

Gingrich Must Go

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"I was overconfident and, in some ways, naive," said Speaker Newt Gingrich in a typically lambing and solipsistic statement Saturday in which he apologized—sort of—for sending "inaccurate, incomplete and unreliable" statements to the ethics committee.

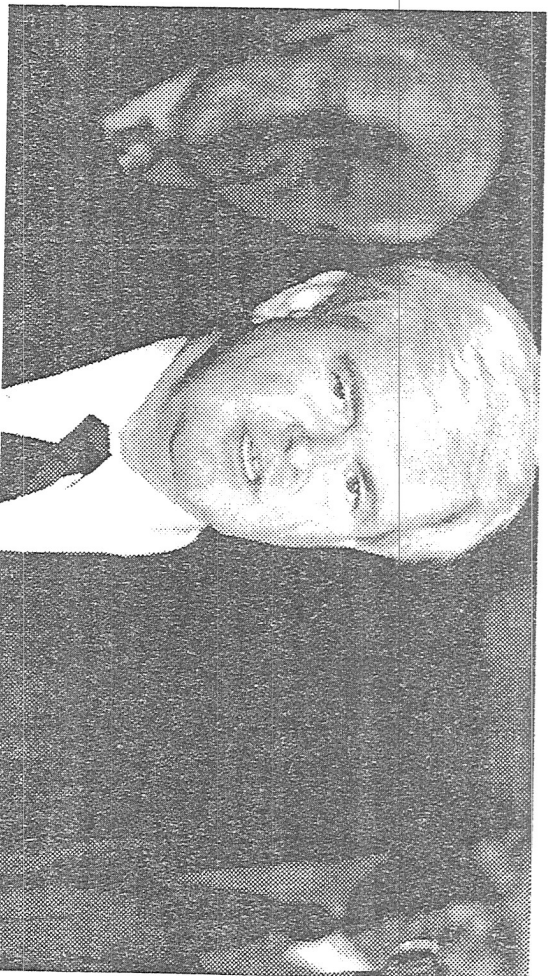
At the same time he was performing this act of quasi-contrition, Gingrich was rallying the troops to ensure his reelection as speaker on Jan. 7. Colleagues hustled to the Sunday talk shows, and the rank-and-file fell in line. Not a discouraging word was heard.

But if they return this severely damaged leader to the speaker's chair, Republicans, overconfident and naive themselves, will be making a mistake of epic proportions. It's time for Gingrich to go—not for legalistic reasons but for political ones.

In the last session of Congress, we had a taste of how a wounded GOP leader operates: He makes concessions on spending, abandons principle on health care and panders to the press with coddly animals.

Imagine, then, how Gingrich will behave after being weakened further. Will he push for deep budget cuts? Fight for Medicare and Social Security reform? Battle expansion of family leave and other corporate mandates that Democrats have in store? Crusade for flatter, lower taxes? Forcefully confront Bill Clinton on Whitewater, Flegate and campaign-finance violations? Don't bet on it.

As a historian, Dr. Gingrich should recognize when his usefulness to an important cause is at its end. He should bow out gracefully, like his hero George Washington. Can Gingrich come back? It's very doubtful. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once scribbled in his notebook, "There are no second acts in American lives." History will properly record that Gingrich's first act—in such a little-known Georgia congressman with little and intelligence ends 40 years of Democratic



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

hegemony and gets the country on the road to a balanced budget—was a brilliant one.

But now it's time for a curtain. Gingrich should announce that, for the good of his party and his movement, he won't seek another term as speaker.

A month ago, Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) was so desperate over Gingrich's weakness that he was pushing 72-year-old Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) to succeed him. That effort failed. Now, while he agrees that Gingrich is "absolutely damaged," King is backing the incumbent. "I don't want the ethics committee to decide who the speaker is," he told me yesterday.

Understood. As editor, for five years, of a newspaper that covered Congress, I grew to detest the ethics process as wasteful, confused and full of insurmountable conflicts of interest. It was wielded as a political weapon by cynics who preferred to bombard their opponents with

charges of immorality rather than engage them face to face on the battlefield of ideas.

Gingrich may be a victim of this squalid process, but he is not clean. First, he is being hoist by his own petard, having used ethics charges himself to oust Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) in 1989. Second, he really did do something wrong. He sent the committee false statements, and he used at least four nonprofit, charitable organizations to fund political activities. Still, his transgressions do not warrant censure, a punishment which would force him to step down.

No, the problem with Gingrich is political. The ethics committee's 22-page report is only the most recent nail in a much-studded coffin. It was preceded by the egregious book deal, the Air Force One petulance and, most important, the horrendous misjudgment that led to the budget defeat a year ago and Clinton's subsequent reelection. The ethics nail has to be the last.

Gingrich would have an able successor in Rep. Dick Armye (R-Tex.). An economist, Armye lacks Gingrich's skills as a party-builder, but he is more appealing to the public. He also has a clearer vision than Gingrich of where Congress should be heading: toward removing the burdens of government to give Americans more individual freedom, personal responsibility and prosperity.

More important, Gingrich's departure would leave Congress free to expose and perhaps even punish President Clinton and his colleagues for their own ethical sins—which appear far worse than Gingrich's. If the speaker is reelected, attempts to probe the Clintons, or to reform the campaign finance system, will look hypocritical beyond belief. That's one reason Democrats would love to see Gingrich stay.

Also, if Gingrich steps down, Republicans will be free to go after groups on the left that make the GOPAC scheme look like amateur night. Donate a dollar as "charity" to certain environmental, consumer and welfare organizations, and it's sent to do political battle. Everyone in Washington power circles knows this game, and it has to end, along with the appropriation of union dues for political purposes. That won't happen with Gingrich in the speaker's chair.

Finally, Gingrich's exit could lead, at last, to reform of the wretched ethics process in both houses. With Wright avenged, Democrats could agree with Republicans to circumscribe the authority of ethics panels. In Gingrich's case, for example, there was really no need for congressional action of any sort. If the GOPAC deal violated tax laws, the IRS is the agency to investigate.

But with Gingrich as speaker, Republicans forfeit nearly all hope of rolling back government and boosting individual liberty. That's why his exit, accompanied by blessings and appreciations for remarkable service, is a requirement.