

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Newt Gingrich

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(b. 1943)

A member of Congress for 20 years, Republican Newt Gingrich was speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1995 to 1999. Regarded as the chief architect of the Contract with America, he was also considered a major force behind the 1994 victory that established Congress's first Republican majority in 40 years.

From "Gingrich, Newt(on Leroy)." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001.

Newt Gingrich was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and spent his childhood on military bases in Europe and the United States. Gingrich earned a Bachelor's degree in history from Emory University in 1965 and a Ph.D. in modern European history in 1971 from Tulane University. He taught history at West Georgia College during the 1970s.

Interested in politics since he was a young man, Gingrich joined the Republican Party and made two unsuccessful runs for the Congress of the United States in 1974 and 1976. He was elected to the U.S. House as a representative for Georgia in 1978 on a conservative platform advocating lower taxes.

Active in federal committees, Gingrich co-founded the Congressional Military Reform Caucus and the Congressional Space Caucus in 1981. In 1983 he founded the Conservative Opportunity Society, a group of young Republicans in Congress that became known for holding long speeches on the floor of the House, mostly after hours. In 1987 Gingrich initiated ethics charges against Speaker of the House Jim Wright that eventually led to Wright's resignation. In 1989, when Wyoming representative Dick Cheney became secretary of defense, Gingrich succeeded Cheney as House minority whip.

Gingrich was recognized for his single-minded pursuit of conservative ideals, a quality that invoked the ire of opponents as effectively as it helped unify political factions of fiscal conservatives. He advocated shrinking the size of the federal government in his "Contract with America," which summarized Republican proposals. This document was widely publicized and contributed to the results of the 1994 elections, when Republicans gained control of both the House and the Senate—the first time they controlled the House since 1954. Gingrich was

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sworn in as Speaker of the United States House of Representatives at the start of the 104th Congress in January 1995, replacing Democrat Thomas Foley. The "Contract with America" became the Republican Party agenda for the first 100 days of the 1995 congressional session, during which Republicans introduced bills related to welfare reform, the federal budget, crime, congressional term limits, defense, taxation, social security, and other areas.

The Republicans had mixed success in enacting their agenda as described in the "Contract with America." The presidential line-item veto became law in 1996, but legislation limiting congressional terms was defeated. Other issues such as welfare reform, social security, and tax cuts were the focus of a struggle between the president and Congress to balance the budget for the 1996 fiscal year. The budget struggle led to two partial closures of the federal government because money was unavailable for government operations. Gingrich worked with President Bill Clinton, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, and other congressional leaders to negotiate a compromise, which was reached in April 1996.

In 1995 Gingrich published two books—one fiction, *1945*, with William Forstchen, and one nonfiction, *To Renew America*. In 1998 he wrote another nonfiction book, entitled *Lessons Learned the Hard Way*. In 1996 the House Ethics Committee mildly reprimanded Gingrich for not registering his political action committee (PAC) with the Federal Election Commission. In January 1997 the House voted to reprimand Gingrich for ethics violations that included giving the Ethics Committee false information and using tax-exempt donations for political activities. As the first Speaker in history to be disciplined by the House, Gingrich was fined \$300,000. He was reelected as speaker later that month, but he resigned from that position and from the House altogether in the wake of Republican losses in the November 1998 elections.