

House Panel Widens Scope Of Gingrich Ethics Probe

Counsel to Examine Accuracy of Submissions

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The House ethics subcommittee investigating Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) voted unanimously yesterday to expand its probe and directed its outside counsel to examine whether the speaker provided "accurate, reliable and complete information" to the ethics committee.

The action by the panel of two Republicans and two Democrats represents a significant broadening of the 20-month ethics probe of the speaker and gives James M. Cole, the Washington white-collar criminal attorney who has been assisting the panel, considerably expanded authority to conduct the investigation.

The panel's statement said it was reacting to "certain facts [that] have

been discovered in the course of" its inquiry. It did not specify those facts, but noted that it has been reviewing a preliminary report Cole submitted last month.

Since January, Cole has been looking into whether Gingrich violated federal tax law by using tax-deductible charitable contributions to foundations to further a partisan political agenda through a college course he taught.

Yesterday, the subcommittee voted to expand its probe to include whether any part of Gingrich's relationships with two tax-exempt foundations similarly violated federal tax law.

While the subcommittee noted that the "scope of the preliminary inquiry has been carefully focused," its

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new directions to Cole did not limit him in his examination of Gingrich's relationships with the Progress and Freedom Foundation, a conservative think tank run by Gingrich allies that helped finance the course, and the Abraham Lincoln Opportunity Foundation, a charitable organization that funded a televised "town meeting" featuring Gingrich.

In a statement, Gingrich press secretary Tony Blankley said he was "confident the committee will conclude this matter to be groundless."

Democrats had long sought broad authority for the outside counsel. The ethics panel's outside counsel in the Gingrich-initiated investigation that led to the 1989 resignation of

House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) had wide-ranging authority and developed charges that went well beyond the original charges against Wright.

"This is no longer just a simple investigation—this is a whole new ball game," said House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), Gingrich's chief House antagonist.

Some House Democrats, who have been stepping up their assault on Gingrich over the ethics charges as Election Day approaches, called on him to step aside as speaker until the matter is settled.

"The integrity and the honesty of the speaker of the House has been seriously called into question," said Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.). "The only appropriate course of action for

Newt Gingrich . . . is to step aside. . . . Until that time a cloud will continue to hang over the House and over the speaker."

The development virtually ensures that the investigation will continue after the November election, although the subcommittee—which has the authority to file formal charges—said it expects to finish its work by early January.

The subcommittee was not responding to any complaint filed against Gingrich when it broadened its investigation, but relied instead on an ethics committee rule that allows it to "consider any information in its possession that a Member . . . may have committed a violation."

Reps. Porter J. Goss (R-Fla.), the

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BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

"This is no longer just a simple investigation—this is a whole new ballgame," House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.) told reporters.

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subcommittee chairman, and Benjamin L. Cardin (Md.), its top Democrat, both left the committee meeting without speaking to reporters. Committee Chairman Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.) declined to discuss the committee's action in any detail, telling reporters: "We are doing our job."

Specifically, the subcommittee directed Cole to investigate:

- Whether Gingrich "provided accurate, reliable and complete information" about the course he taught at two Georgia colleges from 1993 to 1995; the relationship between GOPAC, a political action committee Gingrich headed, and both the course and the Progress and Free-

dom Foundation. It was not clear whether this covers information Gingrich gave the ethics committee in 1993, when he sought approval to teach the course, or during its current inquiry.

Gingrich's critics have alleged that GOPAC has been the financial engine for all of his efforts to build a GOP majority in the House. "All roads lead to GOPAC," Bonior said yesterday.

- Whether Gingrich's relationship with the Progress and Freedom Foundation, "including but not limited to his involvement with the course," violated the group's tax-exempt status. The foundation, founded by the former executive director of GOPAC, helped manage the college course and its financing.

- Whether Gingrich's use of the foundation's personnel and facilities violated House rules.

- Whether Gingrich's activities on behalf of the Abraham Lincoln Opportunity Foundation violated its tax-exempt status. The charitable organization was established by former representative Howard H. "Bo" Callaway (R-Colo.), a former GOPAC chairman, to benefit disadvantaged inner-city youths and later helped finance a GOPAC-conceived televised town hall meeting that featured Gingrich. The foundation relocated from Denver to GOPAC headquarters in Washington, where the two groups shared officers, staff, resources, telephone lines and financial support.

The subcommittee acted as House Democrats have been raising the po-

litical pressure to force release of Cole's preliminary report, charging that Republicans are seeking to suppress it until after the election. Bonior has urged Democratic House challengers to use the issue in their campaigns against GOP lawmakers.

Cole will also report subsequent findings to the four-member investigative subcommittee. If at least three subcommittee members agree there is "reason to believe that a violation has occurred," they can draw up formal charges against Gingrich. If that happened, the three Republicans and three Democrats on the ethics committee who are not on the investigative subcommittee would hold hearings to determine whether the charges had been proved by "clear and convincing evidence."