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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Rules of the House

MAJORITY LEADER Richard Arme y is arguing for a position that would likely delay the House ethics committee's investigation of his boss, Speaker Newt Gingrich, for having possibly violated the rules of the House. The committee took so long with its investigation of the speaker in the last Congress that the process is about to spill over into a new year and new Congress. Some of the members of the committee have begun to complain that their terms on the committee will be up when that happens, and this is a panel on which no one likes to serve. They want to be replaced, and Mr. Arme y has indicated an interest in accommodating them.

But if they are replaced, the already attenuated proceedings would likely be further delayed. The new members would plainly need time to get up to speed. You never know; they too might need an entire Congress, or near enough, and then maybe someone else would want replacement. Faced with protest that the strict adherence to these rules (which have been waived on special occasions before) could be seen as trying to delay and/or evade an outcome to the inquiry, Mr. Arme y now suggests he'd be willing to leave in place a four-member subcommittee that has been investigating the case for the rest of the 10-member panel; only the other members whose terms had expired would rotate off.

But that doesn't strike us as solving the problem, since in the end they all need to vote—and Mr. Arme y would be appointing new members knowing they would be sitting in judgment on Mr. Gingrich. If they tried one like that in the executive branch, the entire Republican establishment on the Hill, Mr. Arme y included, would be up in arms, and justly so.

The charges against Mr. Gingrich are complicated. He was instrumental in setting up a complex series of ventures, including a college course, whose effect if not intent was to help elect Republicans to Congress, and to help reelect Mr. Gingrich as well. The question, in part, is whether the funds raised to support these ventures were simple charitable contributions or campaign contributions in disguise. The ethics committee, as its track record in this case again demonstrates, can hardly be regarded as a hotbed of prosecutorial zeal. Its members, including the Republican members, nonetheless thought enough of some of the complaints against the speaker to have named the subcommittee to examine them more closely. One of the issues the subcommittee is said to have been asked to resolve is whether the speaker was at all times straight with the panel about his activities. The issues are serious enough that the panel should be left intact until it completes the current inquiry.