

Post 5/17/96

Mr. Gingrich Goes Packing

BETTER LATE than never. House Speaker Newt Gingrich has finally decided to give up his chairmanship of GOPAC, an unusual political committee he has used since the late 1980s as a base for expanding his political influence, spreading his own brand of Republicanism, recruiting Republican candidates and, of course, raising money for these causes. GOPAC had become something of a headache for Mr. Gingrich. It figures in a complaint against him before the House Ethics Committee, and the speaker has had to answer for the committee's practice first of not disclosing where most of its money came from and then of disclosing only partially.

One can only marvel at Mr. Gingrich's breezy audacity in distancing himself immediately from all these past questions. He had barely announced he was leaving the chairmanship when he turned around and blamed the committee he ran for the disclosure problems. "They were clumsy in how they went through it," Mr. Gingrich told *The Post's* R. H. Melton. "Frankly, never having done it before, I think they didn't take enough time to sit down with the RNC [Republican National Committee] and look at the system the RNC uses."

Excuse us, but who is this *they* the speaker is talking about? It has not before come to our attention that Mr. Gingrich was the sort of boss who just sat back lazily and let those who worked for him do things he disapproved of—especially on matters as sensitive as those involving GOPAC's finances.

One does, however, hope that the GOPAC staff will now take Mr. Gingrich's remarks to mean that they should make a full disclosure of who has contributed how much to the GOPAC operation. Because most of its energies were theoretically dedicated to the election of candidates for state and local office, GOPAC has existed in a kind of legal netherworld as far as federal disclosure requirements were concerned. But the committee served as a major political vehicle for Mr. Gingrich, one of the country's most important federal officeholders. In keeping with the spirit of federal law, the committee should let the public know who gave it money.

Many members of the congressional leadership—notably, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt—have organized separate "leadership PACs" independent of the regular political committees that finance their campaigns. These PACs allow those who have them to raise extra money and to spend it on almost anything that can be defined as "political." They also allow contributors seeking the goodwill of the leaders in question to give them contributions well beyond what can be given to ordinary members of Congress with only their own election committees. These leaders' PACs do live up to federal disclosure requirements in a way GOPAC does not. But the leadership PACs provide just one more loophole through which money can flow into a system already choking on cash. They should be abolished.