

Republicans Reassessing an Outsider

Gingrich's Remarks Reflect Change in Attitude About Forbes Candidacy

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The rapid rise of Malcolm S. "Steve" Forbes Jr. has prompted Republican Party leaders to reassess his presidential candidacy and begin to consider what life might be like for the party with him as their nominee.

Most party leaders still question whether Forbes can win the nomination, but the clearest sign of their new attitude came Tuesday night at the annual Salute to Congress dinner in Washington when House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) dismissed the view that Forbes cannot be nominated as inside-the-Beltway conventional wisdom.

Praising Forbes as a "genuine risk-taker," Gingrich went on to say, "This city, being a remarkably insular place, is convinced Steve Forbes can't win because he doesn't have the experience, he doesn't have the practical background, he's not uniquely qualified to be an insider."

Gingrich's comments stopped well short of an endorsement of Forbes's candidacy, and the speaker said nothing to undermine the candidacy of Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), the longtime GOP front-runner who now is scrambling to fend off Forbes.

Gingrich made clear yesterday he was not taking sides Tuesday night, suggesting he was more interested in tweaking the conventional wisdom of the capital.

"It's wonderful to see this city set up rules—an outsider can't win," he told reporters. "It was hopefully an amusing speech and amusing dinner. Don't overwrite that."

But Gingrich voiced publicly what other Republicans have begun to say privately, which is that in achieving a level of credibility, Forbes's candidacy has tapped into forces that continue to roil the electorate and that the Republicans need to understand them better to prepare for their fall campaigns.

Twelve years ago, former vice president Walter F. Mondale, the established front-runner for the Democratic nomination, demolished a challenge from then-Sen. Gary Hart

with a television ad featuring a flashing red telephone—symbolizing the Soviet threat—and a quip—"Where's the beef?"—designed to undermine Hart's claim as the candidate of new ideas.

Dole has attempted a similar rebuttal to Forbes, with ads that accuse his rival of "untested leadership, risky ideas." But the political environment has changed dramatically since the mid-1980s, and what Gingrich was suggesting Tuesday night was that, despite Forbes's inexperience, his optimistic, outsider message may play better under today's rules than many of his skeptics—including those in the Dole campaign—have suggested.

"Experience matters to some extent, but probably less now than when foreign policy was a big piece of the job," said Democratic pollster Geoff Garin. "Experience is a qualification, but it's not a compelling reason in and of itself to elect someone president. And these days Washington experience is a double-edge sword."

But Garin said Forbes's lack of experience in office remains an obstacle to actually winning the nomination. "When the day is done, voters are going to stop and worry about Forbes's lack of experience," he said. "But we're not there in the process."

Republican leaders reassessing the Forbes candidacy believe that his greatest asset is what one called his "Reaganesque message," what Forbes himself calls the message of "hope, growth and opportunity."

They also recognize that the anti-Washington theme that propelled them to power in the 1994 elections still holds great appeal to many voters, including those who will vote in the Republican presidential primaries and caucuses beginning this month.

But if many voters hold a dim view of Washington insiders, some Republican analysts say they still rate experience as an asset in a presidential candidate.

"When you're talking about the president of the United States, particularly after four years of Bill Clinton, I think Republican primary voters are again saying, 'Do we want to go with someone with no political experience?'" said Linda DiVall, who is poll-

ing for the campaign of Sen. Phil Gramm (Tex.).

DiVall said Forbes's outsider appeal attracted attention among Republican voters. "But as they begin to think who is sitting behind the desk in the Oval Office, they begin to reassess that calculation," she said.

Some Republican leaders also see social and cultural issues as the greatest potential obstacle to Forbes's candidacy. "The biggest question is can he [build a] bridge to cultural conservatives," one senior Republican strategist said yesterday.

The reassessments of Forbes's candidacy have intensified not only because of his rise in the polls in Iowa and particularly New Hampshire, where he and Dole are now virtually even, but also because of the continued fallout over Dole's performance in delivering the Republican response to the State of the Union address last week.

DiVall argued that without that speech, Republican voters with doubts about Forbes might shift back to Dole. But she argued that other Republican candidates, like the man she works for, might benefit in the end.

"The race is very volatile," she said. "People are taking a second and third look."

Karl Rove, a Texas Republican consultant, said the GOP race already had gone through several reassessments since it began a year ago. "Now we've got the Forbes message hitting home: Outsider strikes it big," he said. "I think we're going to see a couple of different story lines that have yet to emerge."

Dole retains considerable assets in the fight for the nomination, despite Forbes's rise. One Gingrich associate said yesterday that the speaker's public comments about Forbes were "more of a recognition that this guy [Forbes] has made himself a player" than an effort to predict the outcome of the Republican race. "He still thinks Dole is the guy to beat," the associate said.

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