

12/21/96 THE

Republicans Urged to Stand Fast

Sources Indicate Speaker Will Address Issue of His Credibility in Ethics

By John E. Yang
and David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writers

House Republican leaders are urging GOP lawmakers to withhold judgment about House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) amid indications he would soon speak out on the ethics committee investigation.

Gingrich would address the matter in an attempt to "resolve the situation positively," in the words of two GOP sources, before Jan. 7, when he is to become the first Republican to be re-elected House speaker in 68 years.

The sources indicated Gingrich would shoulder the responsibility for erroneously denying to the House ethics committee that GOPAC, the political action committee he once headed, had any role in developing, administering or financing the college course that is at the center of the ethics probe. But, the sources said, Gingrich would say he never intended to mislead the committee, violate House rules or sidestep the tax code.

"It is extremely unlikely that all the facts won't be released before Jan. 7," a source close to the speaker said.

Gingrich press secretary Tony Blankley would not comment.

Gingrich's goal appears to be to resolve the investigation into the financing of the college course before his reelection as speaker. A handful of Republicans has expressed concern about voting for Gingrich to be speaker without knowing the outcome of the ethics committee investigation.

"Members of Congress and the public should have the opportunity to know the outcome of the ethic committee's

work before the new Congress begins," said one of them, Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.). "If the report is not released before the floor vote, I will abstain."

Some lawmakers suggest that more of their colleagues are worried than those who have publicly acknowledged it. Asked if many House Republicans shared his stated concerns about re-electing Gingrich as speaker, Rep. Peter T. King (R-N.Y.) said: "They said they were, but they voted for him anyway" to be the GOP's candidate for the speakership on Nov. 20.

The investigation was triggered by the Sept. 7, 1994, complaint by former representative Ben Jones (D-Ga.), who was then running against Gingrich. Jones argued that the use of tax deductible charitable contributions to finance the course, entitled "Renewing American Civilization," violated federal tax law because the course was intended to further a partisan political agenda.

Three months ago, the ethics committee expanded the probe to include the accuracy of information Gingrich gave the committee either "directly or through counsel." This week, Rep. John Linder (R-Ga.), a Gingrich ally, acknowledged that some of that information was erroneous, but put the blame on the speaker's former chief ethics attorney, Jan Baran. Baran dropped Gingrich as a client in the ethics case one week ago.

Saying he believed that Gingrich had been "shocked" to discover that the credibility issue centered on the document denying any GOPAC involvement in preparing the course, another GOP source, less intimately involved with Gingrich, said correcting that state-

ment "would embarrass Gingrich but would be nowhere close to fatal" to his prospects of remaining as speaker.

Gingrich has described the course, which was disseminated on cable television and through videotapes, as "completely nonpartisan. It was ... about ideas, not politics."

Democrats contend it was intended as partisan ammunition for GOP candidates. House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), Gingrich's main House antagonist, has called it "a scheme to let people who wanted to dump the Democratic Congress finance a \$6 million political effort with tax deductible charitable contributions."

If Gingrich persuades at least two members of the ethics panel's investigative subcommittee—made up of two Republicans and two Democrats—he would be able to avoid being formally charged. In the case of a 2-to-2 deadlock, the panel would issue a report of its findings.

Such an outcome, though, would likely infuriate Democrats and could result in bitter partisanship for the entire Congress.

Until Gingrich breaks his silence, leaders want the GOP lawmakers to maintain theirs.

"On behalf of Newt, I am asking all members to please defer comment on this matter until there is an official statement from the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct and until you have heard Newt's response," House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) wrote in a letter faxed to all GOP lawmakers. "When the committee issues a statement or releases information, Newt will

on Gingrich

Probe Before Jan. 7

immediately contact you with any additional information we can provide.”

“The message is: Stay calm, let the process run its course, this will be over soon,” a leadership aide said yesterday.

House GOP leadership aides acknowledged this has been a bad week for the speaker, with the disclosures that Baran had dropped the case and that Gingrich had given untrue information to the ethics committee. But, they said they take solace that it came one week before Christmas, a time when people pay little attention to Congress and Washington.

Among those calling lawmakers to urge against rash statements or judgment was Rep. David L. Hobson (R-Ohio), an ethics committee member who has represented House GOP moderates in leadership meetings, according to leadership aides.

Because Hobson is not on the ethics committee's investigative subcommittee and, under the panel's rules, is not supposed to know anything of its proceedings, the aides said they saw no conflict between his service on the committee and his role helping the leaders communicate with lawmakers.

Hobson did not return a telephone call to his office.

As lawmakers await the ethics committee's findings, Gingrich's defense efforts are under new leadership. Atlanta malpractice attorney J. Randolph Evans is now in the lead role, replacing Baran. Evans had joined the legal team sometime after the ethics committee voted on Sept. 26 to expand the inquiry to include the accuracy of Gingrich's statements.