

by Sandy Hume

Pictures at an Inquisition

If not for Bonior, Newt might have been removed.

Moments before the vote to decide whether he would remain Speaker, Newt Gingrich glided off the House floor and flashed his characteristically devilish grin. "It's in the hands of God," Gingrich announced, "and the American people." Given Newt's unpopularity, at least with the latter, it was a good thing neither one had a vote. His unpopularity with David Bonior and other colleagues, however, was another matter.

The day before, Gingrich appeared before fellow Republicans in a cramped room in the bowels of the Capitol, with a stack of hundreds of legal papers at his side. The Speaker endured four hours of questioning from the nervous GOP conference. Internal party estimates were indicating that as many as sixteen Republicans were undecided, with two already opposed; a mere ten would have doomed the Gingrich speakership.

It was Monday, and all weekend long, Gingrich had appeared safe. The GOP leadership was concluding an all-out, two-week media blitz, and even though New Yorker Michael Forbes had been enjoying the talk show limelight as the first Republican to break ranks over Gingrich, party bigwigs weren't too concerned. "As Forbes goes," one House aide quipped, "so goes Forbes."

But first thing Monday morning, Jim Leach, chairman of the House Banking Committee, circulated a press release announcing his request for Gingrich to step down. According to one top leadership

aide, Leach was nothing more than a "god-damned, self-righteous goody-two-shoes," but he was an important two-shoes nevertheless; there was widespread concern that his defection would embolden rank-and-file Republicans to jump ship as well.

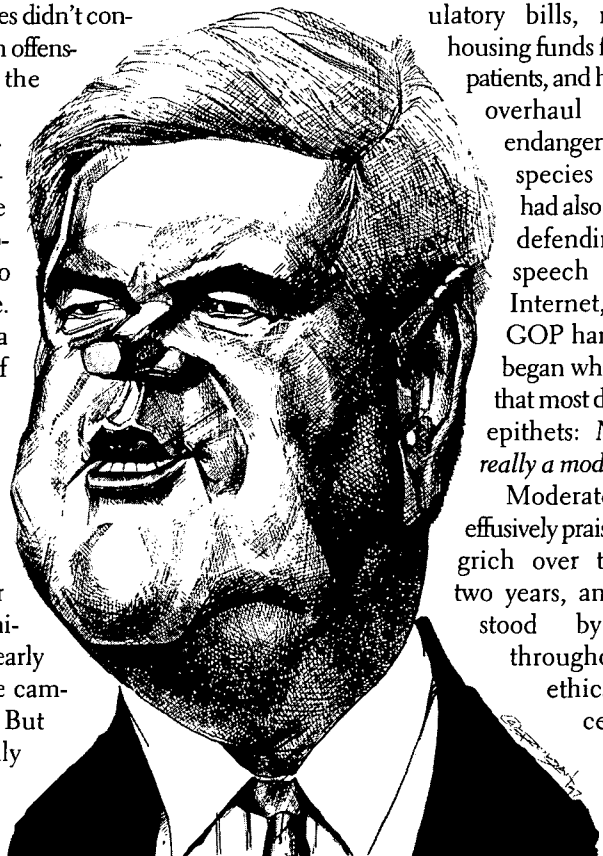
Leach's announcement, coming before Newt had a chance to address the conference that afternoon, particularly irked Gingrich supporters. Didn't Republicans have to hear Newt explain his side of the ethics case first? Well, no. The majority of Republicans—certainly enough to re-elect Gingrich as speaker—had already decided that the ethics charges didn't constitute serious enough offenses to strip him of the speakership.

Sure, Republicans wanted assurances that evidence of further wrongdoing wasn't going to emerge after the vote. But the question a critical mass of Republicans had was less about ethics than politics: Had Gingrich outlived his usefulness? He had led Republicans to their newfound preeminence, and raised nearly \$100 million on the campaign trail in 1996. But he was also wildly unpopular—even among the GOP itself. Republicans

had grown tired of the attack ads: "A Vote for (insert Republican candidate) is a Vote for Newt." Being depicted alongside the least popular politician in the nation was "like a millstone," said one Republican sophomore. "I know as well as anybody that [the ethics case] is basically a load of crap. But there's a part of me that's had it with this guy." It's understandable Republicans are already worried about 1998, recalling how Democrats began morphing some of them into Newt in negative ads as early as summer 1995.

But what irritated Republicans most of all was that Gingrich had repeatedly dismissed the appeals of doctrinaire conservatives in favor of the increasingly assertive centrists: he had softened anti-regulatory bills, restored housing funds for AIDS patients, and halted an overhaul of the endangered species act. He had also taken to defending free speech on the Internet, and GOP hard-liners began whispering that most deadly of epithets: *Newt is really a moderate.*

Moderates have effusively praised Gingrich over the last two years, and most stood by him throughout the ethics proceedings, despite the fact that com-



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ing from districts where Democrats are strong they have more to lose from Gingrich's unpopularity than do conservatives from districts where Newt Gingrich walks on water. Chris Shays of Connecticut, who once called him "a true patriot," denounced the ethics case as baseless more vociferously than any rank-and-file member.

Gingrich couldn't find the same soft spot in the hearts of the conservatives. At the start of the 104th Congress, he'd grabbed unheard of amounts of power for a speaker. Committees lost size, influence, and, in some cases, their very existence. Gingrich assumed the power to name chairmen, regardless of seniority, and appointed the head of the House campaign committee, which gave him more control over the flow of campaign funds to members.

He had wanted to make the speaker equivalent in influence and visibility to the president, but his knack for rhetorical excess had dragged down the approval ratings of the entire Republican Congress. Now his minions were pondering breaking ranks.

If it were pure politics that threatened Gingrich's position as speaker, however, it would be politics that saved him. For the inescapable—and ultimately unacceptable—result of going against Newt was to hand a delicious victory to David Bonior, the Democrat who had made ousting Gingrich the sole purpose of his political life. Republicans could abide a lot in the name of "bipartisanship," but they wouldn't abide a smugly victorious Bonior.

"If there was a rallying cry that seemed to work, it was that," says Rep. Peter King, who had started out in favor of pushing Newt aside. Bonior, he thinks, "may well have succeeded in uniting Republicans." In tones of visceral fury, they talked about how Bonior had been at Gingrich's throat from the beginning. The first week of the new GOP Congress, for instance, he'd even denounced Gingrich over the alleged Nazi sympathies of the woman Newt had appointed House historian. "What did Speaker Gingrich know about her extreme views and when did he know it?" he demanded on the House floor—after the appointment had been withdrawn. More recently, Bonior had accused Gingrich's political machine of "raping" children's charities.

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The constant haranguing led to a backlash, with House Republicans eventually reaching the point where they were talking more about Bonior than about Gingrich himself. "Jackass of the year" is how Pennsylvania's Curt Weldon described Bonior's antics; true-blue conservative Mark Souder of Indiana saw through to the political reality. "Without the help of Bonior," Souder says, "Gingrich wouldn't have won."

Gingrich's victory seemed a bit short-lived, however, when the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* ran stories about the taped cell-phone conference: Newt-backers were once again in crisis mode. "What we've got to find out is who leaked this thing," said one harried Republican aide. "If it's [Jim] McDermott, we're golden."

The involvement of the ranking Democrat on the ethics committee in handling relevant—and illegal—evidence immediately added plausibility to the claim that the ethics process had been manifestly abused in the execution of a political assassination attempt. Basking in the glow of a counter-scandal, Republicans accused McDermott of committing worse offenses than Gingrich had been accused of. The proceedings had been tainted, they argued, and the case against Newt should be thrown out. Says Peter King: "It was impossible for him to get a fair hearing."

By the time prosecutor James Cole released his devastating report, Republicans were already positioning themselves

to call for an end to the bitterness, and for both sides "to put it all behind them" and move forward with "the business of the people." The timing was perfect, particularly now that Republicans could no longer claim that Newt's transgressions were the equivalent of a "jaywalking" offense. Only 48 hours before, a similar call for reconciliation had come from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, where President Clinton awaited searing probes led by Senate Republicans. The day before the report hit, Clinton was hanging a medal around the neck of Bob Dole.

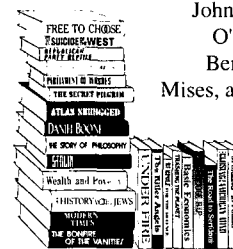
Swept away by the Rodney King spirit—"Can't we all just get along?"—Gingrich appeared to beam on Inauguration Day. He declared it "a joyous occasion" and "one of the miraculous events of the planet," and assured Clinton that, on the Capitol grounds—where the bright lights of committee hearings would soon shine—"Here you are among friends."

Democrats now claim to have gotten exactly what they wanted: a tattered Gingrich, even less popular than he was before, yet still around to

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run against in 1998. And the conventional wisdom is that Gingrich has been weakened within his own ranks: he has, after all, already made moves to return to his committee chairmen the power he consolidated in 1995. Gone is the Speaker's Advisory Group, a circle of top associates that had centralized decision-making in the last Congress.

Gingrich has also opened up leadership meetings to include as many as twenty fellow Republicans. Yet this last change perhaps illustrates best why reports of Gingrich's death are greatly exaggerated. An organization as relatively simple as a hospital auxiliary board can rarely reach consensus with more than about ten mem-

bers; the influx of talking heads will allow Gingrich to call a version of the advisory group for the decisions that really matter. Meanwhile, the party message will be constructed and disseminated through a chief communications director working out of Gingrich's office. The technique is classic Gingrich, who knows how to appease his minions without sacrificing his own power.

In the 105th Congress, then, Gingrich will be the chief "idea man" for House Republicans, developing strategy from the safe environs of the background. That, of course, is precisely the role Gingrich has held for the last year anyway, and it is a role for which many observers consider

him best qualified. He has surely lost political capital, and keeping the fragile Republican conference together will be a tougher job this time around.

As conference chairman John Boehner of Ohio put it, lobbying members to support a bill consists of "trying to convince people of why it's important to the mission and the party. You don't get many votes on your personal magnetism." With Gingrich's magnetism safely in the Nixon-during-Watergate range, that may be all for the best. As one top leadership aide puts it, "Gingrich has fewer friends than he had before." But with enemies like his, who needs friends? ❀



POLITICS

by Grover G. Norquist

Lessons From the Inquisition

What the GOP found out about itself and the other guys.

The Democrats' failed effort to recapture the House and Senate on November 5, 1996 exposed several truths: first, the source of Democratic money is trial lawyers, mandatory union dues, and cash laundered through Buddhist temples; second, the supposedly independent environment, consumer, and feminist groups are in fact highly partisan; and third, the Republican majority is strong enough to withstand these challenges.

Like a boxer who keeps swinging after the bell, the Democrats refused to be slowed by their defeat at the ballot box.

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They launched a month-long ethics war in an attempt to overturn the November election. They lost—again. This second battle leaves the Republican caucus with real scar tissue, but also additional muscle if it can take to heart the lessons of the Thirty Day Ethics War. It started on December 21, 1996, when Speaker Gingrich apologized for misstatements to the Ethics Committee, ran through his re-election as Speaker on January 7, and ended with the January 21 vote for reprimand.

Lesson 1: Democrats really do believe they've lost the House for the foreseeable future. The reckless flailing of Reps. McDermott, Bonior, and even Rangel betray their desperation. People do not

commit felonies casually to seize what they could win through the ballot box. In the 1970's and 80's, Democrats, believing they'd lost the presidency, began to steer power to Congress by micromanaging foreign policy and the budget. Now the opposite is being tried, as Democrats try to weaken Congress by shifting power to the courts and to executive branch regulators at the EPA, OSHA, and the FCC, which are more insulated from the voters.

Lesson 2: The House Republican leadership remained tough-minded and loyal to Gingrich. Dick Armey, Tom DeLay, Bill Paxon, and John Boehner had numerous chances to "accidentally" drop the ball. They never did.

Lesson 3: The 226 members of the GOP caucus displayed impressive unity of their own. Despite great pressures and temptations, only nine House Republicans voted against Gingrich on January 7. A number of