

Gingrich speaks: Will Demos take page from Reagan's book?

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Americans, says Newt Gingrich, are disgusted with negative political campaigns and attack ads — and ready for a change.

“It’s time for someone to step up and be an adult,” the former Speaker of the U.S. House told an overflow crowd at Furman’s Younts Conference Center October 11, emphasizing the need for candidates who are willing to reject nastiness and instead discuss issues directly and openly. “The opportunity for someone to do so is enormous.”

Will Gingrich himself enter the fray? He is frequently mentioned as a likely candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008, but when asked during his Furman appearance if he planned to run, he told the press, “I don’t know.”

One thing he was willing to do, however, was predict potential campaign slogans the Democrats might use in 2008: “Had Enough?” or “We Can Do Better.”

Although the next presidential election is three years off, Gingrich cited President Bush’s low approval ratings and the public’s growing concern about such issues as terrorism, the war in Iraq and the problems generated by Hurricane Katrina as potential sticking points for the president. Gingrich speculated that the Democrats might well take a page from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 race against Jimmy Carter and build a case for change by capitalizing on the public’s restlessness and concern over domestic and international crises.

Pointing to Bush’s slipping popularity and insular style and the current shakiness of his conservative base, Gingrich said the administration brought many of its problems upon itself.

“You can’t lead with just a handful of people in the White House,” he said. “You need input and openness to ideas, which can’t be parsed out by five people in the White House.

“You need dissent and turmoil, even though that drives the White House staff crazy. But Congress is designed to be co-equal with the president, even with the resulting tension between the legislative and executive branches. What emerges from that conflict and disagreement is better government and legislation, which Bush doesn’t seem to understand” — and Reagan, whose name Gingrich often invoked during his remarks, did.

Gingrich spent much of the evening recounting the history and successes of the Republican Revolution of 1994, which he orchestrated. The immediate result of the stunning GOP surge from minority to majority party was the “Contract With America” and the passage of legislation dealing with such conservative touchstones as welfare reform, tax cuts, a strong defense and a balanced budget.

Among the keys to the Republican resurgence, said Gingrich, were long-term planning and a consistent, upbeat message.

“We were standing on Reagan’s shoulders,” he said, adding that Reagan modeled his approach to conservatism after that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt — a Democrat. The Gipper’s sunny disposition and positive message resonated with the public and contrasted sharply, Gingrich said, to the old, traditional view of the GOP as “cheap, negative and pessimistic.”

The former congressman's visit was sponsored by the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership.