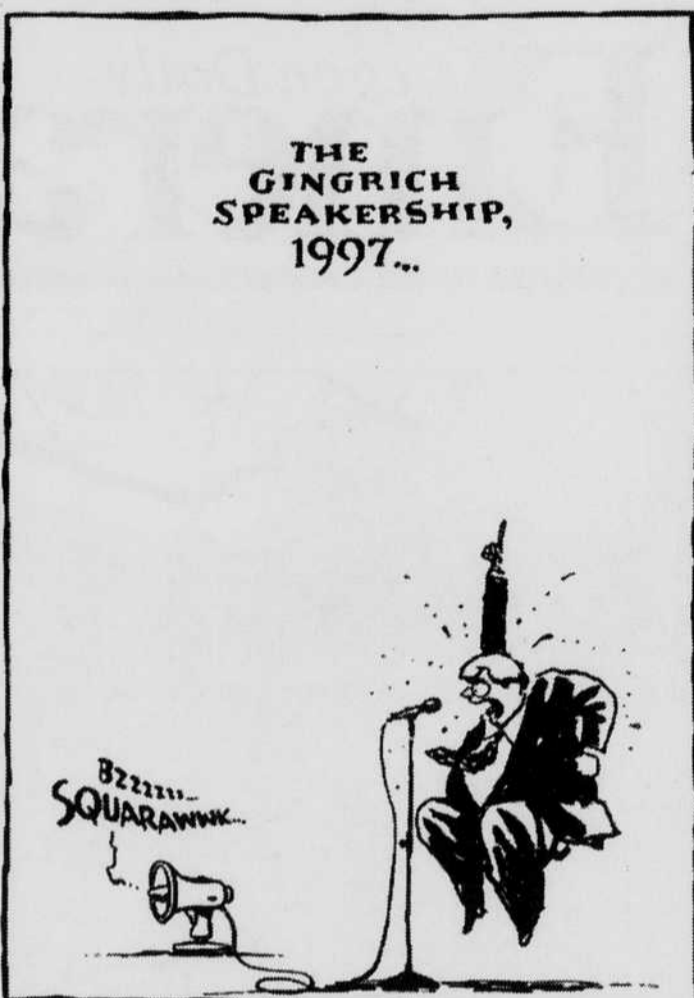


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OPINION

editorials, letters, commentary and perspective

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Ethics violations: Who cares?

Gingrich's mishandled money does not deserve the attention it is getting

For everyone who got a little sick about having to hear politicians squabble back and forth over issues of political integrity and ethics, here is a little bad news. It's about to get even worse. This is because the hearings on Newt Gingrich's status as House speaker are under way and are likely to spark even more debates on political ethics for months to come.

Most people probably secretly suspect that politics and ethics have nothing to do with each other these days. However, politicians in Washington insist on keeping up the facade that they are dedicated to fighting corruption and are prepared to punish any wrongdoers, be they Republican or Democrat. Enter the Newt Gingrich situation.

For those people who don't know what is going on, Speaker Gingrich has been charged with violating campaign contribution rules and is now in jeopardy of being forced to step down as speaker. Gingrich has admitted to violating House rules concerning a college course he taught using tax-deductible contributions. Today, after years of tedious investigation, the House will finally reach a decision on what Gingrich's fate will be.

Whatever the result of the vote is, one thing is clear. People couldn't care less. Illegal campaign funds received from Honduras didn't hamper President Clinton's bid for president, and it is doubtful people care much more about the current Gingrich situation.

The reason is quite simple. Years of political scandals from Watergate to the Iran-Contra hearings have taught Americans a plain fact of life. Politicians are hard to trust. We know they lie, cheat and even steal, so the news that Gingrich violated some campaign contribution rule just doesn't excite people that much. Sure, if Gingrich had been in on the Kennedy assassination or was hiding aliens in his bedroom closet, people would care. But misusing tax-deductible contributions? Who cares?

And further, who should care? Is how Gingrich spent a couple million bucks really the most pressing issue facing America today? I doubt very many people elected their political leaders so those leaders could spend their days investigating the financial status of fellow congressmen.

With all the attention the Gingrich investigation is getting, you would think it was the most pressing issue facing America. More important than the multi-trillion dollar debt we are running up every year. More important than the fact that Social Security is going bankrupt. Maybe even more important than fixing our broken welfare system. When you look at all the problems we have to address, it seems pretty hard to justify spending so much time and effort investigating the actions of one man.

Sure, a lot of people would love to see Gingrich step down as House Speaker, but not because of his use of campaign funds. It is because of his political ideology and agenda. After all, we elect our leaders not just for what they stand for but what they are planning to do. People care what Newt Gingrich plans to do about welfare, how he plans on balancing the budget and where he stands on the abortion issue. They don't care what he did with such and such amount of money that violated some rule that most people don't even understand.

In the end, these investigations have nothing to do with ethics or integrity; they have to do with pure politics. The Democrats want to weaken the Republican majority in the House, and what better way to do that than go after the head, Newt Gingrich. It is the exact same thing the Republicans tried, unsuccessfully, in attacking Clinton over Whitewater and illegal campaign contributions. Not only are most of these charges petty, they are in fact dishonest because while they appear to be efforts to rid Congress of corruption, they are really nothing more than partisan politics at its worst.

This is certainly not to say we should just let politicians get away with breaking finance rules left and right. If we really are concerned with how politicians are using their money, set up a non-partisan committee to evaluate the situation and punish those in violation of the law. That way we don't get these political witch-hunts in which politicians seek out dirt on their opponents in order to discredit them and further their own political agendas. Until this happens, situations like the Gingrich fiasco will continue to bog down Congress and annoy the rest of us.

Brian Diamond is an editorial editor for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.



All thumbs



To the U.S. Supreme Court: Rejecting anything because it was 12 minutes late seems too rigid. But when that "thing" is a legal petition submitted to the Supreme Court last month regarding the overdrawn Skinner Butte cross battle, then the decision to reject is definitely a mistake. Now the war over the cross' existence on public land will surely go on in litigation, and none of us want that.

To a shorter winter break: After four-week Christmas' breaks the last two years, the three weeks we had off this winter seemed meager at best. Here's to a return of the four-week vacation. After the usual marathon fall term, we all need it.

To the men's basketball team: The 17th-ranked Ducks are 10-0 as they enter Pac-10 play, their best start in 22 years. Led by steady seniors like point-guard Kenya Wilkins, the team seems to have more than just momentum behind them; they also have confidence. Newly acquired attributes like these can only serve the Ducks well against upcoming opponents like Arizona and Stanford.

To the Oregon Legislature: In a recent *Oregonian* survey, 55 of 68 legislators who responded said they support Gov. Kitzhaber's plan to freeze college tuition. With signs like this, the future may not be as gloomy as it seems.

Oregon Daily Emerald

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