

Speaker Says Rules Allowed Floor Pitch

Gingrich Defends Promotion in House of College Course

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Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) released his fifth and final response to the ethics complaints against him yesterday, arguing that congressional rules permitted him to promote his college course from the House floor and mention a toll-free telephone number for ordering tapes of the lectures.

Gingrich issued a copy of an April 3 letter from his attorney, Jan W. Baran, to the House ethics committee contending that the promotions from the floor violated no House rule and that toll-free numbers were routinely mentioned in that chamber. Baran also said the remarks were protected in part because no House member objected to them at the time in 1993 and 1994, when Gingrich was minority whip.

"During this century there is not, to our knowledge, any precedent of the committee sanctioning a member for any statement made

on the floor of the House," Baran said in the letter. "Even if Mr. Gingrich's [remarks] were inappropriate—and they were not—the Speaker cannot be censured" under House rules.

Gingrich issued Baran's letter just as the ethics panel, known officially as the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, enters a crucial phase of deliberations on how to proceed with the four complaints that have dogged Gingrich since September.

The complaints include one accusing the speaker of improperly using two tax-deductible foundations to finance the college course that critics complain was partisan.

Two others accuse Gingrich of abusing his office by accepting free time on cable television and violating House rules by allowing a political consultant to use his House offices.

A fourth complaint, filed in March by Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), Gingrich's harshest critic in the House,

raised the issue of the promotional floor speeches, which were broadcast on C-SPAN and entered into the taxpayer-funded Congressional Record.

Gingrich had informed the Ethics Committee of the speeches, known as special orders, and the panel told him that while such remarks were generally proper, "no official resources" were to be used in the solicitations.

In his letter, Baran urged the ethics panel to dismiss Bonior's complaint "because Mr. Gingrich's course speeches are entirely lawful and were expressly approved by the committee" itself.

Baran said yesterday that over Congress's Easter break, members of the ethics committee staff asked Gingrich for "clarifying information" on certain aspects of the complaints. Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley said the speaker had not been especially distracted by any ethical cloud, adding that "obviously, he'll be glad when it's rejected for the bogusness it is."