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# national news

## Eye on Newt

*Gay and lesbian leaders join campaign to shadow Newt Gingrich in his Atlanta district*

by Richard Shumate

**W**henever Newt Gingrich steps into public view in his suburban Atlanta district, there's someone in his shadow—watching, asking questions, even tape-recording what he says to document his many utterances.

But this surveillance doesn't come from the media. It is being done by Newt Watch, a loose coalition of leaders of progressive groups from around the Atlanta metropolitan area who dog the speaker's every step.

Leaders of gay and lesbian organizations have joined the coalition, although the organizations themselves haven't officially endorsed the effort. Newt Watchers include local representatives of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, GAPAC (Georgia's gay and lesbian political lobby), the Cobb Citizens Coalition (formed to fight Cobb County's discriminatory resolution) and even Digital Queers.

"Every day, Newt says something that really outrages mainstream America," says GAPAC executive director Larry Pellegrini. "We need to document that."

This past winter, as Gingrich came back to town to hold a series of town hall meetings, Newt Watchers sat in the audience asking pointed questions. At his final appearance, they managed to turn almost the entire focus to gay and lesbian issues.

Newt Watchers have also followed the speaker to what are normally benign appearances before constituent groups, such as an appearance at a Marietta synagogue attended by a group of Jewish Newt Watchers.

Perhaps the biggest splash came April 12, when the coalition crashed a reception at a suburban hotel where Gingrich was being honored as citizen of the year by the Georgia March of Dimes. The ceremony was being held on the 50th anniversary of the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who helped found the March of Dimes. Protesters carried signs saying "Newt is no FDR."

Gay activist Floyd Taylor, who had sparred with Gingrich at earlier appearances, managed to get close enough at a pre-ceremony cocktail reception to run into Gingrich.

"He looked at me and said, 'It's good to see you again.' He apparently didn't remember that the last time he saw me, I asked him to quit playing God and start acting like Jesus, to let the healing begin," says Taylor.

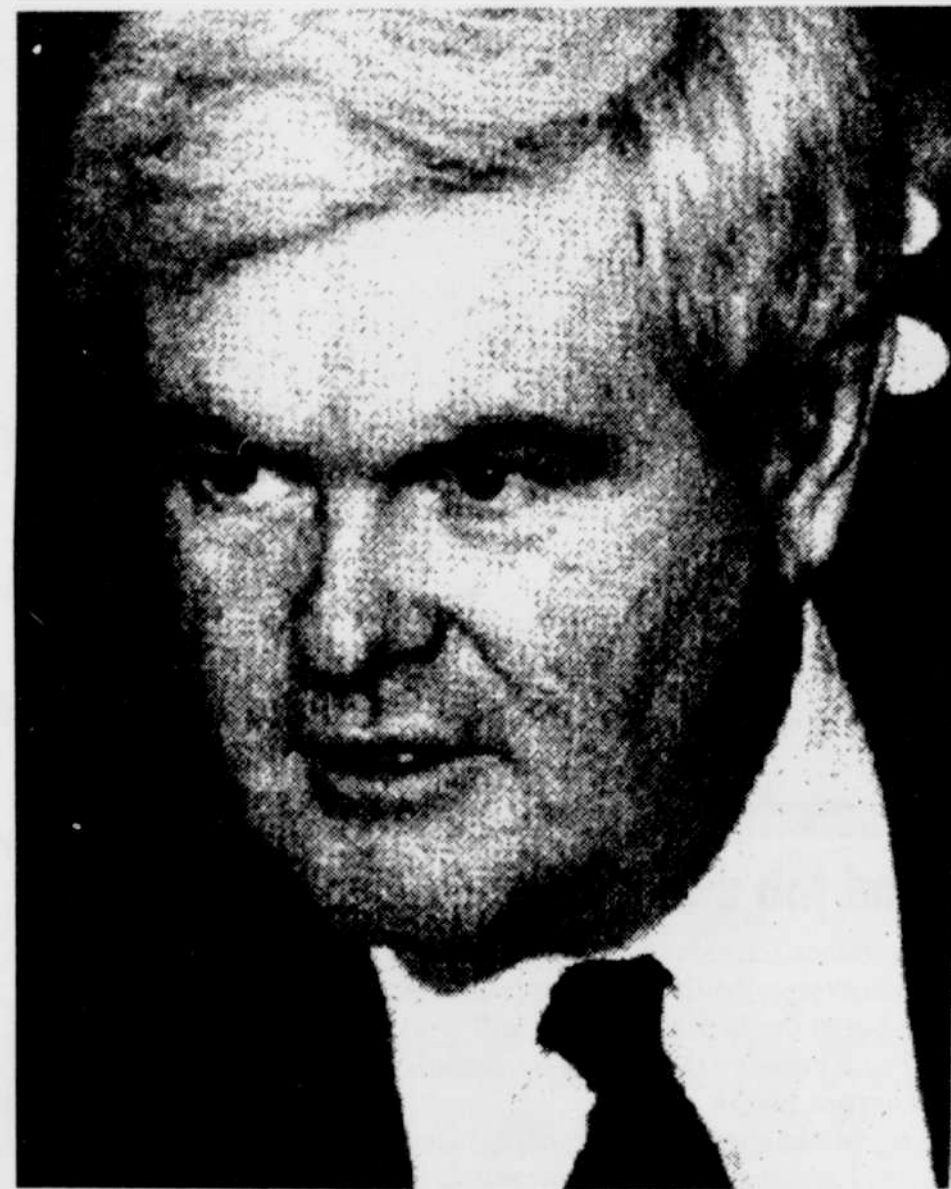
That night, a clearly annoyed Gingrich challenged his critics to come up with constructive ideas, instead of just lambasting his. So the Newt Watchers fired off a letter, accepting the challenge and asking for a face-to-face meeting to outline their ideas about what a contract with America should look like.

Whether that meeting will take place remains to be seen. Gingrich's local press secretary, Alan Lipsett, says leaders of Newt Watch will first have

to sit down with the speaker's local staff before any meeting will be scheduled with Gingrich. And, Lipsett notes, the Newt Watchers have already had plenty of contact with Gingrich at the various meetings they have attended.

"It's not like they haven't been allowed a chance to speak," says Lipsett.

Organizers of Newt Watch, who represent a variety of feminist, consumer, labor, sexual minority rights, abortion rights, labor and environmental groups, insist that the effort is about more than just annoying the speaker or making his public appearances uncomfortable. The main idea behind the campaign is to demonstrate to Gingrich that opposition to portions of the new Republican agenda exists even in the heavily GOP suburbs



Newt Gingrich

that make up his district on Atlanta's north side.

"Over the course of the next year, we hope to build a coalition of groups that is sizeable," says Frank Jackalone, Southeast regional director for Public Citizen (the consumer group founded by Ralph Nader), who is spearheading Newt Watch. "We think we might force him to the middle or at least convince him of the possibility of an election challenge by a moderate Republican or an independent."

Public Citizen, in fact, is so dedicated to this new Newt-watching function that in February it moved its regional headquarters from downtown Atlanta to Gingrich's district.

Mimicking Gingrich's victory tour around his district earlier this year, the Newt Watch coalition is now planning its own series of town hall meetings covering topics such as campaign finance reform, abortion rights, and the influence of the Christian right. And a special invitation to those forums will be sent to a certain big-domed building in Washington.

"We will give Newt the opportunity to respond," says Jackalone.