

# Gingrich Trip Raising Speculation

*Some See N.H. Weekend as Step Toward Presidential Candidacy*

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By Dan Balz

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New Hampshire Gov. Steve Merrill (R) has been watching Republican politicians come and go through his state for two years now and he has no doubt what will happen when House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) arrives next month for a four-day weekend.

"I anticipate Newt Gingrich will receive a hero's welcome," Merrill said. "His reception will be about as big as the changes he has brought about."

Gingrich says he wants to visit New Hampshire in June to raise money for other Republicans and to eyeball a moose. But some Republicans think Gingrich has bigger game in mind.

Gingrich's New Hampshire schedule is now so packed with events he will be using a helicopter to get around, and the Nashua Chamber of Commerce dinner he will address on his first night sold out faster than any in the event's 68-year history.

So it is not surprising Gingrich's long-planned weekend in New Hampshire is now being seen by some Republicans as another step in a process that could make Gingrich a presidential candidate by the end of this year.

In the past few days, two prominent conservatives, former education secretary William J. Bennett and Republican strategist William Kristol, have said they think Gingrich may feel a draft strong enough to draw him into the race.

Gingrich will not flatly rule out running and his spokesman concurs. "Newt has the capability not to get

drawn into the kind of thing he doesn't want to get drawn into," said Tony Blankley. "One can't control how people see things. He doesn't have any plans to run and people have to interpret things by their wits."

There are eight announced presidential candidates and one more—California Gov. Pete Wilson—ready to launch. But it is still Gingrich who draws a crowd—and in the kind of settings that say presidential politics.

On Monday, for example, he was given an hour on "CBS This Morning," fielding questions in the kind of forum the presidential candidates got in 1992—and that none of the announced presidential candidates has yet enjoyed.

Kristol, on CNBC's "The Tim Russert Show" Monday, said he believes Gingrich is one of three Republicans who now stand the best chance to be the 1996 Republican nominee—the others being Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.) and Texas Sen. Phil Gramm. "They respect Bob Dole, and many of them admire Phil Gramm," Kristol said of Republican activists around the country. "But they love Newt Gingrich."

Bennett agreed Gingrich will soon feel a draft. "I don't think there's a lot of passion, a lot of excitement for the top tier" in the Republican presidential field, Bennett said yesterday. "His [Gingrich's] voice drowns out everyone else."

Gingrich may be well loved by Republican activists, but he remains a controversial figure with the public,

with almost as many viewing him negatively as positively.

Gingrich's New Hampshire weekend was planned months ago, but seems to have taken on much grander proportions than originally envisioned. Gingrich will speak to New England governors, meet privately with the governor, attend newspaper editorial boards, greet voters, tape a television show for WMUR-TV in Manchester, meet with Manchester Union-Leader owner Nackey Loeb, eat pancakes with former governor Meldrim Thompson, attend three fund-raisers for New Hampshire Republicans—and see a moose.

"We've got several people working on that," said Rep. Bill Zeliff (R-N.H.), Gingrich's host for the weekend. Zeliff is also Dole's New Hampshire chairman, and he said there was no conflict.

"It's fine," said Dole campaign manager Scott Reed. "It was a previous commitment and it's not taken away from the effort Congressman Zeliff is doing in leading Senator Dole's campaign in New Hampshire."

Advisers to other candidates dismiss the Gingrich boomlet as nothing more than inside-the-Beltway gossip.

"A group of us had dinner with him a week ago Sunday night and the talk was all about the budget and Medicare strategy and had nothing to do with presidential activity," said Linda DiVall, who polls for Gingrich and is Gramm's presidential campaign pollster. "If the speaker has other intentions he hasn't articulated them to me."