

Will the Constitution Rise with Newt's Fall?



He lied." So said a close adviser to then-Speaker Newt Gingrich when I asked him how in the world Gingrich justified telling the media on the day of the infamous budget agreement that having the federal government fund 100,000 new public school teachers was "good for America." The response wasn't meant to be a criticism of Gingrich (after all, he was still in power) but rather a putdown of me for being so naive as to not appreciate the political realities of the moment.

The cock-sure attitude of that adviser is reflective of the culture that surrounded the Speaker: We know what we're doing and where we're going; we have a strategy for getting there; and, if you don't believe us, just look at all the energy and activity around us. Better still, listen to Newt speak. The man is inspiring. Indeed, many intelligent conservatives were captivated by Gingrich's oratory. And so were the liberal media and his political opponents. The leader of the "revolution" that brought a Republican majority in the House for the first time in half a century was held up by friend and foe alike as a political genius and uncompromising ideologue.

Alas, he was neither. Whatever the propriety of the funding for his college lecture series may have been, the lectures themselves revealed a third-rate scholar at best, who relied on rapid, breathless riffs that usually ended with declarative statements uttered in the tone of a question, to convince his audience that something profound had just been said. Something like, "So at the end of the day what we as Americans have to come to grips with is the notion that the liberal welfare state undermined not only the Roman Empire and, frankly, the former Soviet Union, but that Churchill, Roosevelt, and Reagan had remarkable character at a time when others were perfectly willing to accept Yalta?" His voice would come up a little at the end, as if to ask, Do you see now the insight I've provided? No matter if they made any sense, he could sure string those sentences together!

Which is why intelligent conservatives should have paid a little more attention to the substance, and no attention at all to the style, of Speaker Gingrich. Rarely did he speak about programs that needed to be cut back, much less eliminated. You never heard Gingrich invoke the Constitution in defense of limiting the role of the federal government. In fact, he didn't invoke the Constitution at all, because he agreed with his New Age gurus Alvin and Heidi Toffler that the Constitution was fine for the Industrial Age, but clearly not up to the Third Wave's Information Age. Besides, why should someone as brilliant as Newt Gingrich be constrained by some 200-year-old document?

As for Gingrich the ideologue, well, that myth served the media well because they could blame his bumbling tactics and pervasive unpopularity on his alleged ideological fervor for less government: Just goes to show that the American people want to avoid that kind of extremism. But even the Contract with America was

not an ideological document, having been more concerned with processes than substance. The Republican leadership in the 104th and 105th Congresses had an opportunity to present the case for a strictly limited national government under the Constitution and for a return to a true federalist system of competing state governments. With the ugly specter of racially motivated calls for "states' rights" behind us, the wisdom of empowering the states with the responsibility of governance in America is as strong today as it was at our nation's founding—stronger even, given that there are now 50 states to choose from rather than 13.

Without a constitutionally based philosophy of limited government, the GOP is drifting back into the me-too Rockefeller Republican days when it was a permanent minority. Why vote for 80 percent of a philosophy when the other party can give you 100 percent? Thus, the Democrats went into the recent election calling for more federal spending on education, a patient's bill of rights in dealing with HMOs, and a commitment to "save Social Security first." To which the Gingrich-led Republicans replied, "Yeah? Well, Bill Clinton had an affair with Monica Lewinsky!"

The only reason they even held their majority is because of the enormous advantage incumbents have today. A 98.6 percent reelection rate for incumbents in the 105th Congress is a travesty. We need term limits (which, by the way, U.S. Term Limits is starting to give us, seat by seat, through its term limit pledge), and we need to eliminate contribution limits if we're going to have competitive elections and get rid of rule by the political class and career legislators.

We know why government grows, why Thomas Jefferson said, "The natural progress of things is for government to gain ground and for liberty to yield." Concentrated benefits and diffused costs. The tyranny of the status quo. The public choice dynamic of the bureaucratic imperative to expand. We know why it happens. We also know—or should know—that constitutional constraints, rules of the game, are the only hope we have for limiting the federal government's power over our lives. A power that now enmeshes the national government in virtually every aspect of our lives, from education to health care to our retirement.

The departure of Newt Gingrich from Congress exposes a media-created ideological Potemkin village in the GOP, and that's all for the good. There is no philosophical commitment to small government in either party, and, without it, Washington, D.C., is an unconstrained engine for government growth. Those clear-eyed advocates of the limited government the Founders tried to give must now step forward to fill this dangerous ideological void. They start with an impressive asset: the Constitution of the United State of America.

—Edward H. Crane