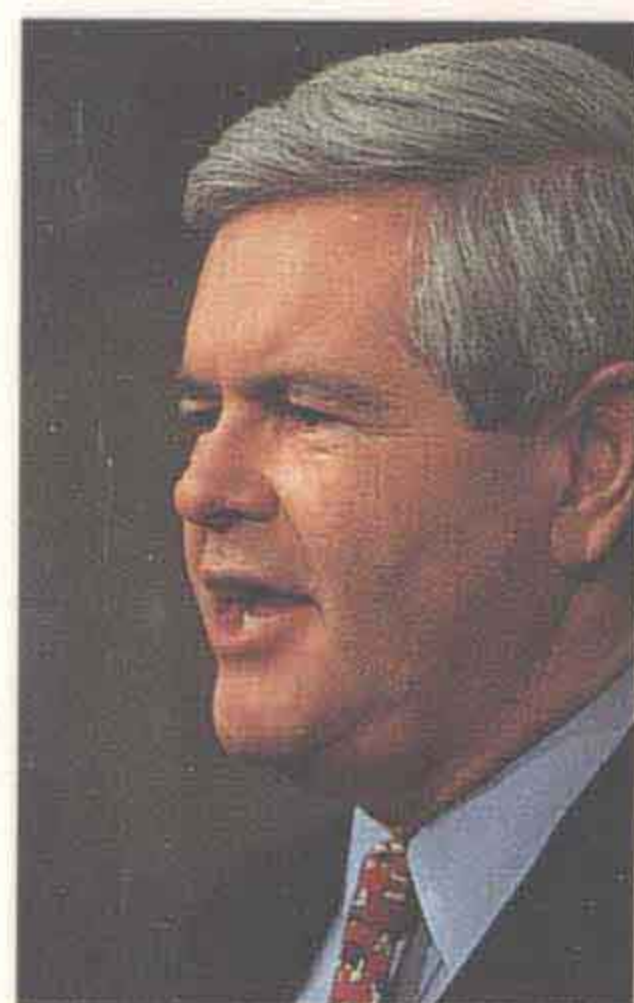


WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

SHOWDOWN



*The Struggle
Between the
Gingrich Congress
and the Clinton
White House*



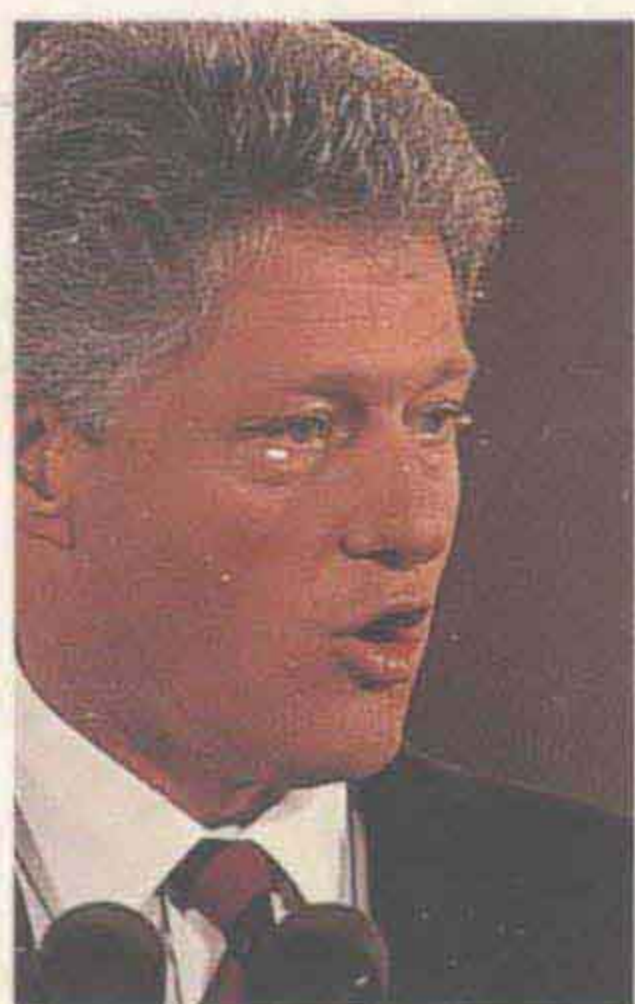
ELIZABETH DREW

[Drew] has eavesdropped on history in the making. . . .”

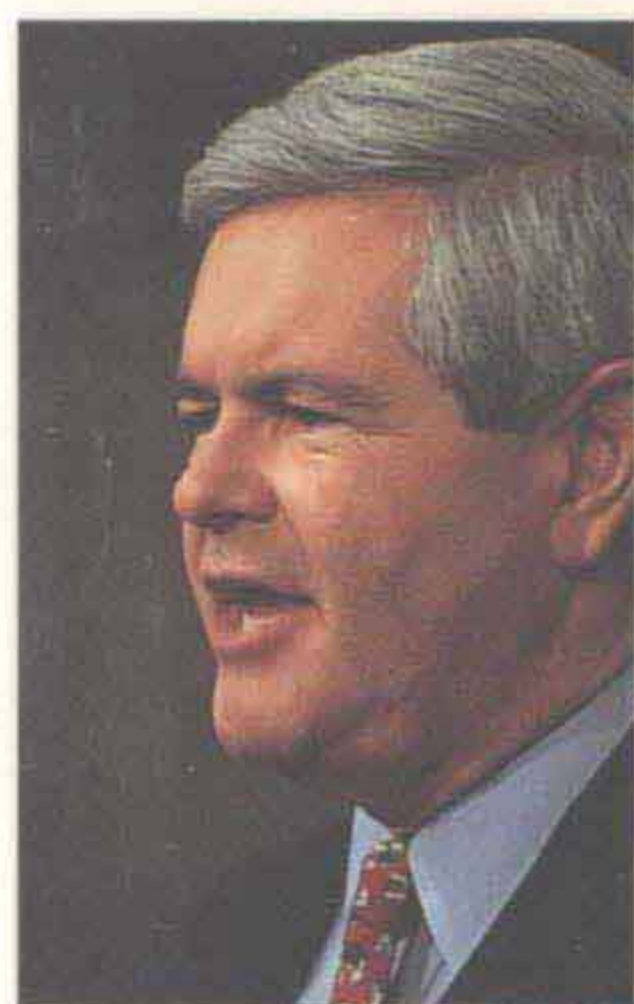
—Larry Bush, *San Francisco Chronicle*

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ELIZABETH DREW, the author of nine books, including *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency*, appears frequently on *Meet the Press* and other public affairs programs. She lives in Washington, D.C.



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SHOWDOWN

The Struggle Between
the Gingrich Congress
~~and~~
the Clinton White House

ELIZABETH DREW

A Touchstone Book
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Introduction

After the 1994 election, I believed that the country would be facing a struggle between the Presidency and the Congress—now to be dominated by different parties—greater than any we had seen in our lifetime. I understood enough about Newt Gingrich, the new House Speaker, to know that his leadership of the House would be anything but dull, and to take him seriously when he said that he wanted to destroy the welfare state.

At the same time, Bill Clinton, having suffered a huge blow in the mid-term election, had to revive his Presidency if he was to be a major force in the coming struggle, and anything but a crippled reelection candidate.

It was clear that there would be a contest over large questions about the role and direction of government, a debate of the sort that this country hadn't had for a long time. Programs that affected every American were up for grabs.

I thought it would be most interesting to be there, on the battlefield, talking to the contending forces, to see what they were thinking at any given moment, what premises they were acting on, what calculations—and miscalculations—they were making, what decisions were reached, and what they meant.

The House Republicans' assault on the Executive Branch was to be total, on every front, and without precedent. Doctrines long considered unassailable, and long-standing assumptions, would be challenged. The

total war was meant to scatter the enemy, divide its strength, confuse it. And for a while, this strategy worked.

What no one could have foreseen were the dimensions of the drama that would accompany these events, or the stunning switch in the situations of Clinton and Gingrich. Like a lot of other people, Gingrich underestimated Clinton's williness and also the power of the Presidency. The struggle turned out to be a Constitutional test as well as one over policy. The personal strengths and idiosyncrasies and defects of both Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton played a strong role in this, but so did the new political dynamics set forth by the changing nature of politics and by the struggle itself. Much of what happened was brand new. Experienced politicians were in places they had never been before. Observers had to discard old assumptions about politics and how the Congress worked.

The battle over this country's future turned out to be one of the most extraordinary stories I have ever covered in Washington. In this book, I set out to trace what happened and why, and what it meant to the lives of the citizens, and point to what it may mean for the future.

ELIZABETH DREW
Washington, D.C.
February 1996

I

OPENING DAY

“A Whole New Debate”

In the afternoon of January 4, opening day of the first session of the 104th Congress, Newt Gingrich, the newly sworn-in Speaker of the House, was striding across the Capitol Plaza, and giving a disquisition on power. It was one of the few bitterly cold days of Washington's winter, but Gingrich wasn't wearing an overcoat. Washington's biggest and newest star, trailed by family members, aides, and security detail and preceded by a covey of photographers walking backward, was in an understandably ebullient mood, happily acknowledging the greetings and congratulations of people he passed. He had great reason to be pleased: more than any other factors, his efforts and exceptional long-sightedness had brought about what had until very recently seemed most unlikely to almost everybody but him—the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives after forty years, and his installation as Speaker. Until that moment, Gingrich had been widely known as a “bomb thrower,” a man more interested in upsetting than observing the regular order, often to the distress of the more mannerly and traditional members of his own party. Next to the takeover of the House, the Republican recapture of the Senate after eight years seemed almost routine. But Gingrich had had a plan.

The opening day of the new Congress was being afforded all the excitement and attention of a Presidential Inauguration. The broadcast networks had brought their anchors to town. Tickets to the galleries—especially the House gallery—were precious items. Overflow crowds watched the

opening events on closed-circuit television in Statuary Hall. In a sign of the new times, radio talk show hosts—almost all of them conservatives and strong allies of Gingrich's and an important factor in his triumph—were given special quarters in the Capitol. Rush Limbaugh's substitute (the popular conservative talk show host was on vacation) worked out of Gingrich's own office. Lobbyists handing out cards crowded the hallways. In the Ways and Means Committee room in the Longworth House Office Building, some Houston oil men threw a lavish reception for their representative, Bill Archer, the new chairman of the tax-writing committee.

Now, shortly after four o'clock, Gingrich, universally referred to as "Newt," having slipped out of the Speaker's chair, was on his way to a reception in the Longworth House Office Building for the families of new Members of Congress, where the leading attraction, courtesy of Gingrich, was the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, stars of a highly popular children's program. Gingrich said he had asked his five-year-old nephew, Kevin, who was trailing along, whom he would most like to meet.

"I work on four models," Gingrich said, when I asked him what he expected to have accomplished by the end of this session of the Congress, "vision, strategy, tactics, and planning." He continued, "We may have a more limited success in terms of bills, but the whole language of politics will be in the midst of transformation. We'll be building a bow-wave of change." The former history professor cited as earlier examples the change that took place from the McKinley administration to Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressives, which led in time to the Wilson administration. Then came the New Deal, which Gingrich called "the most fertile period in our history." The conservative, even radical Gingrich revered Franklin Roosevelt. Gingrich said, "The real breaking point is when you find yourself having a whole new debate, with new terms. That's more important than legislative achievements." While Gingrich may have been trying to lower expectations of what he would achieve legislatively, it seemed also that this was the visionary in him speaking. "We'll know in six months whether we have accomplished that," Gingrich said. "Reagan didn't quite pull it off."

Gingrich soon reached the cafeteria in the Longworth Building, where a couple hundred people—parents and children—had gathered. Six Power Rangers (they weren't actually the ones that appear on television, but the children seemed none the wiser), dressed in white, black, blue, pink, red, and yellow space suits, were standing on a stage. Gingrich took his place beside them, and seemingly a million flashbulbs went off. Gingrich spoke to the crowd for only a couple of minutes, telling the assembled children that "You're probably more interested in them than in me," and he was soon out of the room, on his way back to the Capitol. Gingrich was rarely so laconic, but his schedule was crowded and little time was needed to accomplish his aim at the reception.

Resuming our conversation, Gingrich said, “I gave a paper to the freshmen in which I described the role of a leader. The first job of a leader is to set and create a focus; second, be a symbol—go places where the simple act of being there communicates. That’s what the Power Rangers was all about. It was a pro-family statement. Three, gather resources in the society at large. Four, using the resources of the federal government, govern. The traditional leader would focus on the fourth part. Reagan did the first part. F.D.R. did all four; he’s the greatest leader we ever had.”

In his talk to the freshmen on November 30, Gingrich, typically, gave them a list of books to read, most of them popular theories about the future and management, and said, also typically, “Economic opportunity and technological opportunity will be available if we can stop obsolete political elites and an obsolete welfare state from blocking the future and protecting the past.” He spoke, as he so often did, in global and visionary terms. Whether or not it all stood up to scrutiny, it was clear that Gingrich would be a different kind of congressional leader.

Asked if he was going to try to do all four, Gingrich replied breezily, “Sure. Because that’s the idealized leader. If you fall short you’re falling short of the ideal. If you think of yourself as a transformational leader, you have to try all four. F.D.R. left the Democrats such a powerful base that it could support them for a long time. Now you have a decaying structure and an obsolescent ideology.”

Along the way back, Gingrich obliged a couple from upstate New York who wanted to take a picture of him holding their small child. While doing so, he said to the gathering spectators, “His future is what it’s all about.”

When I asked him, as he resumed his march to the Capitol, what he was most worried about, Gingrich replied, “The biggest thing I’m worried about is being blindsided, which by definition is something you didn’t think of.” Gingrich tried to think of everything. “After that,” he continued, “is the sheer scale of what we’re trying to do. Third, the day-to-day job of creating a new order. Fourth, the established order’s ability to thwart things, day by day. It’s everything from the *New York Times* editorial board, the network executives, the managing editor of *Time*, who was just here.” Gingrich was sensitive to criticism, and he spoke and dealt not in terms of people who disagreed with him but of enemies, including “the established order” and “the forces of the status quo.”

As he made his way through a large crowd back to room H 209, just off the House floor—the large ceremonial office recently vacated by former Democratic Speaker Thomas Foley, who had been defeated for reelection—where he would pose, along with his wife, Marianne, for three hours for pictures with new members and their families, Gingrich remarked, “I’ll be doing hours and hours of pictures. This is my point about symbolism. It creates a web.”

Gingrich's speech to the House, after taking the gavel at 1:30 P.M., had surprised a lot of people, but not those familiar with his thinking. (In the past, Congress usually met only pro forma until the President gave his State of the Union address, but Gingrich wasn't waiting for anyone.) While many interpreted Gingrich's praise in his speech of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party for its accomplishments on civil rights—"The greatest leaders in fighting for an integrated America in the twentieth century were in the Democratic Party"—as a magnanimous reaching out, it was, in fact, a reflection of Gingrich's pragmatic long-term strategy of trying to win over more of the black vote to the Republican Party. Vin Weber, a former Republican Member of Congress and close friend and adviser of Gingrich's, said a few days later, "Newt has always believed that politically we need to break into the black community." This was, of course, a strongly held and more openly expressed view of Jack Kemp's. Gingrich had once been a Rockefeller Republican, in part because of his belief that the party should be more committed to civil rights. During the 1980s, Gingrich had ordered up a study by the National Republican Congressional Committee, whose purpose was to elect Republicans to the House, of black attitudes toward the Republican Party. Weber said, "The data showed us that there was a strong basis for a bigger black vote for the Republican Party. The line about civil rights wasn't a throwaway line. It's a vision he has held for fifteen years. How well developed that vision is, I don't know."

Gingrich's speech to the House lasted forty-three minutes rather than the fifteen predicted by his press secretary, Tony Blankley. As usual, Gingrich spoke from notes and winged much of the speech. Gingrich was no great orator, and he was normally garrulous, so his speech was rambling, as most Gingrich speeches were—but effective nonetheless, touching on several themes he had been developing. Another point of the speech, in which Gingrich said, "The balanced budget is the right thing to do, but it doesn't, in my mind, have the moral urgency of coming to grips with what's happening to the poorest Americans," was, Weber said, to show that a conservative leader was saying that domestic policy is as important as macroeconomics. "How can we not decide," Gingrich continued, "that this is a moral crisis equal to segregation, equal to slavery, and how can we not insist that every day we take steps to do something?" He stamped certain issues which Republicans as a whole had never cared much about—health care, the cities, education—as now matters of their concern. This was an important, even historic, statement—if it was genuine. Weber said that Gingrich was proceeding on the theory that unless the conservative party offered an alternative domestic vision to that of the liberal party, it couldn't be competitive. Weber said, "He wants the country to think of the Republican Party as attacking social ills. If it does, the realignment is complete."

Gingrich's going on to say that "If you cannot afford to leave the public