

As Dole Exits, Gingrich Reclaims Hill's

House Speaker's Campaign Role Must Balance Strategy Strengths

By John E. Yang
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) announced he would forsake the Senate to pursue the presidency, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) stood behind him, his white-haired visage looming over Dole's left shoulder.

As Dole exits, Gingrich is stepping forward, clearly the dominant player in Congress. Gingrich, whose unpopularity, even his supporters acknowledged, was thwarting his party's agenda, had retreated from the spotlight early this year to plot the campaign ahead. Now he moves back to center stage with dual roles, attacking President Clinton, challenging the president's credibility on an almost daily basis, and defending Dole, celebrating his stolid public image by likening him to Abraham Lincoln and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

"You're not going to see Newt the visionary this year," a top House Republican said, "you're going to get Newt the strategist."

Gingrich, for example, seized on the president's praise for Wisconsin's revolutionary welfare plan in Clinton's Saturday radio address and blasted Clinton for saying he supports GOP goals while rejecting legislation to implement them. "Clinton comes trotting along every day like a

"It's glorious for the Democrats. They'd much prefer to run against Newt Gingrich than Bob Dole."

—Stephen Hess, fellow,
Brookings Institution

counterfeit conservative, gets as close as he can, as long as it's only words, and as soon as he gets a bill, he vetoes it," he said at a Houston

WASHINGTON POST

Center Stage *Against Image Problem*

fund-raiser for freshman Rep. Steve Stockman (R-Tex.) Saturday.

Republican officials say Gingrich is particularly valuable as a campaign spokesman because his voice is one of the most attention-getting in American politics. "The press, especially television, is always willing to give Newt time," said Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour.

But it is one of the most contentious, too. He remains highly unpopular, with only one-third of those questioned for a Time Magazine-CNN poll this month saying they approved of the job he was doing and half saying they disapproved. Taking on the president pits Gingrich against an adversary whose approval ratings are the mirror image of his own. The Time-CNN survey found 51 percent saying they approved of Clinton's job performance and 37 percent saying they disapproved.

As a result, some analysts said a high-profile role by Gingrich, who has pledged to be Dole's partner, could do the Kansan more harm than good. "If you're Republican nominee and you've got the most unpopular speaker in American history, I'm not sure 'partner' is the term that comes to mind," said GOP political analyst Kevin Phillips. "The best thing he could do is not be around as much and occasionally say he's wrong."

But that is not likely to happen. Asked whether Dole was leaving Congress to distance himself from the speaker, Gingrich snapped: "You'd have to ask him why he asked me to come over and stand next to him" when he made the announcement.

In fact, Dole has made a point in

recent days to refer to Gingrich as a political ally and friend—which is fine with the Democrats, who are eager to focus on Gingrich and tie Dole to him and the policies of the GOP House.

"The American people reject the kind of Dole-Gingrich approach to government that has been so much a part of this government for the last 18 months," Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"It's glorious for the Democrats," said Stephen Hess, a Brookings Institution fellow who worked in the Eisenhower White House. "They'd much prefer to run against Newt Gingrich than Bob Dole. At the White House, 'Dole-Gingrich' is one word."

But Hess said being a party spokesman is a mission Gingrich, as House speaker, cannot avoid. "I don't know how he can duck it," he said. "He created the majority that is standing for reelection."

Indeed, Gingrich has described his life in terms of missions that he could not evade. When he was 15, he wrote in "To Renew America," he decided to "dedicate my life to understanding what it takes for a free people to survive and to helping my country and the cause of freedom." The next summer, he wrote, he concluded "there was no moral choice except to immerse myself in the process of learning how to lead and how to be effective."

Gingrich said his current mission requires him to be Dole's "junior partner," even after he leaves the

Senate. "The fact is, the leader of the Republican Party today is Bob Dole," Gingrich said. "And he's the next president—and I want to work up brownie points."

Gingrich works closely with Dole and his campaign, meeting weekly with top campaign officials and speaking with Dole almost daily, according to Gingrich's spokesman, Tony Blankley. "If Newt has any new initiatives, he almost invariably discusses it with Dole," he said.

Lately, Gingrich has been using his public appearances to try to set the political agenda, framing the presidential race as a choice be-

tween a slick huckster and an earnest workhorse.

"This is a race between Lincoln and Barnum," Gingrich told a GOP women's group earlier this month. "Our opponents believe P.T. Barnum described America when he said, 'A sucker is born every minute.' We believe Lincoln described America when he said, 'You can't fool all the people all the time.'"

Dole, he said, is "calm, steady, not always glib, not always garrulous, not always articulate, but always honest, always courageous and always steadfast," while Clinton excels at "the capacity to glibly explain away the last

broken promise and garrulously explain away the last failure."

Clinton is helped in his effort to "misuse the office of the presidency to mislead instead of lead" by the "passive conspiracy [of the media] telling us how clever Bill Clinton is because he says things that are false with such elan and flair," Gingrich said.

In interviews, the speaker has sought to keep Republicans unified in their attacks on Clinton, rather than turning their fire on themselves. "My point to party members is simple: You have an opponent—it's called Bill Clinton," he told the Washington Times. "You have an opposition group—it's the trial lawyers and labor

leaders. We ought to keep our attacks, our critical comments focused on the people who are on the other team."

Gingrich describes his return to national television shows and newspaper interviews as part of the rhythm of being a public leader. "I spent the most of January, February and March and April planning and reviewing and thinking through where we have to go for the rest of the year," he said. "It's sort of a natural cycle, and I've been, you know, I've been much more active in the last two or three weeks and that will continue."

At the same time, though, Gingrich has maintained his prodigious fundraising role. He has appeared on behalf of 66 GOP House candidates this year and plans to appear for 40 more before the Republican convention in August.

As to his role in running the House, Gingrich has taken "a half-step back while [Majority Leader Richard K.]

Armey [R-Tex.] is slightly more hands-on" than before, said House Republican Conference Chairman John A. Boehner (R-Ohio). Blankley describes Gingrich's role as the chief executive officer of the House and Armey as the chief operating officer.

He is still the court of last resort for disputes among House Republicans. Earlier this month, for example, some conservatives were pressing for a vote on an alternative way of raising take-home pay for low-wage workers when the House considers raising the minimum wage this week. After Armey rebuffed them, they went to Gingrich, who pledged to help them get the vote if their plan would not add to the deficit, the lawmakers said.

But the fact that it is an election year necessarily changes Gingrich's role. "When he's that involved day-to-day, that hands-on," Boehner said, "we're not utilizing the speaker's best ability—long-term strategy."