

# The world according to Gingrich

*Lessons Learned the Hard Way. A Personal Report.*

By Newt Gingrich  
Harper Collins, 1998  
229 pages

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

When the second most powerful official in American government writes a book, it is wise to read it. This is especially true when it is an autobiographical account by an aspiring president. The book exhibits a battle-worn author, more careful than he used to be about where he steps.

What lessons has House Speaker Newt Gingrich learned during 19 years in Washington? One can't tell from the platitudinous chapter headings like "Keep your Eye on the Ball." But readers will find some useful lessons illustrated by interesting stories.

One lesson is the difference between public opinion and public judgment. Mr. Gingrich explains that public opinion is what people tell pollsters without much thought.

Public judgment is what develops when people pay attention to and discuss an issue over time. He thinks politicians should be guided by the latter, pointing to the 1993-94 debate over the Clinton health care plan as an example of how supportive public opinion changes upon more deliberative judgment.

Mr. Gingrich cites a difference between what U.S. politicians say to foreign and American audiences. When traveling in Russia, Korea or Japan, they urge "free markets and government withdrawal from subsidies." Back in America, however, they largely ignore such advice. This is a canny observation. Yet Mr. Gingrich blurs it by adding that it's only "liberals" who engage in such double-talk.

Another lesson is the difference between Democrats and Republicans. Democrats, Mr.

Gingrich explains, are a "traditional political party" seeking to acquire and use power. Republicans, by contrast, are "a party of policy" composed of individuals who "want to break down the old system" and return power to the people. It is not clear whether Mr. Gingrich really believes this, or is just being jokingly partisan.

As in his previous books, Mr. Gingrich tries to offer fresh, improved policy proposals. Yet this time he seems restrained. He says he is "intrigued" by various tax reform plans. But he avoids the current debate about income vs. consumption taxes and limits his support to a peacetime ceiling on taxes as a percent of national income.

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*Mr. Gingrich is more careful than before about where he steps.*

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The speaker agrees that something should be done about Social Security's looming insolvency but offers no suggestions. Instead, he proposes an "intergenerational dialogue" to discuss the problem, and a change in law to treat employer-paid Social Security tax as income to the individual so people know they're being taxed.

He also advocates using the anticipated federal budget surpluses "to redeem the Social Security bonds." Yet this is mere sophistry. A few months ago, the Congressional Budget Office projected a \$69 billion "surplus" in 2002. But that surplus will exist only because Social Security taxes paid in 2002 will be \$139 billion more than annual benefits. That \$139 billion will be used to buy Treasury securities for the Social Security trust fund, of which \$70 billion will pay for other federal programs and \$69 billion to re-

tire public debt. Thus, not a single dollar of surplus will be available to enable Social Security "trustees" to sell (i.e., redeem) their existing stock of Treasury securities.

Mr. Gingrich does best when he discusses political change. He explains that leaders must adapt their strategy and style depending upon whether they serve during "ordinary conditions" or during a "revolution." Leaders who rely on old-order information and thinking in trying to bring about a transformation inevitably make the wrong decisions and do the wrong things, he adds.

The weakest parts of the book are where Mr. Gingrich tries to rationalize his own mistakes. For instance, he chronicles the federal shutdown in December 1995 and admits he lost the political fight. But he attributes the Clinton administration's victory to two factors — innate press bias and the influence of a White House media blitz.

Mr. Gingrich has learned the wrong lesson. The Republicans lost because they recessed Congress for 11 days, during which time the White House could very plausibly argue that the shutdown was prolonged by congressional inaction.

In one revealing passage, Mr. Gingrich puts a finger on his own problem.

"It is always dangerous," he says, "to try to impose your will on reality, because reality has a terrible way of biting back." Mr. Gingrich has been bitten a lot, but clearly wants to remain a high government official. It seems likely he will continue stumbling over the gap between his perceived world and the real world.

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