

Post
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Hanging on by the Skin Of His Teeth

On Saturday afternoon, after Newt Gingrich humbled and embarrassed himself by in effect pleading guilty to an ethics violation, one of the most respected House Republicans was asked whether the speaker had saved himself. "Yes," he said. "Barely. By the skin of his teeth."

Had this senior figure—who, like many colleagues, has no love lost for the abrasive speaker—taken a contrary position, Gingrich likely would have started down the slippery slope. Instead, on Capitol Hill, there is nothing approaching the climate of rejection by his own colleagues that confronted Democratic Speaker Jim Wright in 1989.

That contrasts with the mood among Republican political operatives attending holiday parties around Washington last week, even before Gingrich's admission of guilt. They happily were clucking about a brave new congressional world run by "Speaker" Dick Armey.

But the Republican House members who actually vote for speaker on Jan. 7 will support Gingrich's reelection, probably unanimously. "It's not because we like Newt," a senior House Republican told me. "Newt is not a likable person." Nor is it gratitude for Gingrich the visionary, who elevated his party to the House majority for the first time in 40 years. It is because Republicans resist a coolly crafted Democratic plot to depose the Republican they despise.

The chief plotter, House Democratic Whip David Bonior, rushed to a microphone twice last week—each time sweater-clad and sans necktie—when he heard glad tidings on Thursday and Saturday. First came Gingrich's admission that he had misled the ethics committee, but he blamed his lawyer. Two days later came his formal statement of guilt, blaming only himself.

Bonior was triumphant, calling for Gingrich's resignation (joined by Rep. David Obey, whose elevation to chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee was aborted by the Gingrich-led GOP takeover of Congress). Democrats have never forgiven Gingrich for engineering Wright's fall, and for two years, they have been filing one ethics allegation after another against him.

There was no alleged petty graft of the kind that ultimately ruined Wright. Gingrich was accused of political crimes, including the outlandish claim that he "stole" his narrow congressional reelection in 1990 by improper funding.

All complaints boiled down to this: Did Gingrich violate arcane provisions of the Internal Revenue Code? This was not the usual sin of paying the

government less than it claims it is owed. The question is whether Gingrich entwined his political action committee, GOPAC, with his tax-exempt college course. Complicating this was whether Gingrich misrepresented this relationship to the ethics committee.

The end for Gingrich would have been at hand had the committee concluded he violated the tax code. Thus, one friend of the speaker told me that "Newt will have a happy Christmas" as a result of secret negotiations that

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looked mighty like plea-bargaining. The bipartisan subcommittee verdict: no position on whether Gingrich violated tax laws, but an admonition that he should have been more careful.

The real problem was Gingrich's admittedly false statement to the committee on Dec. 8, 1994, denying any connection between the college course and GOPAC. The speaker's best defense was his Oct. 4, 1994, letter to the committee, asserting that GOPAC paid for course preparation.

Why would he lie about something he had admitted to two months earlier? In the interim, he had achieved his dream of controlling the House and, as speaker-designate, was consumed by grandiose plans of remaking America from Capitol Hill. Whether or not his lawyer was to blame, it is conceivable that, as claimed, he signed papers without carefully considering them.

The subcommittee's report is mainly an account of how Gingrich intended to use a televised college course, based at an obscure Georgia state college, to create a conservative Republican country. Such visions, reflecting a mighty ego and overwhelming arrogance, are at once Gingrich's weakness and strength.

The determination of punishment of Gingrich is now up to the full ethics committee, where the senior Democrat—Rep. Jim McDermott—is Bonior's eyes and ears. Gingrich may be humbled and greatly diminished from what he once was, but Republicans are determined to retain him as speaker rather than concede victory to the Boniors and McDermotts.