

Posted on Wed, Jan. 11, 2006

Gingrich: Scandals threat to GOP

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STAR-TELEGRAM AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN -- Former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich said Monday that Tom DeLay's ongoing legal battles coupled with the recent scandals that brought down two of his lobbyist associates threaten to drown out the Republican Party's message in this year's congressional elections.

But Gingrich, the architect of the GOP's 1994 takeover of Congress, also said during a visit to Austin that Democrats are poorly positioned to take advantage of the drumbeat of bad news raining down on DeLay, who is under indictment on money-laundering charges stemming from fund-raising activities in 2002.

DeLay, a Sugar Land Republican, is also a close associate of Washington lobbyists Jack Abramoff and Michael Scanlon, each of whom have pleaded guilty to a variety of corruption charges that are expected to ensnare several members of Congress.

"I have said very bluntly, we have got to be the party of reform," Gingrich told reporters after speaking to the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation. "We have got to clean up this mess. We have got to take the Abramoff revelations very seriously.

"We have eight or nine months to prove we are the party of reform. If we fail to prove we are the party of reform, we'll have a tough election."

Scanlon, a former congressional aide to DeLay, pleaded guilty in November to conspiring to bribe another member of Congress. And last week, Abramoff, Scanlon's former partner who has close ties to DeLay, pleaded guilty to federal conspiracy, mail fraud and tax-evasion charges and agreed to testify about members of Congress who are suspected of corruption.

Gingrich, a Georgia Republican who presided over the House from 1995 through 1998, was quick to point out his belief that DeLay will be cleared of the charges brought by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle, a Democrat. But he also said DeLay's decision to relinquish his hopes of regaining his post of House majority leader was for the best.

DeLay himself has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing and is seeking re-election to the House seat he has held for 11 terms. Three Republicans are challenging him in the March 7 primary, and former U.S. Rep. Nick Lampson, one of the Democrats ousted in the 2003 DeLay-engineered congressional redistricting effort, hopes to challenge him in November.

Gingrich said Republicans can weather any setbacks by continuing to stoke their low-tax, responsible-government message. Democrats, he said, will be seen as out-of-touch liberals.

"I think it's very hard for [House Democratic leader] Nancy Pelosi to sell a 'contract with San Francisco' as though it's a contract with America," Gingrich said in reference to his own Contract With America that helped Republicans take over Congress 12 years ago. "The Democrats are simply positioned way too far to the left. I think the Democrats actually have a bigger leadership challenge than the Republicans."

Portraying Republicans as reformers will be seen as a sham by most voters, said Bill Burton, communications director for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

"The Republican Congress [has] been shamed by Democrats into joining the call for lobbying and ethics reform, but after a decade of open-door policies to the special interests, it's difficult to imagine them suddenly supporting meaningful reform," Burton said. Meanwhile, two Washington-based interest groups will begin airing TV ads in the Houston area calling on DeLay to resign his House seat immediately. DeLay has said he intends to wage a vigorous campaign to win his 12th term in Washington.

The organizations -- Campaign for America's Future and the Public Campaign Action Fund -- said they want to educate the public while pushing for stiffer regulations on campaign money raising and lobbying.

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