

Former Speaker of the House addresses crowded Younts Center

By Jessica Taylor
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If you ask former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich about his future plans, he'll wave you off, emphasizing his ideas and issues over speculation and theories.

Gingrich's October 12th speech "Revisiting the Republican Revolution: Ten Years of Republican Rule" was one way to spread some of those ideas while not ruling out a 2008 presidential run.

Sponsored by The Riley Institute, Gingrich spoke to an overflowing Younts Conference Center crowd of over 400 students and community members about his tenure as Speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999. He also recounted the history behind his brainchild, "The Contract with America," that helped Republicans seize control of Congress for the first time in 40 years.

A panel discussion followed between John J. Pitney, Jr., professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, and Danielle Vinson, professor of political science at Furman. Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean Thomas Kazee moderated the discussion.

"Furman has a particular interest in looking at the Contract and how it worked to give [students] a sense of practical politics and talk about the history [Republicans] helped make and write," Gingrich said in an interview before the event about his decision to speak at Furman.

"You can't escape the things that will affect you," he added.

In his address, Gingrich called the 1994 elections "the most systematic and thought-out campaign in American history."

The GOP strategy, which had been in the works since 1978, was to target new voters while simultaneously investing in all 435 seats rather than only those considered winnable.

"We had to stretch the Democrats so thin that they couldn't focus on key races," Gingrich said. "If we ran on ideas, we would win, but if we ran an anti-Clinton campaign we would have lost."

The outcome was a positive campaign founded on the contract that resulted in unprecedented control of the legislative branch for Republicans.

"The contract's purpose was to take even candidates with little skill and give them talking points on the balanced budget, welfare and tax reform," said Gingrich. "We created an educated moderate conservatism based on FDR and said to the American people 'This is our collective future.'"

Although Gingrich is the name and face most identified with the party's evolution, he was quick to point out the policies that emerged from his career that were most important to him.

"I didn't care less about the speakership," he emphasized. "I wanted to know where America was going." He cited passing a balanced budget as the proudest moment of his congressional career.

In August 1997, during the Clinton impeachment trial, Gingrich believed his party's period of creativity ended—and the outlook is bleak. "The Republican Party is facing an identity crisis within the next four to five years," he said.

As the legislative and the executive branch find themselves at odds over judicial nominations and anti-torture restrictions, Gingrich warned that it is Congress's failure to exert its independence that could endanger Republican seats in upcoming elections.

"Congress serves its districts as coequals; no Congress serves a president," he said. "The tension is designed to be deliberate. Out of the conflict we should get better legislation."

In the panel discussion, Vinson agreed, pointing to better GOP communication techniques after the 1994 elections that now seem to have vanished. That failure could be ripe for the Democrats' taking in 2006, she warned.

"For Republicans, the party leaders had to come up with a message and figure out how to make it the common message," said Vinson. "Democrats must set their own vision that Democrats can get behind."

The problem lies in setting forth that message, said Pitney, and cautioned that the "Democrats must convince the public not just what they're against but what they're for."

But is Gingrich the person to steer the Republicans back on course in 2008?

"We need years of talking about the issues that matter," he would only say. "Someone needs to talk about these issues before the next election."