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Newt uses different strategy

Speaker owns up to ethics violations

WASHINGTON (AP) - It's A Tale of Two Speakers, two House leaders humbled by ethics charges who tried different political strategies to survive.

Jim Wright fought the charges and lost, blaming the "mindless cannibalism" of his enemies.

Newt Gingrich confessed and is still fighting for his job, but he's doing it another way - trying to avoid the censure that would make him ineligible to continue.

The ethics ordeals of Mr. Wright and Mr. Gingrich are different and they are similar; in one way, the men are bonded in political irony.

Mr. Gingrich filed the ethics charges against Mr. Wright. He used the case to raise money for his political organization, GOPAC. Mr. Gingrich admitted Friday to violating House rules - by giving investigators inaccurate information about GOPAC.

Both Mr. Wright, a Texas Democrat, and Mr. Gingrich, a Georgia Republican, assumed the speakership with ambitious plans. Both were forceful figures who demanded loyalty from their troops.

But both made misjudgments and missteps in their first terms, and

ethics charges forced both to take a lower profile. Both presided at their party's presidential nominating conventions under an ethics cloud.

"In the Wright case, you had a minor portion of Democrats extremely loyal to him," said William J. Kunkle, a Chicago attorney who was an outside counsel in that investigation and an earlier probe of Mr. Gingrich.

"But beyond that, Wright was more respected and feared than loved. So he didn't have the support a Tip O'Neill (Wright's Democratic predecessor) would have had. There's a personal level to it."

And so it is with Mr. Gingrich. He was the leader of the Republican takeover of the House in the 1994 elections, and remains the ideological mentor for the GOP rank-and-file.

The two cases, however, have far more differences than similarities.

- Mr. Wright fought the charges for 45 days before resigning his speakership, never admitting transgressions and blaming his downfall on the "mindless cannibalism" of enemies.

Mr. Gingrich confessed Saturday to rules violations but is bargaining for a reprimand - a lesser punishment that would allow him to keep his job. A more serious censure would make him ineligible under House rules.

- Mr. Wright was charged with 69 counts. He was accused of failing to disclose thousands of dollars in alleged gifts and of skirting rules on speaking fees through bulk book sales.

Mr. Gingrich's case did not involve personal gain. He admitted failure to seek legal guidance that would have warned him not to proceed with projects financed with tax-exempt organizations.