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## Criticism of Gingrich heartens Republicans

New speaker makes the right enemies

by Ralph Z. Hallow; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The more the Democrats and the correspondents and the pundits castigate Newt Gingrich for not talking in the dignified generalities as befits a House speaker, the more convinced some Republicans are that their man is showing the right stuff.

"The only place Speaker Gingrich is hurting us is with hard-core Democrats who don't have the slightest interest in Republican ideas or principles," says Republican pollster Neil Newhouse. "It doesn't make a darned bit of difference how he plays to these voters."

Says Brad O'Leary, a Republican consultant: "Gingrich is a total ray of sunshine for those people who think that government has got out of control.

Finally you have someone who is standing up and telling it like it is. I know liberals - ordinary people, not your Beltway crowd - who say that's great."

That's not at all how the jawboning critics of Mr. Gingrich see it. Democratic strategist Bob Squier accuses him of McCarthyism, while USA Today doubts he "will grow into the job."

The Baltimore Sun warns that "Republicans who care about their agenda better calm Mr. Gingrich down." The Philadelphia Inquirer accuses him of "scorched-earth recklessness," and columnist Jack Germond slaps him with Washington's most dreaded label: "loose cannon."

For all this gunfire from the left, Mr. O'Leary sees evidence that Mr. Gingrich's verbal bombs have worked to

force President Clinton toward the center.

On Dec. 4, Mr. Gingrich told NBC's "Meet the Press" that Mr. Clinton is an exponent of the 1960s permissive counterculture - or else he wouldn't have appointed and continued to defend Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders. Five days later, Mr. Clinton found an excuse to fire her.

"The real shock for Washington is going to come when Clinton delivers his State of the Union address and liberals leak that Gingrich wrote it," Mr. O'Leary jokes.

Mr. Gingrich first upset his critics on Nov. 13, five days after Republicans swept to victory in elections for Congress, governorships and state legislatures.

He told The Washington Times he planned to have a voluntary school prayer amendment to the Constitution introduced in the House before July 4.

On ABC's "This Week," he said that welfare assistance should last two months, with charities and orphanages rather than government taking over more of government's burden.

The barrage of criticism that these remarks set off has not abated, but some analysts believe much of the public may have liked Mr. Gingrich's frankness.

Polls, in fact, suggest that in the month that followed Mr. Gingrich's prayer and orphanage remarks, Mr. Clinton suffered more damage than did Mr. Gingrich or

his party.

A Dec. 1-4 Times-Mirror poll of 1,511 adults found that since the election and Mr. Gingrich's elevation to national prominence, Mr. Clinton's job approval rating dropped to 41 percent from 48 percent. Meanwhile, the president's job disapproval rating rose to 47 percent from 40 percent.

Mr. Gingrich's own favorable rating leapt to 25 percent this month from only 14 percent in July, the Times-Mirror poll showed. His unfavorable rating, however, took a similar jump, to 18 percent from 12 percent four months ago.

As to whether Mr. Gingrich's mouth helped or hurt his party, the poll found the public's favorable view of the GOP actually rose to 67 percent from 63 percent in July, while his unfavorable rating declined to 27 percent from 33 percent.

The criticism of Mr. Gingrich intensified when, on Dec. 4, he cited as evidence of the Clintons' "counterculture" bent what he said were drug-related security-clearance delays for White House staff appointments.

Immediately, White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta accused Mr. Gingrich of acting like "an out-of-control radio talk-show host."

In fact, some conservatives and Republican supporters of Mr. Gingrich privately complained he was getting "off message" and should stick to items that Republican House candidates promised to accomplish in their "Contract With America."

Some of this friendly criticism came from those who later acknowledged that they didn't know the Contract includes a plan allowing states to limit welfare aid to young mothers and to use the savings to build orphanages instead.

Republican consultant Donald J. Devine, an occasional critic of Mr. Gingrich, says the incoming speaker's remark about former drug users in the

Clinton White House may have sounded imprudent. "But it focuses the debate once again on how bad this White House is," he says. "And judging from the election results, how can you lose on that?"

Many of the GOP's most experienced and successful strategists and campaign consultants have grown uncharacteristically quick to lose their tempers - not over Mr. Gingrich's "off-message" remarks, but over his critics.

"People who say Newt's mouth is undermining his credibility and the Republican agenda are acting on the same kind of mentality that kept us a minority for so long," says Republican strategist Ed Goeas. "The fact of the matter is that change in Congress is here and some people don't like it." In one view, Mr. Gingrich has not yet said anything to hurt his cause, but instead has built public understanding of the direction he wants to take his party, and hence the country.

Mr. Devine believes the orphanage remark, for which Mr. Gingrich "took his worst beating from Democrats and the liberal media," actually sets up a victory for conservatives.

"The next day I heard on my car radio National Public Radio interviewing the head of Boys Town," Mr. Devine says. "Gingrich managed to get the media to discuss how welfare changes can be handled by the states, with some aspects turned over to private charitable institutions. That's just what we want."