gingrich under the microscope for many months, trying to decipher whether the complex connections among the many organizations he created to support his outside political activities conformed to

Can he lead the House without hogging the limelight?

House rules and campaign finance regulations. So far, the answers have been almost entirely affirmative. But late in the session, just before adjournment, the committee announced that it had asked its outside counsel to investigate whether Gingrich had been truthful in his statements to the ethics panel, when he first sought clearance for these ventures.

That announcement signaled a very serious turn. It is one thing to blur the edges of the constantly changing struc-

tures on outside activities for members of Congress. It is something else to lie to a committee of Congress. No one knows if Gingrich did that; he vehemently denies it. But if the committee should find against him on that charge, the consequences would be clear. The House cannot be led by a man who has abused the trust of a House committee.

Assuming that Gingrich is exonerated of that charge, as he has been of the earlier accusations against his financial operations, he still faces an uphill battle to regain the confidence of the public. Election Day exit polls showed an extraordinary 60-31 percent disapproval score for him.

When I spoke with Gingrich, he blamed it on the negative advertising assault, begun by organized labor and echoed in scores of Democratic campaigns. That is clearly part of the problem. But his own actions also contributed to the unflattering public perception.

I recall asking a Midwest Republican regarded as a Gingrich loyalist what she had heard from her constituents during a congressional recess in the spring of 1995—a time, mind you,

when the Contract With America was moving smartly through the House and Gingrich was riding high. "You realize," she said, "that when I go home, I hear mostly from my Republicans." Understood, I said. But what are they saying? "Tell Newt to shut up," she said.

Her comment reflected the fact that in those first heady months in office, Gingrich was simply too much in people's faces, constantly telling them how the government was being turned upside down. Some of what he said, in his breathless fashion, made sense; other things baffled or scared people. It got worse as the budget showdown with Clinton developed, and when the government twice was forced to close down, Gingrich's whiny comments about the snubs he had supposedly received while returning on Air Force One from the state funeral in Israel for Yitzhak Rabin cemented the impression of juvenile petulance.

I was at Godfrey Sperling's breakfast group the morning Gingrich made those fateful comments about being mistreated on Air Force One, and his press secretary, Tony Blankley, did everything but stuff a napkin in Gin-

grich's mouth to stop him. But there are moments when Gingrich simply loses the capacity for self-censorship—and this was one of them.

If he survives the ethics inquisition, the next test will be his ability to use his enormous capacity for political strategy but without hogging the limelight. Institutionally, it should be easy, because the House is by nature a decentralized body, with many power centers. An adroit speaker can exercise control behind the scenes while letting committee chairmen and floor leaders bear the brunt of public scrutiny.

The question is whether Gingrich can bring himself to yield the spotlight to others in the GOP. If he can, I believe he can still be a very large force in the government. If not, the cries from Republicans may be worse than, "Tell Newt to shut up." They could be, "Tell Newt to get lost."

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There are six states—not five, as I said in the last column—where Democrats hold the governorship and both houses of the legislature.