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Anger at the Dinner Table

After spending three hours behind closed doors with the House Ethics Committee answering nuisance allegations by the Democratic leadership, Newt Gingrich last Thursday night erupted in anger at the dinner table—against his friends, not his enemies.

The speaker of the House was the guest at a dinner hosted by R. Emmett Tyrrell, editor of the *American Spectator*, and attended mainly by conservative journalists. The immediate cause for Gingrich's ire was my column that day suggesting that he and other Republicans were flinching on affirmative action. But his complaints were much broader.

For the first time in the 104th Congress, the speaker seemed at bay. His ill humor, his own aides said, was in no small part the product of fatigue. But beyond that, Gingrich is vexed with conservatives, inside and outside the House, who are crossing him on the highly charged issues of race and abortion. A major political leader is in grave danger when he assails his base.

Gingrich's aides, who had never seen him as out of control for so sustained a period as he was last Thursday night, attribute it to an unbelievably heavy work load. Republican colleagues in the House, at the point of exhaustion trying to enact their revolutionary program, wonder how their leader fulfills that schedule while also running a shadow campaign for president and promoting his best-selling book.

Fatigue can be cured by a little rest.

Gingrich's bigger problem lies with the ideological heart of his party. His longtime supporter and sometime critic, conservative activist Paul Weyrich, worries that Gingrich is following the bad example of the Reagan White House in setting parameters of permissible conservatism.

In effect, the speaker is saying: Nobody can be to the right of me and be respectable. From the speaker's office come complaints that conservative congressmen want him to force passage of proposals that do not command a majority in the House.

At the *American Spectator* dinner, historian Gingrich compared the course of Republicans in Congress today to the way U.S. forces temporarily bogged down in France in 1944 after the Normandy landing. Democratic defenders of big government, he said, are fighting for their lives. This is a struggle of seven-day weeks and 16-hour days. But unlike his hero, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gingrich feels he is facing fire from his own troops.

His voice rising, the speaker pointed to journalists at the table and said they were acting like, well, like journalists. He was "infuriated," he said, by my column on affirmative action and asserted that I was wrong in saying his book, "To Renew America," does not mention the subject. (He cited a two-page chapter on "Individual Versus Group Rights" that never mentions affirmative action or quotas or proposes a specific solution.)

Gingrich went on to repeat what Jack

Kemp said: that Republicans will rue a race-based campaign for president in 1996. He angrily lamented that black Republicans feel they are losing a golden opportunity to bring African Americans into the party. He described fears of such blacks as his Georgia congressional colleague and fighter for civil rights in the '60s, Rep. John Lewis, and warned against instilling apprehension about "re-segregation."

Warming to his subject, Gingrich complained about conservatives bringing the party to ruin by opposing a rape-and-incest exception to federally financed abortions (another subject he avoids confronting directly in his book). He did not say so, but word has spread that he will cast a rare vote (the speaker usually does not vote) on the rape-and-incest exception.

In less than eight months, Gingrich has established himself potentially as one of the most powerful and effective speakers in the nation's history. He is unquestionably the most visionary and charismatic figure in the Republican Party. But the strain of "renewing America" is showing.

He seems more tolerant of the 25 or so House Republican moderates who oppose key elements of the party program than of some 200 conservatives who feel deeply about reverse discrimination and abortion on demand. That is not how the Republican majority was built, and it is not how it can be maintained.

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