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White House Assails Gingrich Allegation on Brown

Associated Press

The Clinton administration yesterday accused House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) of stepping "out of line" by spreading rumors that Commerce Department workers might have shredded incriminating documents after the fatal crash of Secretary Ronald H. Brown's plane.

"This is as low as you can go," Commerce spokeswoman Maria Cardona said. White House press secretary Michael McCurry said Gingrich has made "an outrageous suggestion."

Brown and 34 others were on a trade mission when their Air Force plane crashed in Croatia on April 4. Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley confirmed that in a closed meeting with other Republicans, his boss had sug-

gested there might have been a cover-up to get rid of Brown's papers after he died. Brown had been under investigation regarding his finances.

The allegations were first made by the American Spectator, a conservative publication.

Gingrich repeated them Tuesday in a closed Washington meeting with several hundred GOP directors of congressional districts.

Gingrich said such assertions—and allegations concerning Whitewater and the White House travel office firings—could bring down President Clinton. "Reagan was Teflon. Clinton isn't Teflon—he's flypaper. This stuff is going to start to stick," said Gingrich, according to unnamed GOP officials quoted in the New York Post.

Blankley said Gingrich was unapolo-

getic. "I think they are serious allegations if subsequent facts support them," Blankley said. "I think it's something other news outlets ought to look at and other agencies."

White House Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta said it did not surprise him Gingrich would make wild attacks in an election year because "that's the kind of thing he does."

"I think that the speaker, who did not attend Secretary Brown's funeral, frankly is out of line," Panetta said on CBS. "Obviously, I don't think there's any truth to what's being alleged here."

The American Spectator, quoting unnamed sources, said the day of the crash two secretaries at Commerce shredded documents from Brown's office that might have had something to do with an independent counsel investi-

gation of Brown. The publication also said the secretaries were seen removing two cardboard file boxes full of documents.

The investigation of Brown was dropped after the crash. The Justice Department continues to look at his associates and his son, Michael.

Cardona, the Commerce spokeswoman who was at work the day Brown's plane crashed, said the talk was outrageous.

"Honestly, people were in a complete state of shock," she said. "The last thing that was on people's minds were any thought about papers or files. We were thinking about whether these people were alive."

"It's just disgusting that people like Gingrich are trying to dredge up something in the aftermath of a tragedy."