

After missile attacks, Republican leader downplays impeachment threat

Gingrich to Clinton: message received

Jerry White
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US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich is suggesting that Congressional Republicans may not seek President Clinton's impeachment after a report from Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, expected some time next month, reaches Congress.

Only a few months ago Gingrich was maintaining a steady drumbeat of denunciations against the president and using every venue to question Clinton's moral ability to run the country.

But Gingrich told a *Washington Post* reporter last Sunday there would be little grounds for the House Judiciary Committee to initiate impeachment hearings if Starr's report only contained allegations relating to the president's relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

'I don't think the Congress could move forward only on Lewinsky, unless he [Starr] had such a clear case, such an overpowering case,' the House speaker said. The decision to initiate an inquiry should proceed only if Starr's report establishes a 'pattern of felonies,' not just a 'single human mistake,' Gingrich said.

The Republican leader added he would have the House Judiciary Committee examine Starr's report for the most part in 'executive session,' out of public view. Its decision on an impeachment inquiry should be arrived at in a 'low-key' and bipartisan manner, Gingrich said, and not made a political issue in the November elections.

Caution was needed, Gingrich said, because of the political instability that would result from the decision to go ahead with impeachment proceedings. 'It's not just a presumption of innocence, there's a presumption of stability, a presumption of authority, a presumption of the way the nation runs.'

As Gingrich's statements make clear, the immediate

purpose of Clinton's decision to launch missile strikes last week was to send a message to his political opponents that he is prepared to shift his policies in accordance with their demands. Clinton ordered the firing of the cruise missiles not to preempt an unspecified terrorist threat, but to save his administration from the political firestorm that followed his grand jury testimony and television address.

Clinton has for some time been under fire from politicians and editorialists for failing to take unilateral military action. This has been a continuous theme, particularly since last February when Clinton accepted a compromise negotiated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to end a confrontation with Iraq. At the time, Republican Party leaders denounced the Clinton administration for subordinating decisions about US military policy to the UN.

Gingrich's comments are an acknowledgement that leading congressional Republicans have received the president's message and will reign in their attacks, if Clinton continues along the course of stepped-up military actions.

It remains to be seen if Clinton's opponents within the ruling class will be satisfied that he has really seen the light. As far as they are concerned last week's military strikes are a step in the right direction, but only a downpayment on the policy changes, both international and domestic, which they are demanding.

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