Mass resignations hit Gingrich campaign for Republican presidential nomination

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Virtually the entire senior staff of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich resigned Thursday, effectively wrecking his campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, less than one month after it began.

At least 16 aides and advisers quit, including his campaign manager, top spokesman, senior advisers, and aides in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, the first three states with primaries or caucuses next year.

The extraordinary political collapse came after a meeting in Washington DC at which the top aides sought to persuade Gingrich to commit to a serious political schedule.

Media reports focused on tensions over the candidate's decision to go on a two-week vacation in the Greek islands at a time when the campaign was visibly foundering, as well as suspicions that Gingrich was not seriously seeking the nomination, but rather using the campaign to market the books and videos that have made him a wealthy man since leaving elective office 13 years ago.

But the most important issue raised by Gingrich's political shipwreck is the enormous shift to the right in American bourgeois politics, which left behind the former House Speaker who once claimed to be leading a "Republican revolution" and spearheaded the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 and the impeachment of Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1998.

Gingrich ran afoul of the ultra-right with his public criticism of the dismantling of Medicare proposed by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, and backed by nearly every Republican in the House of Representatives in a vote April 15. The Ryan plan would end Medicare for those under the age of 55, replacing it with subsidies to buy private insurance, and gradually shifting the bulk of healthcare costs from the government to the elderly.

During an appearance on the NBC Sunday interview program "Meet the Press" on May 15, Gingrich compared the Ryan plan to Obama's health care program enacted last year, saying: "I don't think right-wing social engineering is any more desirable than left-wing social engineering. I don't think imposing radical change from the right or the left is a very good way for a free society to operate."

Gingrich also restated his longstanding support for the "individual mandate," a reactionary feature of the Obama healthcare program that was actually borrowed from the Republican Party program of the early 1990s, but has been demonized by ultra-right Tea Party elements. The mandate, which takes effect in 2014, will require most Americans of working age, except those poor enough to be eligible for Medicaid, to purchase private health insurance or pay a fine.

The Republican presidential hopeful immediately came under fire from right-wing media spokesmen, from Rush Limbaugh to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, and within 48 hours had issued an abject apology to Ryan, withdrawing his criticism, and threatened to sue any Democrat who used footage of the "Meet the Press" appearance in campaign commercials.

Since then, Gingrich has been hit by more unfavorable media publicity, likely based on leaks from right-wing opponents, including the report that Callista Gingrich, his third wife, had run up a $500,000 tab with the New York jeweler Tiffany's. Gingrich appeared clueless about the damage from this revelation to his claim to defend "normal" Americans from the Obama administration's "elitism."

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Meanwhile, all of the other current Republican presidential hopefuls, such as former governors Mitt Romney, Tim Pawlenty and Jon Huntsman, and congresswoman Michele Bachmann, have committed themselves fully to the Ryan plan.

Significantly, some of Gingrich's departed aides have already signed up with other candidates, invariably espousing an even more right-wing social policy. Former Georgia governor Sonny Perdue, the campaign co-chairman, immediately endorsed Pawlenty, who has sought to outdo Ryan by proposing $5 trillion in spending cuts and $2 trillion in tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy.

Gingrich's criticism of the Ryan plan was not, of course, based on any genuine defense of Medicare against those who seek its destruction. His comments on "Meet the Press" reflected his experience as House Speaker, when he initiated a frontal assault on Medicare, proposing unprecedented cuts that aroused widespread opposition, discredited the Republican Party and helped Clinton win easy reelection as president in 1996.

The result of the Gingrich implosion is that the Republican Party has established a new political litmus test. Social Security and Medicare were once spoken of as the "third rail" of American politics—touch them and you die. Now, in one of the two major bourgeois parties, you must commit yourself to the destruction of Medicare, or your campaign will be dead.

This serves the purposes of the social counter-revolution to which both capitalist parties are committed, to make the working class pay the price for the 2008 Wall Street Crash, the bank bailout, and the deepest economic slump since the Great Depression.

In the ongoing budget deficit talks, the Republicans stand for the complete abolition of Medicare and Medicaid, while the Democrats have already enacted half a trillion dollars in cuts in Medicare as part of last year's healthcare reform legislation. Now the Obama administration is preparing to agree to far deeper cuts, which will be portrayed as an unavoidable "compromise" and an effort to "save" Medicare from outright abolition.

There is no significant support in either capitalist party for the defense of Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and other social safety net programs that were once touted as proof that the capitalist system could be made compatible with the needs of masses of working people.

In one of his appearances to apologize for criticizing the Ryan plan, on the CBS program "Face the Nation," Gingrich said probably more than he intended, remarking, "I probably used unfortunate language on social engineering, but my point was really a larger one, that neither party could impose on the American people something that they are deeply opposed to."

On the contrary, the American financial aristocracy is bound and determined to do exactly that: impose on the American people measures that will provoke mass resistance, that will require mass repression and the abolition of democratic rights.

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