

Stalling Alleged in Gingrich Ethics Probe

Panel's Top Democrat Blames Republican Chairman for Delays, Calls for Release of Report

By John E. Yang
Washington Post Staff Writer

The House ethics committee's top Democrat charged yesterday that the panel's Republican chairman has deliberately delayed wrapping up its 20-month investigation of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) also called for the release of a confidential report on the matter from an outside counsel if it is not settled before Congress is scheduled to quit for the year next week. "This committee has essentially failed," he told reporters. "I do not expect it to come to a resolution. . . . It's wrong; it's outrageous that it would be buried at the end of the session."

McDermott's blunt comments marked an escalation in the political pressure Democrats are seeking to exert on House Republicans over the ethics probe of the speaker as the end of the congressional session and Election Day approach. House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.) has urged Democratic challengers to press the issue in their campaigns against GOP lawmakers.

Without naming her, McDermott clearly put responsibility for the prolonged ethics committee's investigation on Rep. Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.), chair of the panel of five Republicans and five Democrats since January 1995. Saying that a committee chairman has the power to force action, he said: "If you do not do that, then you have to say they're not

serious about bringing it to a resolution. . . . When you have a 5-5 split, you can always stall."

In a written statement, Johnson fired back: "If any member of the . . . committee wants to comment publicly about pending cases and publicly urge a specific course of action—which clearly violates both the House and the ethics committee's rules—then he or she should resign from the committee."

House Democrats have been trying to force a House vote on releasing a report submitted last month by James M. Cole, the Washington white-collar criminal attorney the panel hired to investigate whether Gingrich violated federal tax laws by using tax-deductible charitable contributions to further partisan goals through a college course he taught.

When the House blocked the latest Democratic attempt to bring the issue to a vote Thursday, four Republicans sided with Democrats: Rep. Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.), who is running for Senate, and moderate Reps. Scott L. Klug (Wis.), Jack Quinn (N.Y.) and James T. Walsh (N.Y.).

Gingrich has steadfastly denied doing anything wrong and charged that the complaints against him are motivated by politics.

That report, which panel members have said is a summary of evidence without conclusions, is now before an investigative subcommittee of the ethics panel, which is made up of two Republicans and two Democrats. McDermott said he does not know the report's contents because he is not on the subcommittee.

Under the ethics committee's rules, if at least three subcommittee members agree there is "reason to be-

lieve that a violation has occurred," they can draw up formal charges against Gingrich. McDermott said if the subcommittee does not act by the end of next week, "they should send the outside counsel's investigation to the House for release to the membership."

McDermott noted that the panel did not decide to formally begin an investigation with the help of an outside counsel until Dec. 6, 1995, and that the matter remains unresolved more than two years after the first complaints were brought against Gingrich.

"You can only come to one of two conclusions: The majority deliberately stalled for over a year or they are inept in dealing with serious charges against their leader," he said. Asked which he believed, McDermott said: "There's pretty good evidence that this is being delayed deliberately."

By contrast, the Gingrich-initiated ethics committee investigation that led to the 1989 resignation of House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) took little more than a year to play out. The panel began its official inquiry just two weeks after Gingrich filed a complaint against Wright on May 26, 1988, and brought formal charges against Wright nine months after that.

Wright resigned May 31, 1989, one year and five days after Gingrich's complaint.

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To read the House Ethics Manual, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>