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Don't Dump Newt

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One by one my esteemed conservative columnist colleagues are defecting to the Dump Newt camp. Their calls for Gingrich to resign as speaker are delivered more in sorrow than in anger. But after an expression or two of regret, and of the unfairness of it all, they (joined now by Rep. Michael Forbes of New York) nonetheless conclude that for the good of the party it is time for Gingrich to step down.

On the contrary. It is time now for conservatives to show a bit of spine and halt the retreat. A party that means to govern cannot be intimidated into regicide every time the opposition waves the "ethics" club. God knows, President Clinton's Democrats haven't—and they have had far more cause to.

After four years of a Democratic administration that bends ethical rules and tells untruths so routinely that no one is surprised by anything coming out of the White House any-

more, the Democrats have not buckled. Instead, in a move that must be admired for its brazenness, House Democrats call for deposing the speaker for an offense—making misleading statements to Congress—which the Ethics Committee itself has not even alleged was intentional.

As for the underlying crime—using tax-exempt funds to support a college course that was supposedly partisan—the infraction is so minor that even the New York Times concludes that it would not warrant a civil penalty by the IRS: "Tax lawyers say that if the Internal Revenue Service found that the Speaker had actually violated the law, he would probably be required to do no more than promise never to do it again."

The core of Newt's problem is the allegation that the college history course he gave was not really neutral history but offered a partisan view meant to advance his political agenda. Shocking! If advancing a political agen-

da while teaching history is now a hanging offense, there are not enough lampposts in academia to handle the volume of professors who must swing.

But even those conservatives who admit the relative triviality of the charges facing Gingrich believe that simple hard-knuckle politics dictates that he step down. He will be so weakened by this affair, they argue, that he will be in no position to (1) lead the charge in 105th Congress for conservative legislation and (2) lead the charge in the ethics investigations of the Clinton administration.

These concerns are vastly overblown. This current "scandal" has had practically no impact on public opinion. Moreover, even a weakened Gingrich is more effective both as leader and strategist than any of the understudies waiting in the wings.

Which is why, despite the consensus among the dump-Newters that the Democrats would be delighted if Gingrich remained speaker, Demo-

crats would be delighted to see exactly the opposite. The relentlessness and sheer energy of their campaign against Gingrich is the best evidence that they see removing him as the most effective way to break the power of the Republican majority in Congress. They want nothing more than to topple the man who almost single-handedly led Republicans out of the wilderness and to see a weaker, less visionary leader take his place.

But the most absurd reason for dumping Newt is that Republicans need to get rid of him to clear the decks for a full-frontal ethics assault on the president.

First of all, a full-frontal ethics assault on the president is not exactly the best way to rebuild a conservative presidential majority. Clinton is, after all, a lame duck president. Even if he falls, there will be others untainted by his scandals who will run in 2000.

Second, there is no guarantee that Republicans will be any more success-

ful in pinning ethics charges on Clinton than they have been over the past four years.

Moreover, consider the irony of dumping Gingrich to get a clear ethical shot at Clinton: All of Clinton's scandals—from Paula Jones to John Huang, from Whitewater to the White House FBI files—have left him in power, on top, unmoved. Who falls? Newt.

Gingrich, the inconvenient man because of a slight taint, follows Jim McDougal, Susan McDougal, Jim Guy Tucker and uncounted others as the latest casualty of Whitewater et al.

Finally, let us suppose the critics are right. Suppose Gingrich's effectiveness will indeed be drastically diminished by these charges. He can always step down later on his own terms in his own time. Let Newt look around in June or July and decide with his colleagues whether there is anyone stronger to lead the party, and go from there. But to go now is to go down, gratuitously, in defeat and disgrace.