

A Conversation with Newt Gingrich



Congressman Newt Gingrich

Newt Gingrich was elected to the post of House Republican whip, which makes the controversial Georgian the second-ranking House Republican. It also puts him in charge of building support for Republican initiatives in the House.

Some skeptics wonder, however, if the outspoken partisan is qualified for this role. In addition to initiating ethics charges against House Speaker Jim Wright, he has antagonized many Democrats with his attacks on the "corrupt, liberal welfare state." Even a considerable number of Republicans seem to be disgruntled with Gingrich's style. The best example is House Minority Leader Bob Michel, who quietly campaigned in favor of Gingrich's opponent, Ed Madigan, in the March whip election.

But Gingrich, a former history professor, is clearly comfortable with ideas. As a founder of the Conservative Opportunity Society, he has led that group of House Republicans in their aim to replace liberal notions of equality with conservative ideas about opportunity.

*On a sunny Washington morning last month, at six a.m. to be exact, **Forum** editor Bill McKenzie joined Gingrich to hear more of his ideas. During their 90-minute walk down the Mall linking the Capitol and the Lincoln Monument, they discussed the symbolism of the whip election, House Speaker Jim Wright, GOP rules and the new whip's ideas about the party's future. It is clear that no matter what the GOP's future may hold, Gingrich will play a prominent part.*

Ripon Forum: To some degree your recent election to the post of House minority whip was the result of support by such moderate Republicans as Olympia Snowe, Claudine Schneider and Bill Frenzel. How do you plan to involve moderates in formulating legislation?

Gingrich: There's no question that I would not be House Republican whip if activists in the moderate wing had not supported me. I carried New England by seven to three; I was nominated by Bill Frenzel; Olympia Snowe seconded my nomination; and others like Steve Gunderson and Claudine Schneider played major roles. So I regard my election as a coalition victory for activists of all the ideological views of the Republican Party.

One other reason we created two chief deputy whips was to harness the party's potential energy. By selecting Steve

Gunderson, a moderate from Wisconsin, and Robert Walker, a conservative from Pennsylvania, we sent the signal that both wings would be represented.

Ripon Forum: But beyond personnel selections, on what issues will you involve moderates?

Gingrich: To really understand my hopes, let me give you an outline of my way of thinking. Activities occur at four levels. The top level is vision, the next level is strategy, and after that follow projects and tactics.

Our larger vision is to develop a caring, humanitarian reform party. That's an interesting term, by the way, because [former White House chief of staff] Ken Duberstein said it ought to be caring; my wife said it ought to be humanitarian; and Steve Gunderson said it ought to be reform.

We have to become a party which cares about the nine year-old saying the Pledge of Allegiance, but then also cares about how that child spends the rest of the day. Even in the most conservative Orange County audiences I've received spontaneous applause about our duty to all our children.

Ripon Forum: Let's stop there, because child care is already a controversial issue. Last fall George Gilder took Utah Senator Orrin Hatch to task in **National Review** for the Hatch-Johnson bill that would provide tax breaks for day care. Gilder said that the tax break concept was too much, that government

shouldn't be involved at all with child care.

Gingrich: Certainly some conservatives have said that government should do nothing. But my view is that since 1968 the country has pretty decisively decided it does not want a left-wing president. The result has been a center-right governing coalition, which includes Jimmy Carter, who was an aberration.

The country wants that coalition to govern, not juxtapose. So they're going to ask "What are your answers for so many working mothers? So many single heads-of-households?" A party which says "We have no answer" or "Our answer is a cultural revolution which will take generations, so in the meantime you'll just have to suffer" is going to be in a minority status.

What you're going to see is an argument between a governing conservatism, which is pro-active and willing to solve problems with conservative values, and a more theoretical conservatism. That's not to speak ill of Gilder, because his job as an intellectual is to develop a yardstick for cultural change. But developing solutions such as the Orrin Hatch-Nancy Johnson tax credit for child care, which provides a powerful, pro-family position based upon parental choice, is a vastly more realistic response. It is based upon the real world and seeing people in real pain and real need.

Since 1968 the country has chosen a center-right coalition to govern, and it does not want that coalition to juxtapose.

Ripon Forum: But what happens on such issues as urban development, where conservatives historically have opposed government spending? Will the center-right coalition hold? Or will it splinter when more activist, government-oriented solutions are needed?

Gingrich: There's going to be a lot of arguing, but I don't think it will splinter. In Teddy White's "The Making of The President" from 1960, you will find a description of Theodore Roosevelt and an active conservatism. That is the model I've had in my mind for 28 years.

For example, we now have a great

concept in tenant management and ownership of low-income housing. That empowers citizens, and says "You're not just a client, you're a citizen. You have real responsibility and real authority." If you're truly going to be a citizen, you have to have both opportunity and responsibility.

On these issues we have a common bonding around a couple of premises. The first is that the corrupt, liberal welfare state has failed. Read "City for Sale" by Jack Newfield and Wayne Barneett, or "Honest Graft" by Brooks Jackson. You can see that there is a systematically corrupt, liberal welfare state. The process of giving some people enormous power and calling them bureaucrats, while depriving other people of power and making them clients, rather than citizens, is in the long run corrupting. That is best expressed by Mario Varga Llosa in his introduction to "The Other Path" by Hernando DeSoto.

There is almost a new synthesis evolving with the classic moderate wing of the party, where, as a former Rockefeller state chairman, I've spent most of my life, and the conservative/activist right wing. You have work being done by the Heritage Foundation as well as by such moderates as Tom Petri. Petri has extraordinarily broad support for his living wage concept, which represents an empowerment/citizen choice replacement for the bureaucratic/corrupt, liberal welfare state.

Ripon Forum: But how do you determine what a corrupt, liberal welfare state is? For example, Tom Kean, the Republican governor of New Jersey, supports affirmative action and minority hiring quotas. He took that message into Newark's ghettos in 1985 and won 60 percent of the black vote. Is he part of the corrupt, liberal welfare state? And how is the Republican Party going to attract more black votes, when many of the middle-class blacks it is targeting have benefited from programs you might call part of the liberal welfare state?

Gingrich: This will get the party into a very healthy and fundamental debate. But let me say that Tom Kean is a good example of the complexity of where we're going. He challenged the corruption of Jersey's city school systems, and in taking the state's school districts over from the local machines he highlighted

the existence of a corrupt, liberal welfare state. Tom Kean has also helped me formulate thinking on a variety of issues, and many conservatives have come to respect his innovative leadership.

But of course, we're going to have arguments. This, frankly, should be exciting to Ripon Society members because I believe in the party of the "big tent." If you're large and energetic enough, you better wake up each morning and think about conflict management, not conflict resolution.

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Ripon Forum: So does this signal a shift in your style? As you know, you've been criticized by many as being abrasive.

Gingrich: Clearly, I am comfortable taking on Democrats. I would suggest to moderates that the best example of this is Theodore Roosevelt.

If you're the minority party, you better be able to generate attention. You have to convince people that it is worth being part of your group. By definition, that means a willingness to fight with the Democratic Party. If the Democratic Party is okay, then why do we need Republicans? If the Democrats do some things that are not okay, then isn't it our job to point that out? I just do that more enthusiastically and energetically than has been the tradition in the last 40 years.

Now, the other 95 percent of the time, I've been bipartisan. Norman Mineta, Jim Oberstar or Frank Anunzio can tell you that. I've worked with them on House committees. I also helped found the Military Reform Caucus, although the **Washington Post** doesn't put that on page one. If you get involved in a controversy, then that becomes the mesmerizing event that people remember you by. In general, where confrontation is needed, I'm willing to do that. But where honest bipartisanship is possible, I'm going to be real practical.

Ripon Forum: Where will that be?

Gingrich: It starts with the mechanics

of running the House. I also think the Democrats look forward to working with someone who is part of the party's activist wing. Democrats were concerned that if the activist wing had been frustrated by the recent whip election, it would have been impossible to have working agreements. Now, we'll have a whip system in the classic sense of the word. We'll be able to work the entire Republican Conference and get it to sustain Bob Michel's leadership. For example, we'll be able to make an agreement on how to bring the contra bill to the floor and support that agreement.

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This just makes running an important institution like the House easier.

Ripon Forum: But it's also going to require building consensus, which requires compromise.

Gingrich: We're now at the vision level of developing an honest, conservative opportunity society. Any Democrat who wants to help in that grand adventure, we want in the room. Any Democrat who wants cooperation only at the cost of a corrupt, liberal welfare state, we frankly don't want. We want to fight and we want to say that. The single greatest change you're going to see in domestic politics in the next three years is the rising legitimacy of challenging the Democratic National Committee chair Ron Brown and other Democrats to take responsibility for 50 years of misgoverning America's cities.

Ripon Forum: But again, isn't a corrupt, liberal welfare in the eye of the beholder? Doug Bandow, a libertarian columnist, wrote recently that you supported domestic content legislation, which was a protectionist measure for the auto industry, and that you also consistently favor farm subsidies. Some might argue these are part of the corrupt, liberal welfare state.

Gingrich: Sure, you can find issues where members of Congress voted a certain way for tactical reasons. It's true

of everyone except the most rigidly ideological. Even Barry Goldwater used to say about the Central Arizona Project, that there are moments when conservatism has to be rethought.

But the fact is that Newt Gingrich doesn't run New York, Jersey City, Newark, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago. For my entire life the Democrats have.

The collective responsibility for the Democratic Party as an institution for the destructive misgovernance of America's major cities has been one of the great secrets and scandals of 20th century America. They have convinced all of us in the Republican Party that it is somehow necessary to look at children suffering in the South Bronx, but you're not allowed to look at the city government which has crippled children, destroyed families, ruined neighborhoods and exploited the taxpayer. All of those machines are Democratic.

Ripon Forum: Several years ago you described yourself as a "Jeffersonian populist." Could you please explain that?

Gingrich: It's one of the points I make to conservatives who often describe themselves as "Jeffersonian conservatives." It usually means they want passive, lean, inactive government. That I would never favor, nor did Jefferson. He bought half a continent, sent the Navy to Tripoli, and sent a scientific expedition half-way across the U.S. when that was a longer trip than going to Mars today.

The Founding Fathers were practical men who wanted a system that remained free and worked at a practical level for human beings. Their vision of America was a successful, working America, and that's why a century later William James called "pragmatism" the one uniquely American contribution to philosophy.

What I'm suggesting is that it's possible to be a conservative in the broad sense — i.e.; the world is dangerous and some men are evil, so government must repress those instincts and protect us from those dangers — and hold that private markets and the rule of law are essential to economic prosperity. One can hold those broad values and still believe in the cooperative efforts of Americans — whether it is building the Transcontinental Railroad, populating

the West through the Homestead Act, setting up the Agricultural Agent system, or any of the innovations which made this such an extraordinary place.

My challenge to all Republicans is to invent the systems and the approaches that allow human beings to help themselves, to think through the replacement for the misgovernance of New York City that will allow its citizens to help themselves. Then you'll have a remarkable explosion of energy and opportunity. Centralized government giveaways through politicians and unionized bureaucrats just guarantee the focus on the acquisition of power and invites the systemic corruption which now dominates all big cities and is at the core of our domestic problems.

Ripon Forum: Our former chairman, Jim Leach, has said that Republicans have a traditional base in individual rights and that during the early part of this century Democrats were the party

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of opportunity. Now, Leach says, Republicans are properly stressing opportunity, but are at risk of losing some of their individual rights tradition. The party has backed off its support for the Equal Rights Amendment, Ronald Reagan belatedly supported the Voting Rights Act extension, and during the last administration the Civil Rights Commission lost much of its independence. Are Republicans in danger of losing this base?

Gingrich: Let me say first that one of the gravest mistakes the Reagan administration made was its failure to lead aggressively in civil rights. It cost the Republican Party. It helped cost us control of the Senate in 1986 and it created an environment in the African-American community which was so severe that you can only fully appreciate it when you see the current approval ratings of George Bush. He is seen as a

post-Reagan president by African-Americans, who feel he and Barbara are truly committed to their well-being.

None of us in the conservative wing of the party appreciated the degree to which we were sending the signal to African-Americans that we inadequately appreciated their fears of re-segregation and of being deprived of the rights which they've held for less than a generation. I give credit to people like Jim Leach who understood this. He made a contribution to a very healthy debate within our party and our country.

Having said that, let me pick up the argument. The Republican Party has to be the party of individual rights and individual opportunity. It should be for affirmative action but against minority quotas. There's a big difference. If a young person of any ethnic background is inadequately educated in math, we should find a way to have compensatory math so that person can try for the best math or engineering scholarship in America. The problem with quotas is that they say, "For reasons that have nothing to do with you as a person, we're going to punish you. We're going to punish you if you come from one ethnic background in order to reward you if you come from another ethnic background." Quotas are contradictory to the desire for an integrated America because they put a premium on figuring out who you are ethnically.

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Ripon Forum: I don't know anyone who can defend quotas as a theoretically sound concept, but on the other hand black Americans were not allowed into white corridors until the 1954 school desegregation decision and the 1960s civil rights movement. Those actions were only a generation ago, so have we really had enough time to test the experiment in desegregation?

Gingrich: All Americans owe liberalism a great debt for having fought so passionately to end segregation. The liberal commitment to ending segrega-

tion and the colonization of the Third World are liberalism's two great contributions to the 20th century. And they often did that in the face of conservative indifference or hostility.

But quotas are wrong on three grounds. First, they suppress individual abilities in the name of a block mentality which is antithetical to the "American Dream." Second, they send the signal that the way you get ahead is to manipulate a political system. This is connected to corruption because you end with people who hire one African-American to head a storefront operation. That is misleading, and the African-American gets involved in deceiving the government so that the company can maintain the contract.

Third, quotas send exactly the wrong signal to poor people. It says that they are going to get justice through political action and that justice is going to redress the past. That is simply, historically, not true. It's not the way the world works. The more power there is in a political system, the more the powerful exploit it. New York hasn't ended up a dream world for the poor. It has become a place where Donald Trump manipulates the game.

The message that a poor African-American ought to be getting is: "You're right, you're poor. You see it every morning; therefore you better work longer hours, go to school longer, do more homework, study harder, and save more because only by intense personal and family effort will you climb out of the ghetto." Every group in American history which has applied those values, including West Indian blacks, have risen within a generation and a half.

Ripon Forum: But the black culture has been the only one to live with the residue of slavery, and real barriers stood in the way of those who worked hard. This has led to the failure of some blacks to become fully integrated into America society.

Gingrich: That's statistically not true. The average African-American family was vastly more likely to stay more united in 1960 and was rising out of poverty. Read Charles Murray's indictment in of the war on poverty and the welfare state in "Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980."

Ripon Forum: If those black Americans were rising out of poverty,

then why were there mass problems in the cities in the 1960s? Why was there a push for initiatives like urban development?

Gingrich: You had a massive disruption in the '60s because of the energy surge of the baby boomers, the lack of civil rights, the Vietnam War, the qualities of Johnson and Nixon as communicated to the younger generation, and the left's critique of American society which said basically, "If it's authority, you ought to spit on it." Those things became a cocktail disorder which affected whites in Columbia as much as they affected African-Americans in the ghetto.

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There also was a belief in government power which had been fostered by the First World War and refocused by World War II. It's no accident that John Kenneth Galbraith's formative experience was being in Washington during the Second World War. For a very brief period, well-educated people at the center of national power can order an economy and gain a surge of unbelievable energy. That doesn't last more than five years, but if we had to mobilize the nation next week that kind of centralized command bureaucracy is unbelievably powerful.

The difficulty is that, beyond three-to-five years, it begins to develop feedback mechanisms of distortion and inaccuracy. What we've discovered over the last 20 years is that the world that enriches politicians is the world that enriches a handful of millionaire developers.

Ripon Forum: Let's shift to some questions about the Republican Party. After eight years of perhaps the most conservative administration in American history, what empirical evidence exists that the GOP has actually broadened its base? There has been some increase in voter identification with the GOP, but the party lost control

of the Senate and has fewer House seats than in 1980.

Gingrich: Well, first, to say "some" increase is an understatement. We have gone from being clearly the minority party by almost two-to-one in the late 1970s to near parity.

But in large part the realignment did not build below the presidency because of [former Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chair] Tony Coelho's brilliance as the second most successful politician of the 1980s after Ronald Reagan. Also, there is the fact that the Republican Party is tragically too small, too unprofessional and too weak to be the governing party. We need to triple the size of the current GOP — not the Republican National Committee, but the actual party. The local level has to triple in size before we're

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seriously competitive. That's a huge job and nobody has tackled it.

Ripon Forum: How do you do that?

Gingrich: By developing a positive agenda of a caring, humanitarian reform party, and by developing and winning the argument over the existence of a corrupt, liberal welfare state, you could rally over 80 percent of the vote. Then you could convince people it's their job to be active.

Ripon Forum: Let me ask you a specific question about party growth. GOP delegate allocation rules have a bias towards smaller, non-industrial states. Larger, industrial states such as California, Pennsylvania and Texas have fewer delegates per capita. They also have more minorities than smaller states. There's been a movement to reform this bias, which could open the party to more minorities. What is your view of this change?

Gingrich: I don't know how I would vote. I haven't looked at the issue very much.

I would say that the Republican Party in most states is sufficiently small enough, so that if you went and recruited a new generation of people, you could have a remarkable impact getting minorities involved. Look at Helen Barnhill, the African-American



Bill McKenzie, l., Newt Gingrich, r.

from Milwaukee's inner city who ran for Congress last year as a Republican.

If those people who want to focus on bringing minorities into the party were to focus on electing delegates in those states, they would have the votes to change the rules. Much like the McGovernites, we look for mechanical change to allow us to avoid hard work.

Ripon Forum: But this is reminiscent of what people said about civil rights during the 1960s. Just work hard and you'll get there. That sentiment ignored the arcane rules that prohibited integration, even if people worked hard and tried to get ahead.

Gingrich: To say that segregation, which was a pervasive, government-enforced discrimination, was wrong, and to conclude from that you should focus on inherently minor rules, doesn't get you far. I'm not saying this in defense of the rules, but in defense of the argument that if you went to Georgia and organized Hispanic, Asian and African-American voters, you would probably control five congressional districts in a year.

Ripon Forum: Yes, but why not do both? Why not have rights and opportunity?

Gingrich: Given limited resources, I don't think many people, outside those passionately committed to the Republican dialectic, will ever respond to a battle cry over the rules. I'm in favor of recruiting good candidates and developing good ideas. Then the rules

will change under their own weight.

Ripon Forum: Let's go to a final subject. Now that you're the House Republican whip, how will you deal with Jim Wright, against whom you've been instrumental in developing ethics charges?

Gingrich: As the speaker and as the whip, we work together. We are formal and polite, and we are able to talk to each other. Obviously, there's no personal friendship. He wishes that I weren't in the room, and I wish that he weren't the speaker. In that sense, this is not going to be a friendly relationship, but it can be a professional relationship.

Ripon Forum: You recently told a television interviewer that you thought Jim Wright would not be speaker by June. Do you still think that is true?

Gingrich: I will be very surprised if Tom Foley is not speaker by the end of summer.

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