

GOP Galaxy's Orbit Alters

Furnished Star Loses Power With Ethics Admissions

12/23/93

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In the fullness of his rise to power, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) often boasted that he saw himself as "a transformational figure" who was systematically out to "shift the entire the planet" through his energy, his ideas and his vision of a post-welfare-state America.

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And for a time it was as if the entire political solar system orbited around him.

But those days are gone, and the report of the House ethics committee released Saturday—along with Gingrich's statement acknowledging his guilt—served to reinforce how far he has fallen in so short a time. In barely two years, the Gingrich galaxy has broken apart and even if he salvages his speakership, which appears likely, he may

never succeed in restoring his political dominance within the country.

The contriteness of Gingrich's statement acknowledging that he "brought down on the people's house a controversy that could weaken the faith people have in their government" contrasts starkly with the hubris that surrounded his rise to power. And in the language of that statement there is an echo of other moments in Gingrich's career, when, faced with controversy over his actions, he admitted to his excesses and promised to reform. But he rarely did.

Those moments of self-doubt or confession proved fleeting and in due time, the other Gingrich always reappeared: bold, highly partisan and sometimes reckless in his political behavior. The question before the speaker today is whether this latest, and most serious, acknowledgment of wrongdoing will

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BY JOHN BAZEMORE—ASSOCIATED PRESS

House Speaker Newt Gingrich leaves his Marietta, Ga., office Saturday after issuing written statement.

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ring forth a changed politician, and if it does, what kind of effectiveness he will have as a leader among the Republicans.

David W. Rohde, a professor at Michigan State University who has written extensively on congressional leadership, said yesterday that, even if Gingrich retains his speakership when the 105th Congress convenes next month, his powers will be significantly diminished—not only by the ethics investigation but also by the other mistakes Gingrich made since becoming speaker. Those mistakes include his miscalculation in the budget battle with the president that led to two government shutdowns and the backlash against his personal pettiness when he complained about where he sat on Air Force One to and from the funeral of slain Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

"He will not be able to be the kind of figure and play the kind of role he gloried in in the early stages," Rohde said. "There's a big no man's land

here he could hang on, but not be very consequential. That would be a very difficult role for him to manage because of his personality."

Despite sharp criticism of Gingrich's behavior by his chief congressional accuser, House Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), yesterday and other Democrats, Gingrich appeared to strengthen his hold on the speakership as House Republicans publicly rallied behind him.

But that well-choreographed show of support from what has always been his most loyal corps of followers masks the reality that faces Gingrich as he begins what he hopes will be his second term as speaker. House Republicans may continue to see Gingrich as the person almost single-handedly responsible for their majority status and as the visionary architect of their agenda, but elsewhere in the party, Republicans appear less willing to pay him the kind of deference he received after the 1994 elections.

Two years ago, Gingrich and his "Contract With America" dominated not only the party but the entire political agenda of the country. Today,

a weakened speaker—who even before his moment of reckoning with the ethics committee had transformed himself into the least popular major politician in America—must contend with a resurgent Republican majority in the Senate, a large crop of Republican governors facing their reelections in 1998 and most important, a newly reelected President Clinton, who despite ethical problems that may be far larger than

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Gingrich’s, has reemerged as the country’s dominant political figure.

Some Republicans said yesterday that Gingrich’s weakened status could accrue to the country’s benefit, because he will be more willing to let Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) take the lead for the party on Capitol Hill, more likely to give committee chairs in the House more autonomy and more ready to compromise with Clinton than he has been the last two years.

“He’s never going to get back to his power [of two years ago],” one midwestern Republican said yesterday. “Can he get back to respectability? Yes. He can do that by working with Lott and Clinton to get things done. Clinton is weak and Gingrich is weak. That may portend that they’ll get things done.”

But the ethics committee findings and Gingrich’s response, temporarily at least, have shattered prospects for bipartisanship, particularly in the House. The ethics committee’s findings could enrage many Democrats, while Bonior’s attacks on Gingrich appear to be pushing Republicans to line up solidly behind their leader.

Gingrich must face operating in a manner in which he has never been comfortable—maintaining a low profile and offering advice without being the public face of his party. That stands in direct contrast to the Gingrich who rose to power throughout the 1980s as a brick-throwing partisan who railed against Democratic ethical lapses and transgressions.

“The essence of Gingrich’s leadership style is high profile,” said John J. Pitney of Claremont-McKenna College and author of a book on House Republicans. “He did not come to power from behind the scenes. He didn’t climb the traditional leadership ladder. He came to power precisely through the use of the media and his public leadership style.”

The college course at the center of the ethics committee’s investigation of Gingrich is a perfect metaphor for that leadership style, and for Gingrich’s penchant for using everything within his grasp to advance a political agenda designed to transform the GOP and ultimately bring him to power at the center of it. Gingrich expanded his powers systematically by turning himself into a political conglomerate, using foundations, his political action committee, GOPAC, book-writings, television programs, speeches and interviews to spread his message.

Whatever conclusions are drawn about whether Gingrich violated tax laws in setting up his college course—and the ethics committee in essence decided not to resolve that crucial, if arcane, question of tax law—there was never a question that he saw the enterprise as part of his larger mission to advance his political aims. As he said in an interview in the summer of 1993, “I decided that I had to go teach a course because the level of change that we needed was sufficiently large that I couldn’t explain it in the normal political context.”

There is further evidence in the findings of the ethics committee of the link between the college course and Gingrich’s political goals of turning Republicans into the majority party. One GOPAC letter to contributors spelled out the link between the course and taking control of Congress. “Hopefully, it [the course] will provide the structure to build an of-

fense so that Republicans can break through dramatically in 1996,” he wrote in one. In another he said, “If we can reach Americans through my course, independent expenditures, GOPAC and other strategies, we just might unseat the Democratic majority in the House in 1994 and make government accountable again.”

For two years, Gingrich has defiantly maintained he did nothing wrong and that he was the victim of a partisan effort to destroy him. Now in admitting his mistakes, he hopes to prevent any further erosion of his power and maintain his leadership position long enough to begin the climb back.

Gingrich always has played a long-term game, and having held onto the Congress in 1996, Republicans can look ahead with greater confidence to continued control for the next four years giving the party and the speaker more time to develop a program that wins wider acceptance with the public. Even in his weakened condition, Gingrich remains crucial to that effort.

But for the speaker, the route to personal rehabilitation remains steeper. As Pitney put it, “Republicans realize that Gingrich’s power and leadership come with a price.” That price almost cost Republicans control of Congress, threatens Gingrich with the loss of his speakership and, as Gingrich noted in his statement, may further erode public confidence in government. That was hardly what Gingrich envisioned when he took the gavel as speaker two years ago.