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COFES

Richard Cohen

Fall of a Fine Actor

On Oct. 2, Newt Gingrich pulled an Agnew. This is a term of my own, part honor and part reprobum, which takes its name from Spiro T. Agnew and the tour de force in lying he pulled off the day after it was revealed that he was under investigation for taking bribes. With a bit of acting at Brando at his best could not have equaled, the then-vice president staged a press conference at almost convinced me he was no crook. That day in October, Gingrich did even better.

The setting was no press conference but an elegant dining room at The Washington Post. To it came the high and the mighty, some to acquit themselves well, some not so well, and one, as I recall, to virtually slip under the table from sheer frivolousness. This, though, was not Newt. He came, he saw and he virtually blew the crockery off the table.

The question concerned the ethics committee investigations of, it seems, everything Gingrich has ever done. A key area for the committee is the course Gingrich taught at two Georgia colleges and whether it could reasonably be considered free of partisan taint and thus tax deductible. It is, I grant you, not exactly the sort of riveting question that makes for good detective dramas,

and you are forgiven, dear and holiday-besotted reader, if you have not been following this issue closely.

I cannot recall precisely what Gingrich was asked that day nor, lacking notes, can I quote his answer. But he was asked about his honesty—that I remember—and responded like this: I have based my entire career on honesty and integrity, and for anyone to question me in those areas is, frankly, so outrageous as to be close to treason!

I exaggerate just a bit when I say that the force of his indignation was such that it nearly caused my coffee to brim out of its cup. On the Richter scale, it was noticeable. I was stunned. I was impressed. These lunches are usually so dull, so pat, that a dead person could pull them off—and reporters, determined to ask their question no matter what, would hardly notice. But Gingrich was different. He nearly exploded. His answer was downright physical and, if truth be known, utterly convincing. I believed him.

Now it turns out that Gingrich had been lying about the course, and he made submissions to the ethics committee that were not true. He blames those on his lawyer, on being too busy to pay close attention to the submissions. "I did not

manage the effort intensely enough," he said. "In my name and over my signature, inaccurate, incomplete and unreliable statements were given to the committee, but I did not intend to mislead the committee."

The my-accountant-made-me-do-it explanation is one that the Internal Revenue Service, so lacking in compassion, does not buy. But beyond the IRS, I draw your attention to the speech Richard Nixon did not give and which surfaced just recently. It was written by speech writer Ray Price on Aug. 3, 1974, just days before Nixon resigned, and rejected calls for Nixon's resignation.

"I . . . did not focus on it thoroughly," Price wanted Nixon to say about one of the White House tapes. "I did not at the time find it inconsistent with my past statements. . . . I now recognize this as having been a serious mistake because as a result of it my counsel, my staff, and others . . . who defended my position did so on the basis of facts that were incomplete. . . ."

Not even Nixon, a political sociopath, could deliver such a speech. But Gingrich, in effect, did. I do not, of course, compare this trifling matter

over a college course to Watergate, but note only the similarity of the attempted exculpation. Gingrich is virtually saying his dog ate his homework. I believed him once; I will not do so again.

Washington, even in this season of good will, is a vile and ugly place of cheap and lethal partisanship. Many Democrats loathe Gingrich. Their effort to get him, whatever its virtues, is deeply personal. They hate the guy.

Many Republicans feel something similar about our beloved president. They consider Clinton a chiseling liar who demagogued them on entitlement programs while at the same time he was renting out the Lincoln Bedroom to anyone with a checkbook.

So given this atmosphere, it's not likely that the GOP will throw Gingrich overboard. The wagons have already been circled, and defending the man has taken precedence over both principle and appearance. It's a mistake, but from what Republicans have been saying in recent days, you would think Gingrich never served his country better than by lying to it. Maybe he should get a medal of some sort. I suggest the Order of Agnew.