

For Gingrich, More at Stake

House Speaker Looking for End Of Rocky Road

By Kevin Merida
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MARIETTA, Ga., Nov. 5—House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) is the first speaker since Joe Cannon in the early 1900s to become a major issue in a national political election.

And as voters went to the polls today, there was clearly more at stake for him than a 10th trip to the House of Representatives.

Through an avalanche of television ads in congressional districts nationwide, Democrats and their allies—led by organized labor—framed this election as a referendum on the 104th Congress and Gingrich's leadership. In many of those ads, Gingrich and GOP presidential nominee Robert J. Dole became one word, synonymous with extreme.

Gingrich complained that he was the victim of awful distortions, the target of the most harshly negative ad campaign in history.

"But the question is: How is he going to rehabilitate his own public image so he's no longer the liability he has been in this election?" asked Ronald M. Peters, director of the Carl Albert Congressional Studies Center at the University of Oklahoma and an expert on the speakership.

Peters added that he believes "the only way Gingrich can rehabilitate himself is by rehabilitating the party." To do that, Peters said, he must

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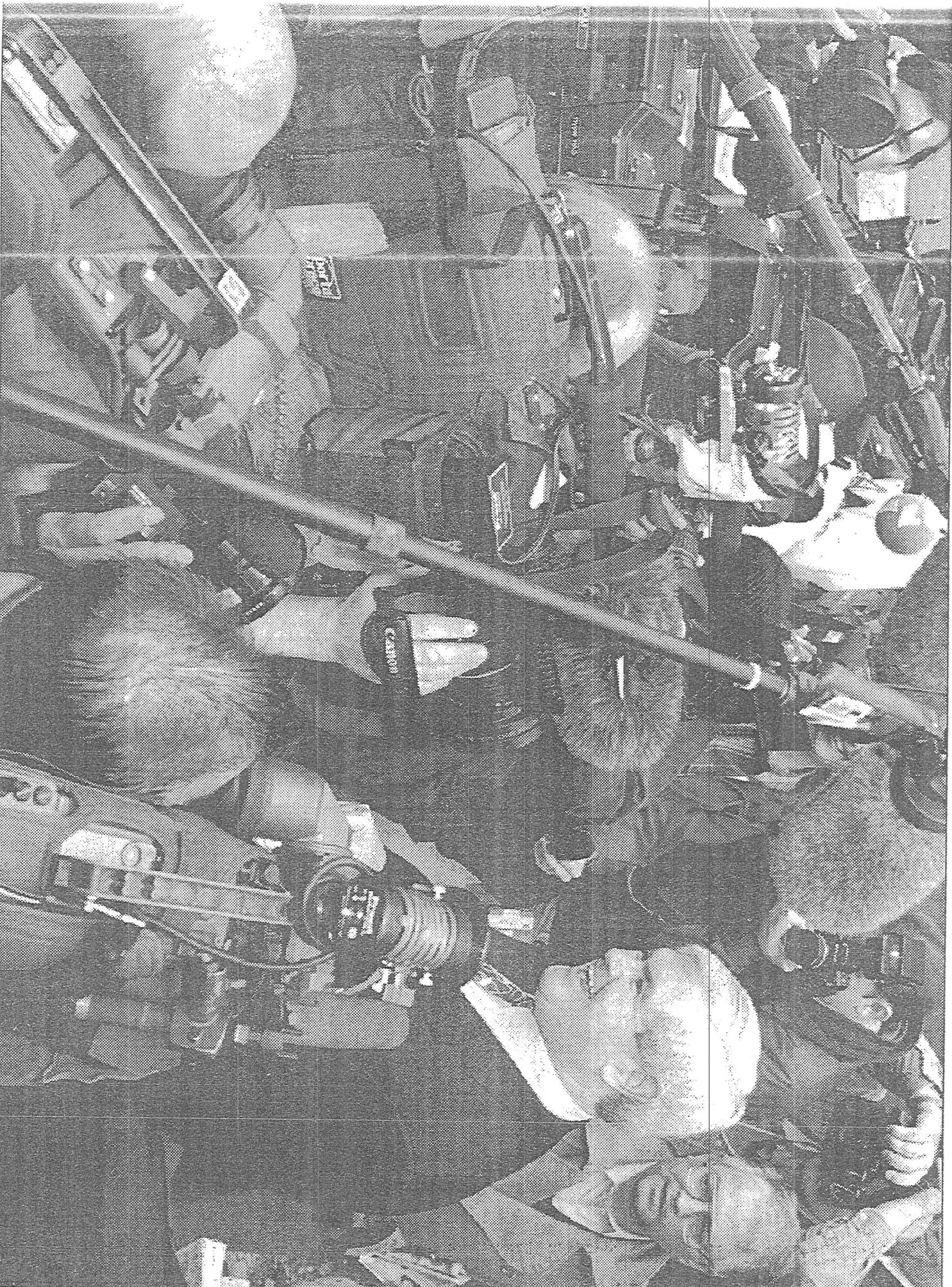
moderate his agenda and string together some legislative accomplishments "in a way that doesn't make them seem divisive."

Whatever happens tonight, Peters said, "It's been the most unusual speakership in history. He reasserted the powers of the speakership and has put his own personal stamp on the management of the House."

After voting this morning, Gingrich spent the day with his family, optimistic that Republicans would keep their congressional majority.

"The key for us is turnout," Gingrich said after he voted, urging the television networks not to call the election until the polls close in California, where there are a handful of close House races.

It appeared Gingrich had much more on his mind today than his race



Speaker Newt Gingrich is mobbed by reporters after voting in Marietta, Ga. Some Republicans are laying groundwork for a leadership challenge by Majority Whip Rep. Tom DeLay of Texas.

BY JOHN KUNTZ—REUTERS

against Democrat Michael Coles, the millionaire founder and chief executive officer of the Great American Cookie Co. A recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution poll had Gingrich with a double-digit lead over the political newcomer in this affluent, solidly Republican, suburban Atlanta district that is home to the Weather Channel and Home Depot. But Coles's supporters were predicting an upset.

It has been a rollicking, rocky ride for Gingrich since the euphoric 1994 elections that catapulted Republicans to power in the House for the first time in 40 years. Almost overnight, Gingrich went from nettlesome flame thrower to the most dominant figure in American politics.

But after speeding through the "Contract With America"—the House Republicans' legislative blueprint—and taking on popular government programs, some of the speaker's sheen began to fade. A

pivotal moment came last November when a budget stalemate between Republicans and President Clinton resulted in the first of two partial shutdowns of the federal government. Congressional Republicans had believed they could force Clinton's hand, but their strategy backfired and the president vetoed the GOP's spending bill. Polls showed the public held Republicans responsible.

As Gingrich's popularity plummeted, even some in his own party began to keep him at arm's length—especially as the election season heated up. Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-N.Y.) was among those who publicly spoke out, saying the Gingrich-led House had gone too far. He urged his pal, Dole, then the Senate majority leader, to put some distance between his campaign and the controversial speaker.

Though Dole never publicly disparaged the speaker, many of Dole's

advisers thought D'Amato's advice was sound. They saw Gingrich as a drag on Dole's prospects. While the speaker continued to be a favorite on the fund-raising trail, raising tens of millions of dollars for congressional candidates and GOP organizations, he took a less visible role in the day-to-day combat of campaign '96. At this summer's GOP convention he was hardly a limelight performer, delivering one five-minute speech before network television coverage began.

If some Republicans thought Gingrich was a liability, the Democrats and their friends at the AFL-CIO were determined to ensure that he was.

They bombarded the nation with ads accusing Gingrich and the Republicans of trying to cut Medicare to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy, of opposing school lunches and student loans.

None of it helped Gingrich's public standing.

A recent Atlanta Constitution poll indicated that even Georgians have a less favorable view of Gingrich than of any other major national or state politician—with the exception of Ross Perot, the Reform Party presidential candidate.

Despite Gingrich's unpopularity nationally, challenger Coles found it difficult to make the speaker's negatives stick in his back yard.

In their only debate, Coles portrayed Gingrich as a divisive figure who puts partisanship over good government and who is out of touch with voters in the Sixth Congressional District.

But Gingrich was dismissive of Coles, deriding his opponent's comments as "silly" or nonsensical and casting him as a liberal.

It is unclear what kind of House Gingrich will return to if he is victorious. Many of the freshmen he nur-

tured have been through sobering reelection campaigns; some likely will not be back.

In addition, Gingrich has been weakened by continuing House ethics investigations into some of his financial activities. Some already are laying the groundwork for Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas to wage a challenge for the leadership if something should happen to Gingrich.

Peters, however, thinks Gingrich could come out of the election in good shape.

"There will be some argument within the party about what the best course of action is," Peters said. "I do think Gingrich might emerge as an even stronger speaker."

"He is still the one figure who can unify Republicans. He has raised a lot of money. And he's made more of an effort to reach out to moderates in the House than anyone else."