**Newt Broke Politics—Now He Wants Back In**

The House speaker who made Congress dysfunctional is wriggling back into government by capitalizing on outrage over that very dysfunction.

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Frenzied speculation about a presidential nominee’s V.P. choice has always struck me as overrated. It’s like scrambling to learn what a president will say in his State of the Union address: You’re going to know soon enough. Why the hysteria?

That said, the fact that Newt Gingrich made it to the final round of Celebrity White House Apprentice—and that, even if he does lose out to Indiana Governor Mike Pence, he’s said to be under consideration for a top national-security position—leaves me breathless with awe and wonder. Whatever job the former speaker ultimately snags, that he is being considered for any crucial government post pretty much encapsulates the absurdity of these political times.

To clarify: The great irony here is not that Donald Trump may be trolling for gravitas by snuggling up to a guy who himself is the clown prince of politics. Sure, some consider it noteworthy that, in 1997, Gingrich became the first speaker reprimanded and sanctioned by the House (on a 395-to-28 vote) for an ethics violation. (He had claimed tax-exempt status for a college course run for political purposes then lied to investigators to cover his butt.) Admittedly, this was no small achievement. Partisanship notwithstanding, it’s exceedingly tough to get House members to spank one of their own. Still, these days the American public regards pretty much all politicians as ethically shady. So why pick on Newt?

It is also true that, somewhere along the way, Americans learned that, even as Gingrich gleefully presided over the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and impeachment, he had been catting around on his second wife with a much younger woman (a junior aide to another House Republican), who, after their six years of semi-public sneaking around, became the third Mrs. Gingrich. (To be fair, Newt might have stuck with his second wife a bit longer if she had honored his reported entreaties for an open marriage.) But Gingrich explained all that during his 2012 presidential run, chalking the whole unfortunate mess up to overwork, “partially driven by how passionately I felt about this country.” Patriotism made him do it. Can’t fault a guy for that.

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Also, if someone were really looking to nitpick, it is pretty remarkable that, a mere three years after Gingrich orchestrated the 1994 Republican Revolution, granting the GOP its first House majority in 40 years, his own troops nonetheless tried to depose him for being such a disastrous leader. It wasn’t until after the party got its clock cleaned in the 1998 midterms, however, that members finally managed to pry the gavel from Newt’s hands. On his way down, Gingrich sniffed that he had no interest in leading a bunch of “cannibals.”

All that and more (remember his tantrum over getting a bad seat on Air Force One?) helped make Gingrich a magnificent comic figure of the waning 20th century—and, come to think of it, a pretty good playmate for Trump, characterologically speaking. But what boggles the mind about Newt’s latest moment is not his personal foibles or his ethical slips or even his political ham-fistedness. The truly great irony is that, more than any other lawmaker of our times, Newt is the guy who screwed up Congress, turning it into the dysfunctional circus it is today. And now he is looking to slouch back into power on a wave of public rage over that very dysfunction.

How did Gingrich break the House? Let us count just some of the ways. For starters, there was his elevation of legislative obstructionism to a central political strategy. Long before there was the Ted Cruz government shutdown of 2013, there were the Gingrich shutdowns of 1995 and 1996, the latter of which lasted three weeks and still stands as the longest in U.S. history. Not that anyone should have been surprised. Such chaos was all part of Gingrich’s long-standing quest to undermine public confidence in government. As former Democratic whip Steny Hoyer noted in a 2009 interview with The Washington Post:

Gingrich’s proposition, and maybe accurately, was that as long as [Republican leaders] and our party cooperate with Democrats and get 20 or 30 percent of what we want and they get to say they solved the problem and had a bipartisan bill, there’s no incentive for the American people to change leadership. You have to confront, delay, and undermine and impose failure in order to move the public. To some degree, he was proven right in 1994.

In his zeal to cripple Democrats, Gingrich poisoned the public against the entire American political system. As a congressional scholar, Norm Ornstein has [noted](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/the-eight-causes-of-trumpism/422427/%5D), Gingrich labored “to create a climate in which Americans would be so disgusted with Congress that they would say, collectively, ‘Anything would be better than this.’” And so, he launched “a long campaign to delegitimize Congress, politics, and politicians, and to provoke the Democratic majority to overreact, thereby alienating even moderate Republicans in Congress and uniting them against the evil Democrats.” (And make no mistake, Gingrich was very, very good at demonizing the opposition. As he’d lecture colleagues way back in 1988: “When in doubt, Democrats lie.”)

Next up: Gingrich’s acceleration of congressional money grubbing. As Lawrence Lessig, a Harvard Law professor and campaign-finance-reform obsessive, [charged](http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/19/opinion/lessig-gingrich-change-washington/) during Newt’s 2012 presidential run: “The transformation to this ‘Fundraising Congress’ began in 1993. Newt Gingrich was its leader.” Having ridden to power on a flood of money, Gingrich had every intention of staying there, noted Lessig. “The four years between 1994 and 1998, Republican candidates and party committees would raise over $1 billion. Never before had a party come anywhere close to raising that amount of money, because never before had any party’s leaders so effectively focused the energy of their members on this single task: fundraising.”

Then, of course, there was Gingrich’s push to nationalize congressional elections, making the qualities of any individual candidate less important than voters’ devotion to the overall party (or at least their antipathy toward the opposing team). And let us not forget Gingrich’s shortening of the congressional work “week” to three days. (Do not get House conservatives started on the insanity of the current schedule!) And the explosion of earmarks during his reign.

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Nor can we forget the centralization of power. Once in leadership, Gingrich took multiple steps to reduce the authority of chairmen, committees, caucuses, and pretty much anyone else who might stand in his way. There has been much hubbub this year about Paul Ryan’s attempts to restore “regular order” to the House, giving rank-and-file members and committee chairman more of a say in legislation. You know who blew up regular order to begin with? I’ll give you two guesses.

As Bruce Bartlett, a former Reagan and Bush I official, [wrote](http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/29/gingrich-and-the-destruction-of-congressional-expertise/) in 2011 (forgive the long quote; it’s worth it):

Because Mr. Gingrich does know more than most politicians, the main obstacles to his grandiose schemes have always been Congress’s professional staff members, many among the leading authorities anywhere in their areas of expertise.

To remove this obstacle, Mr. Gingrich did everything in his power to dismantle Congressional institutions that employed people with the knowledge, training and experience to know a harebrained idea when they saw it. When he became speaker in 1995, Mr. Gingrich moved quickly to slash the budgets and staff of the House committees, which employed thousands of professionals with long and deep institutional memories …

In addition to decimating committee budgets, he also abolished two really useful Congressional agencies, the [Office of Technology Assessment](http://www.princeton.edu/~ota/) and the [Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations](http://www.library.unt.edu/gpo/acir/Default.html). The former brought high-level scientific expertise to bear on legislative issues and the latter gave state and local governments an important voice in Congressional deliberations.

The amount of money involved was trivial even in terms of Congress’s budget. Mr. Gingrich’s real purpose was to centralize power in the speaker’s office, which was staffed with young right-wing zealots who followed his orders without question. Lacking the staff resources to challenge Mr. Gingrich, the committees could offer no resistance and his agenda was simply rubber-stamped.

Had enough yet? Because I could go on literally for thousands more words.

In 1994, on the brink of his revolution, Gingrich, with characteristic humility, proclaimed himself “a transformational figure.” It turns out he was exactly right. Just not in a good way. Here’s hoping that neither Trump—nor any future nominee or voter—is actually crazy enough to let Gingrich anywhere near the levers of power again.

**Answer the following:**

1. What did Newt Gingrich do that was new and different?
2. What effect did his actions have on Congress and what was the reaction from the other side?
3. What effect did his actions have on public opinion?
4. Why did he do this?
5. What elements of Gingrich’s tactics to we still see in politics today? Do we see this in both parties or one more than the other?