

COUNTDOWN TO INDICTMENT

IT WASN'T UNTIL AFTER THE ELECTION THAT AN INTERNAL GOP skirmish erupted into a public battle. For the first time, signs of Newt Gingrich's unpopularity with socially moderate Republican representatives spilled out of the House chambers and into the newspapers. Newt also faced opposition from some fellow conservatives. Eager to attack the president over Whitewater and Indogate, they felt the House Ethics Committee's charges against the speaker might derail their own assault on Clinton (Newt would be "bled to political death by Democrats using ethics charges as leeches," the *National Review* complained). Both factions suggested Newt step down as speaker until the ethics investigation concluded.

The first round went to Newt. He stifled his GOP critics, was re-elected speaker, and then got his deputy, Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas), to try to reconstitute the very committee that's investigating him. To understand why, you need look no further than its chairwoman, Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), a moderate Republican and Gingrich ally. *Mother Jones* first exposed Johnson's stonewalling of the investigation—a charge later picked up by the *New York Times*, among others. Eventually, under intense public pressure, Johnson appointed a special counsel, James Cole. After winning re-election by just 1,600 votes, Johnson admitted the criticism she took for her handling of the Gingrich case nearly cost her her seat, and she now wants off the committee. But while she's still on it, she probably won't do anything that could be interpreted as going easy on the speaker.

Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.) has been ambivalent about pursuing Newt from the start. One reason may have been the GOP's threat of a retaliatory ethics investigation into the Democratic leader. Fundamentally, though, Gephardt is a consummate deal maker. When Newt let Democrats have another seat on both the Appropriations and Commerce committees, it could have been construed as part of a compromise offer.

As we go to press, the ethics investigation is still unresolved. But even if the jury is rigged, and the committee takes only a narrow look at Cole's yearlong probe, the evidence is powerful.

For months the charges focused on Newt's televised "college course," and whether its funding violated U.S. tax law. But in September the investigation was widened so that Cole could explore more of Newt's funding mechanisms and investigate whether the speaker had misled the committee. GOPAC doled out more than \$10 million to GOP causes (by conservative estimates) from 1986 to 1995, when Newt was in charge. He's never disclosed who gave GOPAC all that money, or where it all went. After *Mother Jones* was leaked a list of about 150 top GOPAC contributors, we annotated who those secret donors

were and made the information available on the World Wide Web, showing just how those early investors bought influence in Congress (visit the MoJo Wire: www.motherjones.com).

There's ample evidence that Newt used GOPAC money to build the Republican army that took over Congress in 1994 and whose soldiers, by and large, retained their seats last year. While his approval ratings may be universally low, Newt is still a star fundraiser. He raised an estimated \$100 million for Republican candidates in 1996, including timely fundraisers for representatives, such as freshmen Jack Metcalf (R-Wash.) and Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.), who survived close races. Still, contributions to fellow Republicans will work as hush money for just so long, and as the probe into GOPAC expands, Newt's troops may start to abandon him.

A few days after the election, Chris Shays (R-Conn.), Mark Souder (R-Ind.), and Marge Roukema (R-N.J.) declared they wouldn't vote to re-elect Newt speaker until the Ethics Committee released its report; Steve Largent (R-Okla.) urged the speaker to resign until the ethics charges were settled; and Peter King (R-N.Y.) said Newt should step aside for someone new. King claimed that as many as 20 other Republicans wanted a new speaker.

None of those other 20 have spoken out. But Republican Hill staffers, interviewed by *Mother Jones* reporters, confirm that Newt's grip is slipping. Art Jutton, an aide for James Walsh (R-N.Y.), says many of the cuts Gingrich pushed proved difficult to defend back home. Jutton says that won't happen again: "We're going to protect our people." Niel Wright, press secretary for Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wis.), notes: "Early in the last Congress, there were cuts at the EPA and some aspects of the Medicare proposal that were both overreaching." Robert Bradner, a staffer for John Porter (R-Ill.), says, "Our constituents are not supportive of repealing the assault weapons ban, of repealing the Brady bill, of passing a human life amendment. We'd like to see the party move to a more tolerant point of view."

And Michael Armini, whose boss Rep. Peter Torkildsen (R-Mass.) lost his re-election bid but requested a recount, says Gingrich's unpopular measures—such as weakening the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act—upset constituents, and hindered support for the leadership. "It was unconditional support and now it's not," says Armini.

There has been speculation that Newt might be able to escape the ethics investigation with only a reprimand—which would keep Newt above the law. Now, with the inquiry heating up in the House, the question is: Will Republicans stand for any more controversy from their beleaguered speaker? □