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## The Contingency Candidate

**H**ouse Speaker Newt Gingrich races around Washington as if he owned the place, and he does. President Clinton has long since ceded custody. He only pops in occasionally to pick up fresh laundry before resuming his perpetual tour of the provinces and Potomac-bashing. He refuses to mess with the city's crumbling government, whereas Gingrich, by contrast, sits knee-to-knee with Mayor Marion Barry on resurrection schemes. He is everywhere—"Capital Gang," Larry King, the National Press Club.

He has perfect cover for his ubiquity. He has written a book—two in fact—and ostensibly he is beating the drum for bestsellerdom. "To Renew America," which is out now, and "1945," his formerly sexy fantasy about what would have happened had Hitler won, will doubtless do well, if only because of his flaming celebrity. But he is also subliminally peddling his wares as a contingency candidate to succeed Clinton. If Republican front-runner Bob Dole should trip, Newt will be right there to snatch up the torch.

His National Press Club speech illustrated his strengths. He speaks fluently, without notes. He has the vision thing with a vengeance. He loves the question period, and can rip off an answer that is guaranteed to gain him more notice. Asked about our trade relations with Japan, he gave a sharp answer in which he showed he digs the Japanese character, the fine points of gamesmanship and the uses of power. We should not confront the Japanese and cause them to lose face. We should engage them in the equivalent of sumo wrestling, with ritualistic grunts and groans and exertion of pressure and humiliation that the Japanese understand and respect. The present policy of confronting them is "absolutely insane" and the Clinton administration "hasn't a clue."

He has other virtues to recommend him as a candidate. He doesn't need a ghostwriter. The Republicans will not need to write a platform. "To Renew America" will fill the bill. Nobody need be in any doubt as to where he stands, although on abortion, he is, like Dole, somewhat murky—he regards it as infanticide but admires his pro-choice daughter. But the man who steered the "Contract With America" through the House can perhaps be counted on to work out language that will soothe troubled souls.

It is hard to argue with his pitch on what is wrong, even if you don't agree

with his thesis that civilization is on the brink of extinction.

Who can say that the public schools are not failing? Who can say we don't need more discipline in our national life, and who doesn't cringe at the news that the drug traffic in our prisons is out of control?

"A system that can't impose its authority in the prisons should not be surprised that they can't impose its authority on the streets," he said.

He has perfected a kind of revival rap that would sell very well, particularly among the many citizens who are frightened that "the center cannot hold." He has a quick intelligence but is not alienatingly intellectual. He is mad about ideas and theories—at his worst he sounds like the village crank. He is somehow not the wonk that Clinton is, being somewhat more grounded in power circuitry. He is not elegant, being chunky in silhouette and notably rumped in attire. He hasn't even had his thick gray hair styled yet, which could mean that he is serious when he says he is not actively seeking the Oval Office.

He has conspicuous drawbacks. For one thing, he is under investigation by the House ethics committee on charges he calls "totally spurious." For another, he has bad poll numbers. People complain that he is "mean" and "extreme," although these by no means distinguish him in the GOP presidential ranks. Still, if the party were to choose on the basis of capacity, he might be their man.

His real problem is that for all his gifts, he is not to be trusted on one of the great issues of our day, guns. Like Tim McVeigh, and other weapon freaks, he believes in that old chestnut that "the right to bear arms" is enshrined in the Second Amendment. If he is bad on the subject of guns for individuals, he is worse on the subject of guns for the nation. He has been leading the charge on the Hill for a return to yesterday, for exotic, expensive weapons that keep needless assembly lines in operation for war machinery we will never use. He is for the B-2, "Star Wars," for bankrupting outlays that bring back all the excesses of the '80s and put off the day when the military-industrial complex and its handmaidens in Congress will make serious efforts at industrial conversion and retraining.

The most passionate passages in "To Renew America" relate to his conviction that we should be an armed society. He writes: "Far from making people feel insecure, the sight of the weapons makes people feel safer." He should speak for himself.