

# Gingrich holds 'wake' for Conservative Revolution

by Jeffrey Steinberg

One year ago, House Speaker Newt Gingrich's (R-Ga.) own private think-tank, the Progress and Freedom Foundation (PFF), held a conference in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. It was a triumphal affair, a mini-Nuremberg rally, celebrating the recent congressional sweep by the Conservative Revolution wing of the Republican Party. Speaker after speaker, led by pop-cult futurists and Gingrich "spiritual advisers" Alvin and Heidi Toffler, proclaimed their loyalty to the mythical post-industrial "Third Wave." Even Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) proclaimed the Republican Party "the party of the Third Wave."

Tobacco baron and former George Bush White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray presided over a table full of Seagrams executives, who, along with Gray, had bankrolled the affair. When Gingrich arrived, late in the proceedings, he was greeted by thunderous applause. The crowd even made a serious effort to follow the strained logic of Gingrich's rambling speech—even the part about the magical future in which every ghetto kid would have his own laptop computer and could escape the tenements for a front-row seat in cyberspace. Kooky? Yes. But Newt and company were on top of the world.

What a difference a year makes.

On Jan. 22, 1996, the PFF sponsored another conference in the same hotel. The event had all the makings of a wake. The deceased? The much ballyhooed Conservative Revolution.

Gone were the Tofflers. Gone was any mention of the Third Wave. When Gingrich briefly showed up to deliver a canned luncheon speech, he drew groans from some of his own troops when he tried to defend the Tofflers. After fumbling a tough question on the budget negotiations from David Gergen, Gingrich politely excused himself and made for the nearest exit.

From beginning to end, it was a "tough love" session. Former Rep. Vin Weber (R-Minn.), now a top official at the PFF, bluntly admitted, during a morning panel appropriately titled "In Search of the New Majority," that the Republicans had been outclassed by President Clinton throughout the recent budget debate. GOPAC (another Gingrich front group) pollster Frank Luntz went even further, acknowledging that the "Revolution" was on the ropes, and desperately needed an infusion of new, positive ideas and, yes, a new

lexicon of buzzwords. Andrew Kohut, president of the Gallup Organization, politely informed the assembled revolutionists that the American public still believes that the federal government has a role to play. They are not, he asserted, "with the revolution."

After that, there was no end to the self-flagellation. Weber admitted that he finds the seven-year balanced-budget plan "dangerous," and that the Republican efforts to exploit Whitewater are counterproductive.

## A second Clinton term

In the afternoon panel, titled "The Future of the Revolution," Arianna Huffington, the millionairess airhead socialite, practically mugged former Reagan Office of Management and Budget Director James Miller when he tried to cheer up the crowd with a string of trite war analogies. She equated the revolution with a chronic alcoholic showing up for his first AA meeting. "If we don't start by admitting the problem," she shrieked, "this revolution won't be saved!" Her solution? Stop whining and, above all else, stop sounding like a bunch of mean-spirited accountants. She bluntly predicted Bill Clinton's reelection, and bitterly complained that the President had hijacked all of their "best ideas."

Grover Norquist, a Mont Pelerin Society/Lord William Rees-Mogg clone, was about the only voice in the crowd who was satisfied with the state of the revolution. Norquist was blunt that the Republicans had already succeeded in snatching \$1.5 trillion in federal spending. "We're lucky there were no snipers sent up onto the roof to shoot us," he told the handful of die-hards who remained.

The conference sponsors had hoped to liven up the day by bringing in three prominent international "revolutionaries" to flank Gingrich at the luncheon head table. John Redwood, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's rising Tory star, and Preston Manning, leader of Canada's post-conservative Reform Party, did their best to remoralize attendees, and a TV audience watching the luncheon on C-SPAN.

But Japanese Frontier Party head Iwao Matsuda rained on everybody's parade, when he bluntly rejected, repeatedly, any suggestion that Japan should go for a balanced budget and other austerity measures. "Stimulating the economy" to revive Japan's shrinking economic growth rate "is our top priority," Matsuda told the audience. He later professed to be baffled over why the Republicans had insisted on the budget being balanced in seven years. And when he lifted his voice to proclaim that "the U.S.-Japan partnership is primary," and added, dripping with sarcasm, that maybe, someday in the future, there would be close ties between Japan and Britain, Redwood winced, and everybody laughed at the put-down.

Maybe next year, if they hold another conference, the PFF execs will get Seagrams to send over a few cases of cheap whiskey—just in case things don't improve.