

THE INDISPENSABLE **REPUBLICAN**

In the twelve years since he resigned in defeat and disgrace, he has been carefully plotting his return to power. As 2012 approaches, he has raised as much money as all of his potential rivals combined and sits atop the polls for the Republican presidential nomination. But just who is Newton Leroy Gingrich, really? An epic and bizarre story of American power in an unsettled age.

By **JOHN H. RICHARDSON**

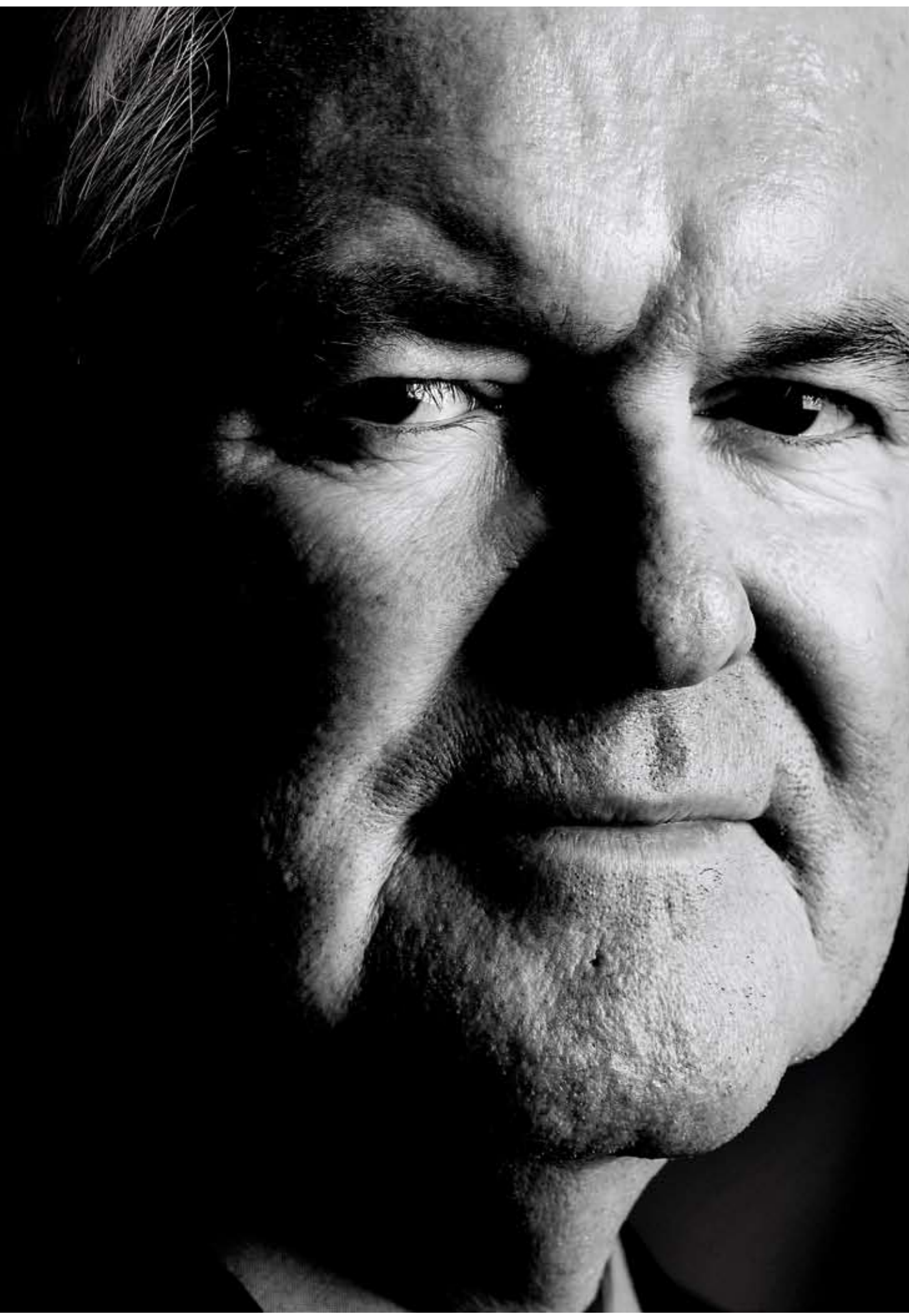
Photograph by **NIGEL PARRY**

S HE WAS MARRIED TO NEWT GINGRICH FOR EIGHTEEN years, all through his spectacular rise and fall, and here she is in a pair of blue jeans and a paisley shirt, with warm eyes and a big laugh and the kind of chain-smoking habit where the cigarettes burn right down to the filter—but she’s quitting, she swears, any day now.

We’re having breakfast in a seaside restaurant in a Florida beach town, a place where people line up in sandals and shorts. This is the first time she’s talked about what happened, and she has a case of the nerves but also an air of liberation about her. Since he was a teenager, Newt Gingrich has never been without a wife, and his bond with Marianne Gingrich during the most pivotal part of his career made her the most important advisor to one of the most important figures of the late twentieth century. Of their relationship, she says, “We started talking and we never quit until he asked me for a divorce.”

She sounds proud, defiant, maybe a little wistful. You might be inclined to think of what she says as the lament of an abandoned wife, but that would be a mistake. There is shockingly little bitterness in her, and she often speaks with great kindness of her former husband. She still believes in his politics. She supports the Tea Parties. She still uses the name Marianne Gingrich instead of going back to Ginther, her maiden name.

But there was something strange and needy about him. “He was impressed easily by position, status, money,” she says. “He grew up poor and always wanted to be somebody, to make a difference, to prove





• *The Speaker and Marianne Gingrich, May 1995. She had been with him since he was a maligned backbencher and was his most important advisor. For twelve years, until now, she has maintained her silence.*

himself, you know. He has to be historic to justify his life.”

She says she should have seen the red flags. “He asked me to marry him way too early. And he wasn’t divorced yet. I should have known there was a problem.”

Within weeks or months?

“Within weeks.”

That’s flattering.

She looks skeptical. “It’s not so much a compliment to me. It tells you a little bit about him.”

And he did the same thing to her eighteen years later, with Callista Bisek, the young congressional aide who became his third wife. “I know. I asked him. He’d already asked her to marry him before he asked me for a divorce. Before he even asked.”

He told you that?

“Yeah, he wanted to—”

But she stops. “Hey, turn off the tape recorder for a second. This is going to go places...”

Back in the 1990s, she told a reporter she could end her husband’s career with a single interview. She held her tongue all through the affair and the divorce and even through the annulment Gingrich requested from the Catholic Church two years later, trying to erase their shared past. Now she sits quietly for a moment, ignoring her eggs, trying to decide how far she wants to go.

It’s been twelve years since his extraordinary political career—the one in which he went from being a bomb-throwing backbencher in the seemingly permanent Republican minority to overthrowing the established order of both parties—collapsed around him. And yet, stunningly, in all that time Newt Gingrich hasn’t been replaced

as the philosopher king of the conservative movement. And as the summer rolled on, a revived Gingrich sat atop the early polls of Republican presidential contenders, leading the field in California, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas and polling strongly in Illinois and Pennsylvania. This year he has raised as much money as Mitt Romney, Tim Pawlenty, Sarah Palin, and Mike Huckabee combined. He is in constant motion, traveling all over the country attending rallies and meetings. He writes best sellers, makes movies, appears regularly on Fox News.

And Marianne Gingrich, his closest advisor during his last fit of empire building, sits on the boardwalk chain-smoking her breakfast.

He thinks of himself as president, you tell her. He wants to run for president.

She gives a jaundiced look. “There’s no way,” she says. She thinks he made a choice long ago between doing the right thing and getting rich, and when you make those choices, you foreclose other ones. “He could have been president. But when you try and change your history too much, and try and recolor it because you don’t like the way it was or you want it to be different to prove something new... you lose touch with who you really are. You lose your way.”

She stops, ashes her cigarette, exhales, searching for the right way to express what she’s about to say.

“He believes that what he says in public and how he lives don’t have to be connected,” she says. “If you believe that, then yeah, you can run for president.”

Sitting on a bench, she squints against the light. “He always told me that he’s always going to pull the rabbit out of the hat,” she says.

TO VISIT HIM, YOU START IN A MARBLE lobby of a building on K Street, Washington’s Lobbyists’ Row. The guard checks your ID, you go up the elevator. At Gingrich Group, he has two floors and dozens of employees. You sit on the sofa by the reception desk manned by a neat young man, and you study the magazine covers with Gingrich’s face on them and the copies of his books lined up on a row of mahogany shelves: *Winning the Future*, *Real Change*, *Gettysburg*, *Rediscovering God in America*, *Paper Kills*. Then another neat young man comes and leads you down a series of halls, telling you that Gingrich is the kind of guy who loves McDonald’s and never stands on ceremony, has five ideas before breakfast, and tweets “because he understands it’s the future.”

And there’s Newt Gingrich with his big square head. His features are surprisingly small and precise, and his deep-set eyes have a cool distance that feels vaguely scientific.

You ask him if he feels vindicated by the Tea Parties, if he thinks that his third act has come around.

No, he says. “I see myself as a citizen leader trying to understand three things:

- What the country has to do to be successful.
- How you would communicate that to the American people so they would let you do it.
- And then how you’d actually implement it if they gave you permission to do it.”

He’s the first person you’ve ever met who speaks in bullet points. In fact, he sometimes more resembles a collection of studied gestures than a mere mortal, so much so that he gives the impression that everything about him is calculated, including the impression that everything about him is calculated. Which can make him seem like a Big Thinker but also like a complete phony—an unsettling combination.

The failure of the Republican leadership under George W. Bush created an opening for him, he says. Obama’s “radicalism” made

that opening wider. Now a lot of Republicans are starting to ask, What Would Newt Do?

Or, he puts it another way: “The underlying thematic is beginning to be universalizable in a way that has taken years of work.”

At minimum, he expects to be a “sort of a teacher/coach/mentor.” At maximum, a leader who may yet assume the role he has prepared a lifetime for—

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves, he says. The next couple of years will answer that question.

Still, isn’t there one major problem with all this? The Tea Parties only embrace half of the Gingrich vision, the one that ties bureaucracy and corruption around the neck of the Democratic party like a dead cat. But some of the policy proposals he’s thrown out over the years suggest that Gingrich also supports massive government spending on education, technology, high-speed trains, national parks, health care, Social Security, and a host of odd pet projects: compulsory gym class for every public-school student in America, forcing teachers to take attendance every hour, paying kids to read, even compulsory health insurance—isn’t that exactly like the “Obamacare” that drives the Tea Parties mad?

“I’ve always said you should have a choice between either having insurance or posting a bond, but that every American should provide for their medical future,” Gingrich answers.

He seems a bit annoyed by the question—his tone is somehow both unruffled and peremptory at the same time.

And didn’t he support the bank bailout, too?

“Reluctantly.”

Gingrich bats these questions away like pesky little flies. He gets brittle if you try to pin him down.



• Most people thought he was crazy when he started saying that he would be the next Speaker of the House, but by 1994, Gingrich was the subject of an extraordinarily powerful cult of personality.

You call Obama’s Iran policy appeasement. But what’s the alternative?

“Replace the government.”

You’re advocating war with Iran?

“Not necessarily. There’s every reason to believe that if you simply targeted gasoline, and you maximized your support for dissidents in Iran, that within a year you’d replace the regime without a war.”

That’s it? After such an incendiary charge, your only solution is sanctions and speeches?

“The only thing you have to stop is gasoline,” he repeats.

But that just seems like nuance, and only a minor difference with Obama’s position.

“The difference between replacing a regime and appeasing a regime is pretty radical.”

But you won’t replace the regime that way. You’re just tinkering with sanctions, which have never worked.

“I would cut off gasoline, and I would fund the dissidents,” he repeats.

He wears the tight smile of a man who has very little room to move. He is known for his rhetorical napalm and is not accustomed to acknowledging that he often deploys it for its own sake, facts and gross exaggeration be damned. You don’t build a movement by playing fair. He didn’t single-handedly topple forty years of Democratic rule in the House by strictly keeping Marquess of Queensberry rules. And so in Newt’s world, putting Barack Obama in the company of Neville Chamberlain to win a news cycle is just the way it’s done. The grimace on his face says, What part of this game don’t you understand? His assistant looks at his watch. “We have three minutes.”

He will not relax, will not let down his guard, not this time around. He did that once when he was younger, spent three days with a reporter who got his staff to complain of his sexual adventurism and saw him yelling at an assistant. Afterward, he mentioned the episode to Robert Novak, who said, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“It was terrible,” Gingrich says, “because I relaxed.”

But this is his last chance, and if Newt Gingrich is going to fulfill his destiny, he will not relax.

IT IS A STUNNING RETURN TO RELEVANCE for someone who quit his job as Speaker of the House of Representatives and resigned from Congress while having an affair with Bisek—twenty-three years his junior—followed by an ugly divorce and their subsequent May–December marriage.

But now Gingrich is trapped in a tricky balancing act. Here he is meeting with a group of small-business owners at the waterfront Hilton in New Orleans. They’re seated around a long brown conference table, a couple of women and a couple dozen middle-aged men. Gingrich sits at midpoint with two assistants and a reporter behind him. “I’m here to listen,” he begins, his tone respectful. “This is your meeting.”

The business owners seem like ordinary folks—a builder, a man with a small boat shop, a woman who plans parties, a real estate investor or two. They seem cheerful enough and take their turns politely, but they’re fired up with the Tea Party’s sense of impending apocalypse: Obama is a socialist who’s trying to “equalize us with the rest of the world,” our tax system penalizes “doers,” 49 percent of the people in the country pay no taxes at all, we’re like Germany in the 1930s, all they teach you at college is “self-loathing 101,” and 60 percent of Americans are on some kind of government program. “Katrina gave a lot of these folks the largest check in their lives,” says the woman who plans parties. “They live on unemployment because they can.”

When they finish, Gingrich speaks in a voice that is thoughtful and measured. “At historic crossroads there is seldom unanimity,” he reminds them. “We have 90 percent employment in this country. An amazing number of people get up and go to work.”

It is a startling trait that you witness over and over again as he meets with different groups of conservative activists: When Gingrich—the godfather of the leveling attack and the politics of apocalypse—is surrounded by doomsayers and radicals, he takes the long view and becomes the very soul of probity. But a reasonable and sober Newt Gingrich would never have gotten anywhere. Hence his ability to be scandalous-

ly extreme with great ease. This incoherence is at the heart of today's conservative movement, and no one embodies it more than Gingrich. He is both sides of the divided Republican soul in a single man.

But today, among this group of conservatives, Gingrich the statesman presides, calming the troubled waters. Liberals with unhappy memories of his slash-and-burn approach may never believe it, but this is a consistent theme in his life: Civil rights inspired his first work on a political campaign, he sent one of his daughters to a mostly black Head Start program, pushed "compassionate conservatism" long before the term existed, tamped down the hard-liners during the Republican revolution, and made a secret pact with Bill Clinton to salvage Social Security.

Next comes a delegation from the Tea Party. "Obama poses an existential threat to the Constitution," one man says. "I seem to remember that I swore an oath to protect America against 'all enemies foreign and domestic,'" says another. But when one of the Tea Partiers makes an ugly comment about immigration, Gingrich walks him back. "People who come here overwhelmingly come to work. They come from a culture where work is important."

Like the business owners before them, the Tea Partiers seem puzzled. "Don't you think that when they get here, they'll learn to be lazy?"

"No, I worry about them learning to be Americans."

His behavior is bracing and principled.

But with both groups, in the same placid and sensible voice, he moves quickly into darker themes: The work ethic is fraying, the feds are piling up debt, there are pizza parlors passing themselves off as HIV-treatment facilities and teachers who can't be fired and the Democrats passed a \$787 billion stimulus bill without reading it, which proves they are the most radical "secular socialist machine" in American history.

"The more angry we get, the worse it is for Obama," he tells his audiences. "I don't care how many three-point jump shots he makes."

"THERE'S A LARGE PART OF ME THAT'S

four years old," he tells you. "I wake up in the morning and I know that somewhere there's a cookie. I don't know where it is but I know it's mine and I have to go find it. That's how I live my life. My life is amazingly filled with fun."

He says this in the same office, with the same assistant at his side and a digital recorder on the table.

Last year, at sixty-five, he converted to Catholicism. He credits this to Bisek, a willowy blond who sings in a church choir. "Callista and I kid that I'm four and she's five and therefore she gets to be in charge, because the difference between four and five is a lot."

Speaking of childhood, he makes his sound ideal. His family were the kind of people that "Norman Rockwell captures in his pictures," he says, stiff-necked individualists who "came out of the mountains from small farms" and served in World War II, people who had "an old-fashioned deep belief in citizenship" that was "like living at Mount Vernon kind of stuff." He speaks fondly of the "lovely older lady" who used to listen to his stories, the newspaper editor who first published him, the aunt who made sugar pies, the grandmother who had an "old-fashioned belief in citizenship," even the crusty old bureaucrat who spent an afternoon telling a ten-year-old why the town couldn't afford to build a zoo. And no, he never felt like an oddball. "I felt unique

in a way that I think every American should feel unique—if I wanted to open up a lemonade stand, I opened up a lemonade stand."

Actually, he grew up on a series of Army bases in Kansas, Georgia, France, and Germany. His father was raised by a grandmother who passed off his real mother (Gingrich's grandmother) as his sister. His mother married his father when she was sixteen, left him a few days later, and struggled with manic depression most of her life. His stepfather was an infantry officer who viewed his plump, near-sighted, flat-footed son as unfit for the Army. By the time he was fifteen, Gingrich dedicated his life, he says, "to understanding what it takes for a free people to survive." By the time he was eighteen, he was dating his high school geometry teacher. He married her a year later, when he was nineteen and she was twenty-six.

It sounds like a complicated childhood, I say.

"It was fabulous."

Fabulous?

"Lots of relatives, lots of complexity, lots of sugar pies, when I could talk my aunt and grandmother into making them. They had an old-fashioned cast-iron stove where you cut wood...."

Just as Ronald Reagan created an idealized version of an America that never quite existed, so has Newt. And just as Reagan curated a fantasy version of his own life, so, too, has Newt.

Aren't you sugarcoating it a little bit?

"What do you mean?"

It sounds like a troubled domestic situation.

"It's troubled if you decide that's what it is."

True, you can choose to look at the bright things. But there are also less bright things.

"There are for everybody."

Yeah, but I'm asking you.

He doesn't respond.

Both your fathers, the stepfather and the biological one, were angry men.

His expression is flat, and he answers in his scholarly voice, like a professor telling a legend from distant history. "I think by the time I knew Newt, my biological father, he was no longer particularly angry. I think Bob was very tough. But I look back now

and I realize that Bob imprinted me in a thousand ways. He taught me discipline, he taught me endurance, he taught me to take the long view, he taught me the notion of teams, he taught me a depth of patriotism, he taught me to be prepared for things not to work—you sleep as often as you can because you don't know when you'll be able to sleep again, you drink water when you can because you don't know when you'll be able to drink again, you rest as much as you can because you don't know when you're going to rest again. If you come out of an infantry, World War II, Korea background, that is how the infantry functions. Well, it turns out that's pretty good if you're going to be a politician."

SITTING IN THE FLORIDA SUN while she annihilates a long series of Benson & Hedges, Marianne Gingrich paints a very different picture. "He didn't talk to his mother much. He just didn't have patience with her. And she was pretty drugged up for a long time."

But he said his childhood was like Norman Rockwell.

She laughs. "You're kidding. That's funny. Well, I liked his dad. He was outspoken. He was a down-home, practical kind of guy. But you know, he was a drinker."

AT THE PEAK OF THE IMPERPEACHMENT CRISIS, CLINTON CALLED GINGRICH TO A SECRET MEETING. HE LAID IT OUT FOR HIM: "YOU'RE A LOT LIKE ME," HE TOLD HIM. GINGRICH WAS MUZZLED.



• Gingrich (left, in 1989) was relentless in his campaign to destroy Jim Wright, even as he had similar ethics problems. In 1995, with Clinton, his perfect foil.

Marianne loves long stories, straight talk, and rueful laughter at the infinity of human foibles. Her eyes go wide when she hears his line about being four to Callista's five. "You know where that line came from? Me. That's my line. That's what I told him."

She pauses for a moment, turning it over in her mind. Then she shakes her head in wonder. "I'm sorry, that's so freaky."

But she's happy to say nice things about him, too. As a husband, she says, he was affectionate, fun, awkward, eager, endlessly inquisitive. Once, she asked him why he was always so full of questions, and he said, "I found that if I listen, I'll learn more. And people like to talk to me."

That's completely Newt, she says. There was something missing inside, so he had to think his way into doing the right thing. "Newt trained himself. He wasn't a natural. He doesn't have natural instincts and insights. Everything has to be a thought process first. It took years and years. It wasn't, 'I have this insight, I am compelled, I can do no other.' It was step by step by step by step, and it was all mental, all learned behavior."

It's kind of touching, really. "He was a shy boy underneath it all," she says.

SHE MET HIM IN EARLY 1980, at a political fundraiser in Ohio. She was twenty-eight, the daughter of a small-town Republican mayor. He was thirty-six, a brand-new congressman from Georgia just emerging from an emotional crisis so severe that he drank heavily and contemplated suicide. She told him about the local economic decline, he said somebody needed to save the country. She said that he couldn't do it alone, he asked about her plans for the future. Even then, he was making rash pronouncements that reasonable people made fun of, such as that he would be the next Republican Speaker of the House.

They kept the conversation going on the phone, often talking late into the night. Although he was still married to his first wife, Jackie Battley, Gingrich told Marianne they were in counseling and talking about divorce. That summer, she went to Washington to visit him, and soon afterward he introduced her to his mother and stepfather. "They were thrilled because they hadn't wanted Newt to marry [Jackie]. I think his stepdad wanted to be able to say, 'Look, we always knew this wasn't going to work.'"

At first, she had no idea that the wife he was divorcing was actually his high school geometry teacher, or that he went to the hospital to present her with divorce terms while she was recovering from uterine cancer and then fought the case so hard, Jackie had to get a court order just to pay her utility bills. Gingrich told her the story a little at a time, trusting her with things that nobody else knew—to this day, for example, the official story is that he started dating

Jackie when he was eighteen and she was twenty-five. But he was really just sixteen, she says.

The divorce came through in February. They got married six months later, in August of 1981.

There were immediate stresses. They had no money at all. Marianne had to take over the budget because it was too stressful for Newt. On a congressman's salary, which was then about \$70,000, Gingrich had to maintain households in Georgia and Washington, plus alimony and personal debts and child support. She remembers one reception when a woman asked Newt to buy a charity ticket for ten dollars. Between them, they didn't have a dime and didn't know how they were going to eat for the rest of the month. "Ask Marianne," he said, so the woman came up to her and she had to say, "No, I'm sorry, I don't have ten dollars." When she looked over at Gingrich, he was smiling.

But they shared a thrilling sense of commitment, talking endlessly about the future and how to make things better. "The choice to try and change things consumed both of us," she says.

The challenge was huge. People in Washington called Gingrich "Newt Skywalker" and snickered at his pretensions. "He'd walk into every meeting clutching books, trying to send a signal of intellectual gravitas," says Mickey Edwards, then a prominent Republican congressman from Oklahoma. His own administrative assistant called him "bold but careless, imaginative but undisciplined, creative but sloppy." He would rattle around his office in the Rayburn House Office Building until well past midnight, restless and pacing, brainstorming with his staff or talking on the phone to Marianne. His mantra was that the Democrats were a corrupt permanent majority. And the Republican establishment was the biggest impediment to changing that. "How do we move the politics so that conservative is acceptable?" he would ask. That was the main question.

The answers he came up with made him so powerful that he would humble the president of the United States.

THE FIRST ANSWER? WELL, OF COURSE, Newt Gingrich would become Speaker of the House. That was essential.

The second came from Richard Nixon, who told Newt to build up a cadre of young Turks to take on the Republican moderates. Gingrich had been thinking about this kind of thing since he visited Verdun at fifteen, followed by an obsession with a character in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* who "plotted the social and economic trends" of his world and figured out how to manipulate mass psychology by inventing a fake religion. Political change was also the theme of his Ph.D. thesis. A big reader [continued on page 184]