

# Gingrich Lost and Found

By TOD LINDBERG

IT WASN'T MERELY THE political career of House Speaker Newt Gingrich that came to an abrupt end after the Republican Party's surprising losses in the November 1998 congressional elections. It was also a theory of history that died.

One might call it the world according to Gingrich, for he was surely its chief proponent and its public face. But to describe it as such runs the risk of making it seem somehow idiosyncratic, something uniquely or chiefly Gingrich's. It was anything but. What made Gingrich a leader was first and foremost his abundance of followers — lots of them, and not just in Congress or in the organized Republican Party, but including just about all those who had taken personal pleasure in the election results four years before, when Republicans won control of the House for the first time in 40 years. This was his doctrine and theirs, a view of progressive Republicanism, a new, ideological Republicanism on the march. True, by 1998, many of Gingrich's followers (inside and outside Congress) had turned on him. And not for quite a while has it been possible for Republicans and conservatives to hear the words "Republican Revolution" without cringing in embarrassment. But the truth is that not so many years ago, the phrase quite accurately captured their frame of mind, their own sense of who they were and what they were up to. The 1994 GOP electoral triumph, which they felt as their own, they recognized also as his. Those who knew Gingrich personally knew all about his personal eccentricities, his vanities, his intellectual conceits. But those things didn't matter so much next to the bigger things Gingrich represented and the political achievement he had just brought off. Gingrich was no less than the chief theorist, lead strategist and tactician, and principal spokesman of the activist Republican Party, manifesting itself in 1994 as Republican Revolution.

This doctrine of Republican progress was ideological, conservative, pop-

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## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

ulist, and triumphalist in character — each a quality that found its personification in the man on point, Newt, now Speaker Gingrich.

The conservatism is perhaps the most obvious, certainly the element most visible to liberals and Democrats. In 1994, it came with an official document, the Contract with America. In it, GOP members of the House and aspiring Republican candidates pledged to hold votes in the first 100 days of a Republican-majority Congress on a slew of stalwart conservative issues, including balancing the budget, cutting taxes, reining in entitlement programs, ending welfare, and getting tough on crime. Conservatives came in various stripes in 1994, as they do now, ranging from libertarian to the religious right. This was, however, a document they could all agree on. If the idea was gimmicky, and it was, it nonetheless served as their own internal organizing principle and program of action. They rallied around it, and their opponents rallied against it.

This conservatism was anti-Washington. In part, it was a product of the equation in the minds of conservatives of the nation's capital and liberalism, against which conservatism had arisen. Washington, the thinking went, was out of touch with the concerns of Americans, and its principal product, big government, was a negative influence on their lives. Gingrich, who first came to fame leveling the corruption charges that toppled House Speaker Jim Wright in 1989, saw the delegitimation of Washington as essential to conservative change. Wright's corruption was of a piece with a Washington culture of corruption, itself the product of liberal policy and arrogant one-party control.

The anti-Washington character of conservatism was also a solution to a practical political problem: It united the various strains of conservatism. Whatever particular issue a conservative activist cared about, a bigger federal government was not the solution and was in the activist view probably contributing to the problem in the first place. Those who felt they had a personal stake in Washington and a bigger federal government were not conservative and would not be voting Republican; they were, in the Gingrichian view, the Democrats' natural constituency. But as government had grown and with it grievances against the actions of government on a thousand different fronts, the pro-Washington constituency was no longer necessarily a majority. An anti-Washington coalition might supplant it.

If conservatism was the most visible feature of Republicanism on the march, the Revolution's ideological character was its most important feature. Modern conservatism bears little relation to most of the things that have gone by the name of "conservative" over the generations, and the reason is its ideological character. Michael Oakeshott once wrote that conservatives believe this is the best of all possible worlds — not because they admire

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## *Tod Lindberg*

the present, but out of certitude that things will get worse. William F. Buckley Jr., in much the same vein, wrote that it was the task of conservatives to stand athwart history and shout, "Stop!" Neither sentiment could be more at odds with the sensibility of modern ideological conservatism.

This was conservatism with an action agenda, a conservatism that was disinclined to look back on the past with a sense of nostalgia, let alone with a desire to recreate some long-gone world, but rather one that envisioned a better future created by conservative reform. This ideological view was comprehensive; its adherents believed they had worked out the answers to the major policy questions facing the country. And while this view did indeed see the federal government as the source of many of the nation's troubles, it did not hold that the problem was federal power as such. Change those wielding federal power, and the power could be harnessed to the ends of conservative reform.

**G**INGRICH WAS CONSERVATIVE ideology in the flesh. He was, of course, trained as a historian. He may have lacked particular academic distinction, but he did not lack for intellectual ambition. His speeches were fraught with historical allusions; he was a tireless miner of the past for insights into the present, for past patterns repeating themselves, for large historical forces and great trends. He had an autodidact's indiscriminating, catholic taste in intellectual matter. He found wisdom in the Federalist Papers as well as Alvin and Heidi Toffler, whose "Third Wave" intellectual quackery enjoyed a brief flurry of attention thanks to its influence on his thinking.

Gingrich had, above all, an ideologue's sense of the connectedness of things. This quality often allowed him to dazzle an audience, especially one that shared his generally conservative views, and even more so an audience of like-minded conservative ideologues. He was comfortable discussing history in sweeping terms organized around great themes — the progress of the liberal welfare state, its progressive corruption, the American people's mounting estrangement from it. His frame of mind was such that a notorious murder in the suburbs of Chicago, in which a woman nine months pregnant was shot to death and her baby cut from her womb, was naturally a product of the welfare state and its deformations of our culture and those caught up in it. Gingrich's critics, in this instance, accused him of using a tragedy to score cheap political points. If that is as much as there was to it, it would hardly be the first time a politician was guilty of such a sin. But in Gingrich's case, the charge missed the mark. He was not being cynical; he was trying to help people understand what he thought had really happened.

Naturally, he explained things in ideological terms. An ideology is a closed system; there is nothing the ideology cannot explain. How could there be? An ideology is, in essence, a view of the whole. And with the ability to explain, more often than not comes the urge to explain. Gingrich viewed himself first and foremost as a teacher — although evangelist might be closer to the mark. Our chief national problem, as he saw it — namely, that voters kept electing

## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

Democratic Congresses — was largely a result of the fact that they had not had matters properly explained to them nor issues properly framed for them. In one particularly florid schematic Gingrich drew on a notepad to illustrate his role, his task was to civilize the nation; he would teach and train others, and using whatever media were available, together they would reform the nation by extending the influence of his ideas. The college course he taught (and used tax deductible contributions to distribute, leading to a slew of ethics charges against him) wasn't just a fillip of academic vanity. Its teacher hoped those who watched it would be wooed to his project of "Renewing American Civilization." The course title referred not just to a lofty goal but also to an intended outcome once enough people got the message. Gingrich was, in his own view, a transformational figure.

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And so he explained — and explained and explained. In the first year of the 104th Congress, he was everywhere explaining. Sometimes, as in the case of the Chicago murder, the explanation was in questionable taste. Sometimes, as in the notorious incident in which he complained about President Clinton not inviting him to the front of Air Force One to discuss the budget on the way back to Washington from Yitzhak Rabin's funeral, his explanation of historical precedent came off as whining over a personal affront. Sometimes, as in the televised press briefings he conducted daily before abandoning them as counterproductive, he would allow himself to be baited by reporters, drawn into colloquies with them in which he sought to explain why their questions were a product of liberal bias. He would describe at length why media hostility made it so hard for conservatives to get their message out. As the cameras rolled on and the complaint continued, its substance looked more and more foolish. And sometimes, the mere act of explaining was too much; he was overexposed.

For all these reasons, from time to time his fellow Republicans begged him to shut up, and at times he obliged them. But this in turn set another fascinating dynamic in motion. For no sooner had Gingrich kept quiet for a while than Republican cries of "Where's Newt?" would ring. He was their leader, after all; how come he was ducking the hard questions? They couldn't stand all the explaining, but when Gingrich stopped explaining, suddenly they didn't have explanations. What were they doing? And why, exactly? Gingrich was the one who could best say how the pieces fit together.

Gingrich-style Republicanism's populist character was a product of both its ideology and of the rising percentage of people giving pollsters conservative answers to questions about issues. Of the two, the latter is the more straightforward phenomenon. No one seriously disputes that the country's center of political gravity has been moving rightward for some time (though the reasons for this movement and its likely duration are matters of serious debate). And increasingly, in order to tap into this sentiment and exploit it

politically, the Republican Party has overtly identified itself as a conservative party. As ideological conservatives tell the story, the turning point was the battle for the 1964 GOP presidential nomination, when Barry Goldwater's victory wrenched control of the party from its liberal Northeast wing. Nixon, a problematic character in many ways, nonetheless recognized the political existence of a "silent majority" of Americans who opposed 1960s-style radicalism. It remained for Ronald Reagan, the story continues, to rally this constituency and turn it into a solidly anti-liberal, not just anti-radical, majority at the presidential level. Some analysts began to speak of a supposed GOP electoral lock on the White House. The congressional transformation was harder, due in part to the advantages possessed by entrenched

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incumbents, but also because many Democrats responded to their constituents' rightward turn by talking more conservatively while voting much the same as they always had.

But the people, in the Gingrichian view, possessed great wisdom. One could tell from their responses to such favorite Republican questions as whether federal budget deficits should continue or the budget should be balanced; whether the bureaucracy should grow larger or be cut down to size; and whether taxes should go up or down. On this reasoning, once the people knew that Republicans, not Democrats, were espousing the people's views, the people would vote Republican. There was no inherent conflict between a populist outlook and a modern Republican outlook; they were one and the same.

The Democrats were elitists, Gingrich believed. They were out of touch with what people wanted. They were the defenders of a status quo that favored them and their friends and perpetuated their own power through the power of government. Only by a constant expansion of government could they keep peace within their governing coalition. They would unhesitatingly deceive the people about their true intentions to the extent necessary to keep power. They were both liberal and corrupt. The American people were neither, and neither were Republicans.

Gingrich's description of the people's conservatism was, of course, ideological — once again, a piece of a larger whole. In a democratic society, an ideology that expects to succeed openly in the political world must necessarily be populist. Otherwise, it must be based on a successful and permanent campaign to keep people misinformed. In Gingrich's view, liberalism was an ideology based exactly on such a campaign; conservatism and the Republican Revolution, so-called, would not make war on the democratic order, as liberalism had, but restore to the people the government they really wanted.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the populist character of Gingrich's Republicanism was its candor. The premise of the Contract with America was candor itself: Politicians would, for once, mean what they said and do



## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

what they promised. Gingrich, once again, was at the forefront. If there were thoughts he had that he left unsaid, hidden agendas, secret strategies, and surely there were, they nevertheless could only have been but a tiny fraction of what most politicians, out of prudence, keep mum about. Gingrich spoke openly of his desire to see the Health Care Finance Administration, which administers Medicare, wither on the vine; of a reversal of U.S. China policy in favor of Taiwan; of his willingness to see the government shut down if President Clinton declined to go along with GOP spending and tax plans; of his intention to use the statutorily set debt limit as a sword of Damocles over the administration to force capitulation. His political opponents used all of these statements, and many more besides, against him — often wrenching them from their context to enhance the political damage, but not always, since in truth it wasn't always necessary. Gingrich didn't have to give them that opportunity with his candor. He could presumably have confined his didacticism to statements less potentially explosive. But he never saw them as explosive — or any more explosive than anything else he said. Gingrich said these things not out of some desire to be provocative; nor did they slip out. Rather, they were a product of his confidence that he was speaking for the people.

His political opponents, he believed, would twist his words no matter what he said, so he concluded he might as well speak the truth. He was, after all, speaker of the House, the body most directly in contact with the American electorate. From the point of view of Gingrich-style Republicanism, the takeover of the House in 1994 was evidence that the American majority had recognized that Republicans, not Democrats with their false promises, had the people's true interests at heart.

This view gave rise as well to another distinguishing characteristic of Gingrich's Republicanism: its triumphalism. This is where the talk of "Revolution" came from. Forty years of Democratic Party control was at an end, and concomitantly, 40 years of GOP control was beginning. In 1994, the American people completed their repudiation of the failed tenets of liberalism and its big-government intrusions into their lives. They recognized kindred spirits in the Republicans and welcomed a new era of conservative reform. Gingrich, the transformational leader, would consolidate the transformation. All Republicans need do was keep their promises and the people would be with them. Clinton, near death politically, would be unable to defy the people. Gingrich said after the 1994 election that if Republicans held their new majority in its first electoral test in 1996, they would rule the House for a generation.

WITH SOME JUSTIFICATION, most political commentators date the end of the "Republican Revolution" to the failed government shutdown in winter 1996. A seemingly desperately weakened Bill Clinton emerged victorious from the confrontation Republicans provoked to try to force him to agree to GOP plans for balancing the budget,

## *Tod Lindberg*

cutting taxes, ending welfare and curtailing the cost of entitlement programs. Public opinion supported the president and blamed the Republicans for shutting down the government. In addition, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole was eager to end this damaging distraction to his presidential campaign. In the end, Gingrich, who had publicly announced the GOP strategy early on and who also believed that Congress had the upper hand in these budgetary struggles with the president, acceded to Dole's action in the Senate to reopen the government.

The experience was indeed painful for Republicans; it did indeed revitalize Clinton, now cast as the master of "triangulation," the man positioned between the extremes of conservative ideology and liberal ideology; and it did indeed begin a reappraisal of the revolutionary talk. But it did not bring a halt to Gingrich's brand of Republicanism. Rather, it set in motion a series of modifications in response to unexpected political realities.

No, it would not be so easy to halt and reverse 60 years of liberal dominance of Capitol Hill. Liberalism would not go gently into that good night. And Bill Clinton, a president whose liberalism shone brightly his first two years in office, in the GOP view, was perfectly prepared to distance himself from liberalism, steal conservative ideas and take credit for GOP reform if he had to for the sake of political survival.

So Gingrichian triumphalism started taking the long view. Perhaps the 1994 election did not, after all, mean imminent GOP dominance of the political scene and the policy agenda. The notion that Clinton would, in effect, be gone based on his own collapse into irrelevance gave way to the prognosis that he would be gone after losing a reelection bid in 1996 to the Republican candidate, who would then gladly sign into law the reform agenda of the GOP Congress. The failure of the shutdown strategy, triumphalists decided, was just that: a strategic error. It did not change the fundamentals, the vast historical forces that were moving the country away from the belief in government as the solution to social problems, from liberalism to conservatism. Victory, while it might take longer, was still assured.

As for the populist character of the Gingrich revolution, what's striking in retrospect is how little altered it was by Clinton's first successful efforts in triangulation. Republicans explained their problems by lamenting their inability to get their message out. Many of them, especially Gingrich, blamed the press for the problem. The story line about politics in the press coverage, they believed, was framed in terms favorable to Democrats and the White House. Gingrich once mused that he had never seen his press secretary, Tony Blankley, so despondent as in December 1995, when he felt he simply couldn't get so much as single good word for the GOP into the media discussion of the government shutdown. The people, in short, heard only one side of the story: the Democrats' side, whether that was through the liberal media or from Democrats directly, in the form of advocacy television ads Clinton and his allies were airing to discredit the GOP and boost the president.

## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

And what the people were hearing was sheer demagoguery, to boot. In the GOP view, Democrats were using classic scare tactics, trying to frighten vulnerable Americans with untrue or grossly exaggerated claims about GOP reform plans. Medi-scare, they called Democratic characterizations of their reform plans (“gutting Medicare”). Class-warfare tactics, they called Democratic dismissals of their modest tax-relief measure (“tax cuts for the rich”). Paradoxically, the success of the demagoguery in the public opinion polls was for Republicans further evidence that the people were with the GOP. The rise in Democratic support, they rationalized, was a product of a Democratic campaign of lies, distortion, and exaggeration; had Democrats told the truth, or had Republicans been able to get their message out, the people would not have supported Clinton in the showdown. The Democrats had managed to sow in people’s minds some of the same confusion that had kept them in power long after the people concluded that liberalism was a failure.

The conservative character of Gingrich Republicanism also underwent a transformation in the wake of the failed government shutdown. Throughout the 1994 campaign and the first year of the GOP Congress, Republicans on Capitol Hill and the outside activist base were united — first around the Contract with America, then around the necessities of balancing the budget by 2002, a project Gingrich set for Republicans immediately after the Senate failed to muster the required two-thirds vote to pass a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. The amendment might have failed, but the GOP Congress would balance the budget anyway.

After the failure of the shutdown, there were recriminations within the GOP, of course. Some of the most conservative Republicans in Congress as well as many outsiders said the big mistake was not closing the government but reopening it too soon, just as Clinton was (arguably) beginning to pay a political price. Others, including a number of Republican members of the Senate, said the GOP had interpreted its 1994 mandate from the electorate far too broadly. Voters wanted a conservative turn in government — but not one as far right as Gingrich and his allies proposed. New York Sen. Alfonse D’Amato explicitly attacked Gingrich, citing polls showing that most Americans, including those voting in 1994, had never heard of the Contract with America — let alone endorsed measures more extreme.

Interestingly enough, Gingrich probably agreed with those criticisms at the time, though he surely did not appreciate their public airing. His 1998 memoir of the early years, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way*, suggests as much. Thereafter, and much to the frustration of the community of activist outsiders, he would try to temper GOP conservatism with an insistence on political realism, the limits of the achievable. He had badly underestimated,

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Gingrich admits in his book, the strength of the president and his ability to combat Republicans. He would try not to make that mistake again. His strategy would be incremental.

Thereafter, the GOP Congress was less overtly conservative, more preoccupied with avoiding confrontation with Clinton. (With mixed success; despite themselves, for example, in 1997 Republicans picked another humiliating fight by trying to attach partisan provisions — on the census, among others — to a disaster relief bill. Clinton vetoed the bill and accused Republicans of playing politics with aid to flood victims; the GOP capitulated, and Gingrich took the heat for the blunder.) Typical of the period was GOP willingness in appropriations bills in fall 1996 to give Clinton whatever he wanted; Republicans wanted to go home and campaign. The price of peace ran to the tens of billions, and conservative activist groups on the outside squealed in protest.

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As it happened, after the shutdown failure, no subsequent legislative action of the 104th nor 105th Congresses really passed muster with the conservative activist community as a whole — with the exception of a securities-litigation reform measure passed over Clinton's veto and the successful effort to rename Washington's airport in honor of Ronald Reagan. Gingrich's biggest prize in the 104th

Congress was the welfare reform legislation Clinton signed shortly before the 1996 election. It brought an end to a federal entitlement program, an unprecedented achievement. Even so, some conservatives regarded the measure as insufficient because it allowed states too much latitude to avoid tough measures to get people off welfare rolls. The balanced budget agreement reached in 1997, which capped spending, cut taxes, and included much of the entitlement reform and cost-cutting Democrats had decried in 1995, met with widespread disfavor among outside conservative groups: The spending levels were too high, they said, and the tax cut was too small and too directed toward social engineering.

Against judgments of this kind, Gingrich counseled patience; some matters took time to ripen; the electorate had not yet made up its mind that Republicans in Congress were trustworthy and responsible, especially given tireless Democratic efforts to paint Republicans as extreme and irresponsible. As he regrouped, to some he looked feckless, to others like he was abandoning conservative principle, to still others like he was now out of touch with whatever had won him the speaker's gavel in the first place. Calls among conservative outsiders for his ouster grew louder and more numerous. And some members, including some among the House GOP leadership, hatched an unsuccessful coup attempt against him.

All of this was essentially an argument over the pace of conservative

## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

change and the ability and willingness of the congressional GOP to serve as an agent of that change. Conservative outsiders, the activist community, were frustrated. In a sense, this was natural; after all, their role is, in part, to keep conservative pressure on their elected allies, to push them rightward against whatever counter-pressure they encounter; an attitude of contentment in the activist wing would apply no such pressure. Yet for some conservatives, frustration with the difficulty of making legislative progress in rolling back liberalism led them to regard Gingrich's conservatism as an open question.

The contention that Gingrich was no conservative was and likely will remain entirely unfathomable to liberals and most non-conservatives. For partisan Democrats, he was the poster boy of Republican extremism. Among neutral observers, he was the leader of an unruly Republican conference with a large right-wing bloc he had to appease by pursuing a right-wing course wherever he could. But some conservative activists, demanding and expecting victory sooner rather than later, saw things differently.

Their view is absurd. In truth, Gingrich by disposition was never the most conservative of right-wingers. And it's also true that he did abandon the confrontational course of the period of Republican Revolution. Moreover, he had grown attentive to the narrowness of his own majority and the strength of his opposition in the White House. On some issues, the environment for example, his newfound political realism led him to conclude that he needed a united GOP conference in order to proceed. Activists might be unhappy, but market-oriented reform, known not only to Democrats but also to some Republicans as "gutting environmental protection," would have to await a more favorable correlation of forces. But it's a sure bet that were Gingrich speaker in the 106th Congress, he would have been advocating tax cuts, defense spending increases, and private accounts for Social Security, among a number of other things no one could fail to recognize as conservative.

**F**ROM TRIUMPHALISM to a doctrine of eventual triumph; from populist ratification of a conservative GOP agenda to a need to reconnect with and reassure the people in the face of liberal efforts to cling to power by deceit; from conservative Republican Revolution to incremental conservative change: The Gingrich ideology was subject to substantial revision in response to its collision with political reality. But it remained largely intact even through the defeat of Bob Dole and into the run-up to the 1998 congressional election.

Gingrich's public popularity might never recover from the depths to which it sank as Democrats promoted him as the chief villain of the American polity, and some conservative pundits might have been sick and tired of him. But, really, who among Republican elected leaders was better at explaining the Republican agenda than Gingrich? Surely not Bob Dole in 1996. Not Trent Lott, who was new to the scene and hardly a spellbinding orator. Nor was there anyone else of sufficient stature in the House. Even

## *Tod Lindberg*

many of Gingrich's detractors admitted as much.

As for the insiders, the members of his conference, at least part of the reason efforts to oust him as speaker during the 105th Congress came to naught was the absence of a plausible alternative. He might not have been well-liked among other Republican members of the House; the coup attempt was a vicious reminder that the top leaders of a legislative body are not typically friends but rivals. But in the end, for the insiders, Gingrich was the one who had purged pre-1994 congressional Republicans of what he called their "minority mindset." It was he who got them to contemplate the possibility of winning control of the House and how to go about doing it. He was the one who led them to political victory and their majority in 1994 and was godfather of the huge freshman class that year. And he was the architect of the plan that retained GOP control of Congress in 1996, despite Dole's dreadful performance. Democrats had assailed him unrelentingly on ethics charges that Republicans mainly viewed as just a means to take down their leader for political reasons. And if gratitude was not enough motive, nor depriving Democrats of the biggest trophy they sought, then there was still the question of who else could hold the fractious GOP conference together. Who else could talk to the moderates and the Buchananite right and the old bulls chairing the committees, as well as the broad middle of the conference? No one had a ready answer to that question, especially not within the Republican conference.

**T**HE ABILITY TO SUSTAIN an incremental view of conservative progress en route to eventual triumph in fulfillment of the people's wishes has, as it happens, a rather huge predicate: victories along the way. Now, over particular pieces of legislation, one can have an argument about whether they constitute victory. Conservative Gingrich skeptics might ask: Did the balanced budget act of 1997 really do much of anything to balance the budget that a surging economy wouldn't have accomplished anyway? Gingrich supporters might reply: It codified the GOP terms for keeping the budget balanced, and it cut taxes, paving the way for the fight over the next tax cut. So long as Gingrich and the GOP majority could stop what conservatives saw as egregiously bad legislation, for example a tobacco deal with a big tax increase or a campaign finance bill including public financing of campaigns, and so long as most of what did pass could at least claim to be a step in the right direction, however small, then Gingrich would have what he needed legislatively to sustain his incremental strategy.

It's not so easy to argue over what constitutes electoral victory. The results are posted in black and white, with real winners and real losers. No less than legislative progress, Gingrich needed to demonstrate political progress as well — and he firmly believed, through election day, that he would do just that in 1998 — by picking up House seats in the sixth year of the Clinton administration.

All of history told him it would be so. In the midterm election of a presi-

## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

dent's second term, the party of the president always loses seats in Congress. Why? Gingrich had an explanation, naturally, and it had nothing to do with the particular circumstances of Bill Clinton. It was that six years into a presidency, sufficient numbers of people will have accumulated sufficient grievances against the government that if they are members of the president's party, they will stay home, and if they are members of the opposition, they will turn out and register their discontent. Clinton's 1998 scandal troubles would only make this tendency more pronounced. A week before the election, Gingrich was even sanguine about the GOP failure to pass a tax cut in 1998. While in an ordinary year, he said, the failure to do so might hurt Republicans with the GOP base, this year the base had other reasons to be worked up about Clinton.

As it happened, Gingrich and his allies did have some experience spinning an electoral result: 1996. Republicans lost about half their House majority in tandem with Bob Dole's defeat. But they portrayed the congressional elections (in which the GOP picked up a couple Senate seats) as the electorate's reaffirmation of the Republican majority. The reaffirmation, they said, was all the more remarkable for Dole's poor showing. They had absorbed everything the Democrats had to throw at them, and they had survived. In this sense, they didn't lose; they won.

The results in November 1998 just weren't spinnable with that kind of argument (not that Gingrich didn't try, lamely congratulating Republicans on election night on the American people's good sense in giving them a third term in the majority). The near-universal expectation among observers was that Republicans would make modest gains. The GOP spin immediately preceding the election was that even if Republicans picked up only a few seats, Democrats would begin the 106th Congress at an historic low; privately, Republicans expected to do much better. The Clinton scandal was an embarrassment to Democrats, who would express their frustration by not turning out to vote. The independents would stay home, enjoying the peace and prosperity. *Et voila.*

A five-seat loss in the House is, in general, not much. In this context, however, it was devastating. More to the point, it was well beyond the capability of Gingrich and his Republicans to explain away in terms that were consistent even with their scaled-back vision of Republican progress. There was nothing self-consoling to say. Gingrich, at the press conference he gave the day after the election, was nearly speechless. He didn't know what had happened. He said that when he woke up election morning, he was confident Republicans were about to win seats in the House. He didn't know why they didn't. He said historians and others would have to analyze the 1998 results at some length in order to make sense of them.

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## *Tod Lindberg*

This was a blunt admission that the results made no sense to him. Where was his victory? What about his lessons learned the hard way? What about the way things always were and the way they had to be?

It was all gone when the polls closed on Tuesday, November 3, 1998. And by week's end, so was Gingrich.

GINGRICH HAS SINCE been heard saying that he harbors no ill will toward Bob Livingston for challenging him for the speakership, because (Gingrich charmingly remaining Gingrichian), historically, it was the right thing for Livingston to do. It's hard to see how he could have survived the challenge, although all of his old lieutenants were gathering to help him when he announced he was giving up the position he had worked all his adult life to attain. All he had needed, really, was a win, even a small win, and his incrementalist case would have been vindicated. But he didn't get a win. And for perhaps the first time in his life, he was confronted with a political fact he couldn't account for.

Clearly, the defeat mattered. It meant something. But what?

The question fell not just to Gingrich, but to all conservatives. If Gingrich himself could not explain who he was and what he represented in American politics, then what was the explanation? Clearly, it was necessary to reassess what had been happening. If he was not the chief architect of a national political makeover, was he then merely the master of GOP delusion at a time when Republicans, for reasons having little to do with him, got lucky at the polls?

For example, 1999 began in unprecedented prosperity at home and quiet abroad. Yet notwithstanding that Bill Clinton was beginning his seventh year in office, he got little credit from conservatives for the peace and prosperity. Rather, he was the lucky fellow who got to be president at the end of the Cold War and the dawn of the age of the central bankers.

It's not hard to construct a similar explanation for the 1994 results. Bill Clinton campaigns as a centrist, a New Democrat, but upon taking office he lurches left, bringing liberal social issues to the forefront (gays in the military, abortion rights protection), as well as a traditional Democratic approach to the budget deficit (a tax increase). To top it off, he proposes a grand health insurance "reform" beyond the reach even of a Democratic Congress; and while his goal of universal access remains popular, his plan allows all the attention to focus on the trade-offs for universal access. The 1994 election is mainly about Bill Clinton and the desire of a substantial number of Americans to put a check on him; they do so by giving Republicans control of Congress. Gingrich is the man positioned to ride the wave to shore, no more. Had it not been he, it would have been someone else.

The Gingrich-free account might continue through the present as follows: Clinton recognizes the error of his ways, but he also recognizes that Republicans have staked out an anti-government position too extreme for ordinary Americans. Capitalizing on GOP mistakes, he organizes a campaign to point this out to Americans, and he also takes measures to recapture the cen-



## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

ter of the political spectrum. In particular, he successfully counters the most effective Republican charge against Democrats, fiscal irresponsibility, and turns the charge against Republicans. He agrees to a balanced budget, and then urges that ensuing surpluses generated by high economic growth be reserved to address the long-term problems of Social Security. In addition, he develops a number of other, smaller government initiatives sufficiently popular to restore some measure of the public's faith in Washington.

Some of what he proposes is merely rhetoric; sometimes his actions belie his words, as in the case of domestic spending proposals that make use of funds from the budget surplus. Republicans make these points against him. But his approach is not merely rhetorical; his politics is not simply liberalism flying under a false flag. And so his party begins to regain some of the ground it had lost to the GOP — in his reelection in 1996, in the gains Democrats make in the House that year, and in the unprecedented gains they make two years later. His public support is so strong that he is able to withstand a searing year-long scandal brought on by his own irresponsible actions and his attempt to hide them, culminating in his impeachment largely along party lines.

*Was  
Gingrich  
then merely  
the master  
of GOP  
delusion?*

Where are Gingrich and the Republicans in all this? Well, they are hardly the vanguard of history's march, notwithstanding their imaginings. They are instead almost entirely a product of Bill Clinton. They are a sharp slap to his face from the right, to remind him that he must seek his political fortune not on his party's left, but in the center. The Republicans in Congress embarrass themselves by overreaching, largely on Gingrich's account, then obligingly write the legislation that enables Clinton to move to the center in a way Clinton's own party in Congress never could. Meanwhile, the Republicans chafe at Clinton's ability to win political victories over them even as he appropriates large swaths of their agenda as his own. He is infuriating.

The 1998 election is the last straw, but not just because Democrats pick up seats. It's here that Gingrich's view of Republican progress becomes relevant — because it's here that it's shattered.

Republicans no longer have a story to tell themselves about where they came from and where they are going. They continue the impeachment process independent counsel Kenneth Starr has set in motion for them, stubbornly defending a principle that seems incomprehensibly out of fashion. And at its end, with Clinton still in office, the Republican majority that began with Gingrich's Revolution in 1994 is by 1999 leaderless and characterized by qualities nearly the opposite of those with which it began. Triumphalism has given way to fatalism and foreboding; populism to an uncertain sense of where people stand and why they hold the views they do; ideology to doubt about where the nation should be going and how to move it at all;

## *Tod Lindberg*

conservatism to the ad-hoc tactics of political survival. Where once the voice of Gingrich was ubiquitous, now there is only an awkward silence.

**I**S IT NECESSARY, THEN, to reinterpret the entire period of Republican ascendancy in the House through the lens of Bill Clinton, and never mind much about Newt Gingrich? Such a judgment is premature. But if Democrats, now firmly in possession of the electoral center as well as their own left flank, win the presidency and recapture the House in 2000, and then hold onto both past the hubristic flush of triumphalism of their own that is sure to ensue, the six-year GOP regnum will indeed look like an aberration.

And it's undeniably true that Gingrich's inability to retain the speaker's chair for all six of those years has diminished him. In 1994, as hero or villain or curiosity, he was the largest figure in American politics. Perhaps anything that bursts so spectacularly across the sky is bound to fade quickly.

Then again, it's possible that 2000 will turn out very differently and that some version of Gingrich's view of Republican and conservative progress, sans Gingrich, will be reborn, a satisfactory explanation for 1998 included. The Gingrich vision of Republicanism that flowered in 1994 did not, after all, come out of a vacuum. The story he told in 1994 had its origins 30 years earlier, when Barry Goldwater won the GOP presidential nomination and Republicans became the party of conservatism. Ronald Reagan's was the first great electoral victory of modern conservatism. Gingrich's was the second. In the context of great victories ahead, 1998 would be no more than a bump in the road.

For Republicans, one of the lessons of 1994 and 1998, considered together, is surely that permanent triumph is an extremely unlikely outcome in politics. Democrats had an opportunity to learn the same lesson in the combination of the 1992 and 1994 elections. As things turned out, it was wrong to place Gingrich at the center of a new political universe. It's equally wrong, however, to see him now as essentially a beneficiary by happenstance of a place at the center of American politics, however briefly.

Gingrich put himself there by will and hard work. The story of Republican control of the House does not begin in 1994, but years before in Gingrich's ascendancy among House Republicans. That ascendancy was a product in no small part of his vision of a Republican majority and a House he would lead as speaker. If the vision was faulty or incomplete, it nevertheless served to inspire Republicans to go about the business of preparing to be a majority. If a Republican majority required a wave to come along, it also required Republicans to be prepared for it with candidates and money and electoral plans. If Republicans over-read their mandate and overreached their grasp, they at least didn't treat their majority as an accident of history that history would soon undo. Political cowardice was not their first impulse. These are qualities that Gingrich, more than any other, was responsible for fostering.

## *Gingrich Lost and Found*

Nor can one say that Gingrich has nothing to show for his period at the forefront of U.S. politics. It is possible that Bill Clinton set out in 1993 to balance the budget while cutting taxes, to end the federal entitlement to welfare, to reverse the decline in military spending, and to pursue a missile defense. It is certain that Newt Gingrich set out in 1995 to do those things. It is possible that Bill Clinton set out to move his party to the right in order to accommodate the wishes of a country that had grown suspicious of doctrinaire liberalism. It is certain that the new Republican House speaker in 1995 set out to move the Democrat in the White House that way. And Democrats and Republicans alike in 1999 might ask Ronald Reagan's question from 1980 and 1984: Are they better off than they were four years ago? If the answer to that is yes, one must assign Gingrich at a minimum the role of catalyst to Clinton's reaction, and possibly a much greater role. Gingrich himself, surveying the changes in America during his tenure as House speaker, would have some reasons to be disappointed but many reasons to be pleased.

Barring the greatest political comeback of the next century, something of Churchillian proportion, Gingrich is unlikely ever to be a figure of much fondness outside the ranks of the GOP. And even among the cadre, opinions about him now are decidedly mixed. One day, though, conservatives and Republicans will probably be able to look back on 1994-95, the time of their Revolution, without a sense of pain or embarrassment or humiliation at defeat, but rather with the fondness with which one views one's youth, including its follies and delusions. There they will rediscover the Newt Gingrich they have currently lost amidst their frustration and disappointment. He could be maddening and he could be wrong, wrong, wrong, but when he was good, he was very, very good.

# Why Ritalin Rules

By MARY EBERSTADT

THERE ARE STORIES THAT are mere signs of the times, and then there are stories so emblematic of a particular time and place that they demand to be designated cultural landmarks. Such a story was the *New York Times*' front-page report on January 18 appearing under the tame, even soporific headline, "For School Nurses, More Than Tending the Sick."

"Ritalin, Ritalin, seizure drugs, Ritalin," in the words of its sing-song opening. "So goes the rhythm of noontime" for a typical school nurse in East Boston "as she trots her tray of brown plastic vials and paper water cups from class to class, dispensing pills into outstretched young palms." For this nurse, as for her counterparts in middle- and upper-middle class schools across the country, the day's routine is now driven by what the *Times* dubs "a ticklish question," to wit: "With the number of children across the country taking Ritalin estimated at well over three million, more than double the 1990 figure, who should be giving out the pills?"

"With nurses often serving more than one school at a time," the story goes on to explain, "the whole middle of the day can be taken up in a school-to-school scurry to dole out drugs." Massachusetts, for its part, has taken to having the nurse deputize "anyone from a principal to a secretary" to share the burden. In Florida, where the ratio of school nurses to students is particularly low, "many schools have clerical workers hand out the pills." So many pills, and so few professionals to go around. What else are the authorities to do?

Behold the uniquely American psychotropic universe, pediatrics zone — a place where "psychiatric medications in general have become more common in schools" and where, in particular, "Ritalin dominates." There are by now millions of stories in orbit here, and the particular one chosen by the *Times* — of how the drug has induced a professional labor shortage — is no doubt

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