

## Speaker's Choice

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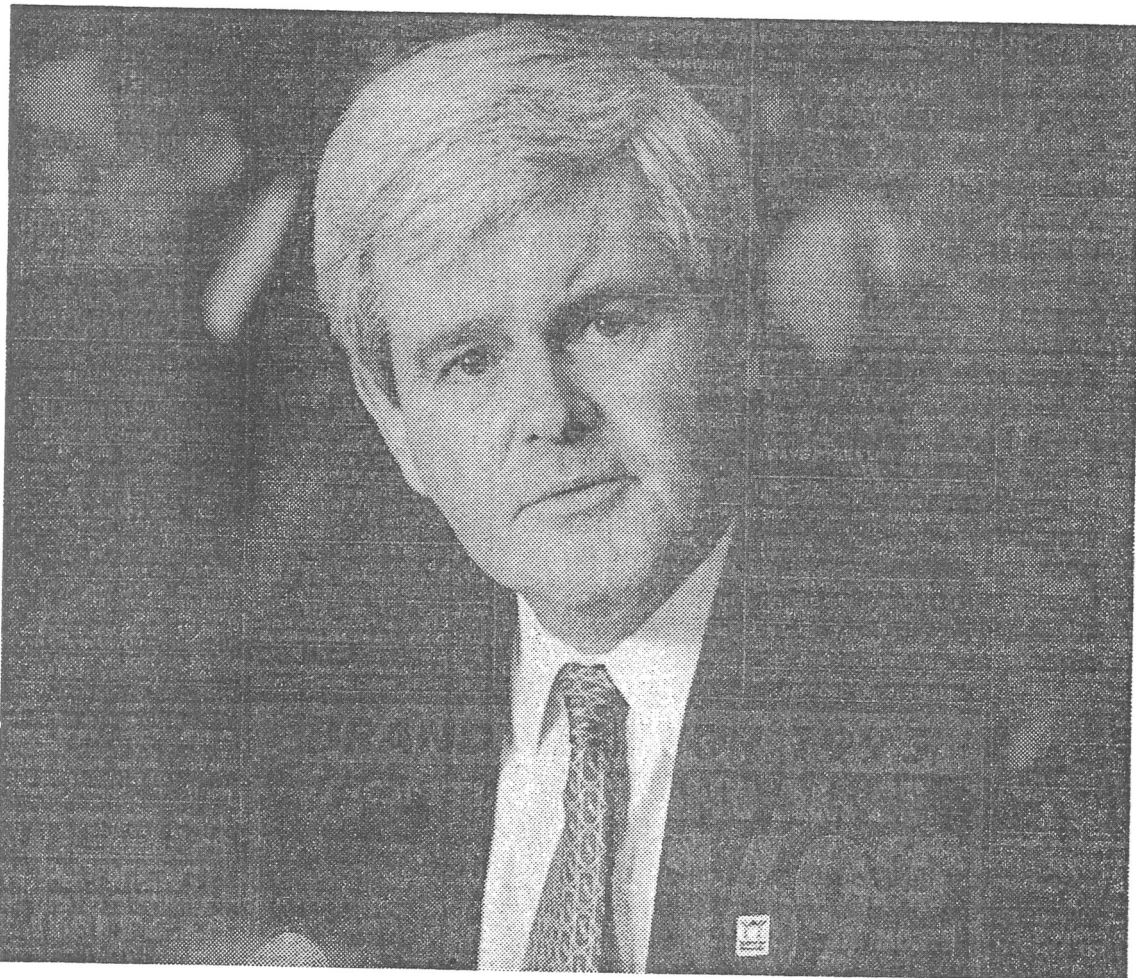
House Speaker Newt Gingrich garbles his two principal points about affirmative action and thus manages to inject more darkness into a national debate in which the urgent requirements are light and decency [letters, Aug. 2]. He is wrong on both the question of "group rights" and the meaning of the work and words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I am reminded of Harry Truman's use of the phrase "red herring" when I hear some politician instruct us about the dangers that "group rights" pose to our society. Affirmative action does not seek to bestow rights, but rather, it is designed to provide *remedies* to people who have been and are being injured as members of groups, not as individuals.

We blacks have been viewed and abused as members of our group since blacks were first sold to the

Jamestown colony by the Dutch in August 1619, exactly 376 years ago. The abuses have been as bestial as field slavery and as subtle as being seated by the kitchen door at an expensive restaurant. In today's world it can range from the brutality of callused politicians who ignore the fact that blacks have suffered double-digit unemployment for the last two decades to the much lighter, but still injurious glass-ceiling losses of partnerships in major professional firms or high managerial positions in journalistic organizations.

The speaker-historian, who suggests that remedies for the most persistent and vicious group consciousness in our history have introduced group consciousness into our innocent culture is assaulting both history and political decency.



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Just as he misuses reality, the speaker also misuses Martin Luther King. In his 1963 March on Washington speech, King described a dream that someday black and white children would be judged in America by the content of their character, not by the color of their skins.

King surely knew the crushing burden that race had placed upon the psyches of Americans, and he knew not only that we hadn't reached that state of decency in 1963 but also that much change would have to occur before we could even approach it. To that end, he continued to fight for race-specific remedies to racial wrongs. People like Gingrich conveniently forget that one of King's most famous campaigns—for the race-conscious Voting Rights Act—came two years after the Washington speech.

I am King's contemporary and shared his hopes and struggles. I too hope that the day will come when the content of character test prevails in America. But of these things, I am absolutely sure: Someday is still a long way off, and if King were alive, he would not only agree but would also think that those who pretend otherwise are engaging in the same kind of unprincipled demagoguery that made his life and work so difficult in the first place.

If the speaker really wants blacks to believe that he and his party are trying to create an "opportunity society" for all, he might look at Gov. William Weld of Massachusetts for a Republican response to affirmative action that blacks find credible. Weld told *The Post* recently that after learning that "the black unemployment rate is twice that of white unemployment," and 95 percent of the top corporate jobs are held by white men, he concluded that affirmative action is still needed. "This was personal with me," Weld said.

Gingrich's choice is clear. He can use his enormous power to help Americans learn what their real problems are and work on honest solutions, or he can continue the course of political profiteering that insults blacks and divides the nation. If he continues his current course, he and others like him will keep on disgracing their party by pushing our country farther and farther away from Martin Luther King's "Someday."

—Roger Wilkins

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at George Mason University.*