

Gingrich Won't Wait for Close Of Ethics Case

Speaker Will Seek Reelection Even if Punishment Is Pending

12/31/96
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House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) will seek reelection to his leadership post next Tuesday even if the ethics committee has not decided by then on punishment for his violation of House ethics rules, his spokesman said yesterday.

"Republicans will recognize the Democrats are stringing this out and will move ahead to a successful conclusion" of the vote as scheduled for Jan. 7, the opening day of the 105th Congress, Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley said as the ethics panel struggled to agree on a schedule for winding up its work.

Ethics committee sources said a conference call involving panel members yesterday failed to set a firm schedule for wrapping up case and confirmed the impression that no final action will take place before the Tuesday leadership vote.

As the committee leaders were conferring, House Republican leaders conducted a conference call of their own to shore up support for the speaker among members and to remind them that the House GOP campaign committee has established a "hot line" offering information on the case.

It can be called to find out "what others are saying" about the case and to get suggestions on how to answer questions about Gingrich, said Rich Gallen, communications director for the campaign committee and chief operator of the hot line.

Gingrich admitted Dec. 21 to violating House ethics rules in filing erroneous information about a college course he conducted and agreed with an ethics subcommittee that he should have consulted a lawyer to ensure that tax-exempt charitable funds were not used for political purposes. The full ethics committee still must determine punishment, which Re-

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publicans expect to be sufficiently mild to allow him to be reelected speaker.

Gingrich had hoped for a speedy decision by the ethics panel to satisfy wavering members who claimed they wanted to see the committee's verdict—and more of the evidence—before voting. But instead he is faced by slow-down signals from Democrats and a high-profile defection from his own ranks.

Rep. Michael P. Forbes (R-N.Y.), one of the speaker's most loyal followers, Sunday became the first Republican to publicly oppose the speaker's reelection, saying he was troubled by Gingrich's admissions and concerned that he is wounded as a leader.

And, on the ethics committee, Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), ranking minority member, said he does not think the panel could make a "thoughtful, intelligent judgment in less than a week or two" in light of the voluminous information that it must review. Other Democrats accused Republicans of a "rush to judgment" to prevent erosion in support for Gingrich.

Republicans pounced swiftly on the Democrats' statements, trying to turn them to their advantage. They cited the slow-down as evidence of a "get-Newt" cabal by the Democrats and used it to rally Republicans as a matter of party and personal loyalty.

"We are currently witnessing a blatant attempt by the Democrats to win by perversion of the ethics process that which they could not win at the ballot box: control of the U.S. House of Representatives," said Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour.

If the committee fails to conclude the case by next Tuesday, "it will only be as a result of the Democrats' partisan perversion of the process, and Republicans cannot let that destroy our majority or deny the speakership to the choice of that majority's conference," Barbour added.

Rep. Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-N.Y.), a moderate who is supporting Gingrich, made a similar point. "If anything, what the Democrats are doing might fortify Republicans who might be a little queasy," he said. "It's becoming a fairness thing."

"I think what is disconcerting to me and others is the prospect of capitulating to [House Minority Whip] David Bonior's fixation on Newt," said Rep. David Dreier (R-Calif.), who is close to the leadership. "He [Bonior] has been trying to get rid of him

for a long period of time, and it pains me to think that he might succeed."

Forbes's call for Gingrich to step aside was significant because he was one of the 74 Republicans Gingrich helped elect in 1994 and because he has been one of the most staunch Gingrich loyalists—a "sycophant," in the words of Long Island's Newsday.

While at least eight other Republicans

have reserved judgment, saying they want more information before they vote, none has gone as far as Forbes in urging Gingrich to abandon his plans to seek a second term as speaker and in saying he will not vote for him if he runs again.

"As we move into the new Congress, we need a strong, dynamic, unencumbered speaker," Forbes said Sunday on MSNBC. He was troubled, he said, "by the speaker's own admission that he took his eye off the ball in preparing his own defense before the ethics committee."

Gingrich should "exercise the ultimate in profiles in courage in stepping aside and in not standing for reelection as speaker."

In an interview yesterday, Forbes said he has been "told directly by a couple of members" that they planned to do as he did and believes "several others are very close" to doing the same. "A sizable number of Republicans are going through a lot of angst on this," he added.

But Blankley said Forbes was alone in his position, and Rep. Bill Paxon (R-N.Y.), a Gingrich lieutenant, said, "There is very, very strong support for Newt's position."

In an attempt to reach bipartisan agreement on wrapping up the case, ethics committee Chairman Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.), McDermott and key staff members had a lengthy phone discussion of procedures for setting Gingrich's punishment.

McDermott, vacationing in Italy, said afterward that "tentatively, we'll start next week, but we've not decided which day." Among the procedures still being worked out is what portion of the proceedings will be open to the public, he said.

Other sources said Johnson was trying to figure out a reasonable deadline later in January for committee action so she can tell House GOP leaders when the current members of the committee could expect to be finished with the case.

Several Republicans want to leave when the committee formally expires at the end of the current Congress this week. But the leadership reportedly hopes to persuade them to finish the Gingrich case by giving them a firm date on which they could leave the committee.

In response to Republican charges that Democrats are delaying the process for political reasons, McDermott said, "We know it's important to the House that this not be stretched out. We have to follow proper procedures, and we are operating in chartered territory."

Staff writer Guy Gugliotta contributed to this report.

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For the full text of the House ethics committee report on Gingrich, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>