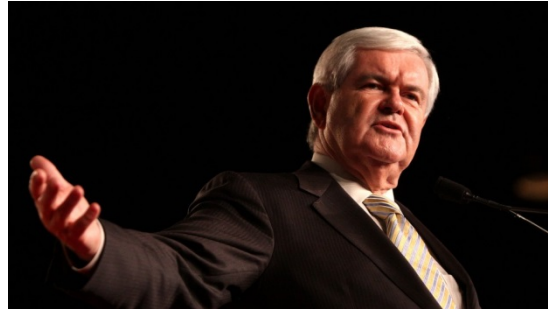


GOPAC Strategy and Instructional Tapes (1986-1994)

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Essay by Steven Gillon (guest post)*



Newt Gingrich

In 1979, Delaware Governor Pierre “Pete” DuPont IV, and a handful of other governors, created GOPAC to help develop a “farm team” of state and local GOP candidates. Initially, the organization limited its role to providing money to candidates running in tight races. The goal was to chip away at the Democratic dominance in statehouses and city halls.

In 1988, however, DuPont was considering a run for president and decided to turn the organization over to a rising Republican star, Newt Gingrich. The Georgia congressman, and former college professor, had already earned a reputation for being both an inspiring speaker and a partisan brawler. Even many Republicans found Gingrich too divisive, partisan, and controversial to be a party leader, but they also knew that he possessed the energy and ambition necessary to transform GOPAC into a powerful arm of the conservative movement.

Instead of writing candidates checks, Gingrich sent them information--and lots of it. He used GOPAC to recruit and train a generation of candidates who would talk and think like him. GOPAC distributed thousands of cassettes and videotapes to potential GOP candidates, teaching them to speak “Gingrich.” Gingrich also used GOPAC funds to travel around the country recruiting training and campaigning for candidates. He hired marketing professionals to identify issues--”65 percenters”--that would resonate with a majority of the public. “We are on the way to becoming the Bell Labs of politics,” he bragged.

For Gingrich, language was the key to securing a new Republican majority. The GOPAC tapes were designed to develop a vocabulary of positive words to use to describe Republican initiatives --liberty, freedom, truth, opportunity--while using “bad” words to label the Democrats--decay, corrupt, permissive, and pathetic. Gingrich produced a list of 133 words candidates should use to demean their opponents and elevate themselves. “The words and phrases are powerful,” a GOPAC memo instructed candidates. “Read them. Memorize as many as possible. And remember that like any tool, these words will not help if they are not used.”

GOPAC and Gingrich developed the tapes to nationalize local elections, develop common themes and tactics, and articulate a unified Republican message. Using GOPAC as a recruitment and training organization, Gingrich spent more than \$8 million identifying the strongest potential Republican challengers and providing them with the themes, the “wedges and magnets,” to use

against their Democratic opponents. Gingrich concluded that Republicans “must emphasize a wedge of issues that drive our opponents away from the American people, while having a secondary theme of magnet issues that attract the American people to us.” Ohio’s John Boehner credited the tapes with convincing him to run successfully for Congress in 1990. “I started getting tapes in 1986 or 1987,” he told the “Washington Post.” “If it weren't for the tapes, I probably wouldn't have run for Congress. I'm not sure I would have been comfortable enough understanding the breadth of a lot of issues and where we should go.”

The tapes helped Gingrich develop a generation of young Republicans who adopted a similar militant rhetorical style that attacked the moral underpinnings of the Democratic Party while highlighting a positive Republican message that revolved around tax cuts and family values.

The tapes implored Republican candidates to join with Gingrich to “save western civilization” from its own excesses by rooting out the counter-cultural influences in contemporary life and reestablishing clear standards of right and wrong. “I would assert,” he told sympathetic listeners, “that no civilization can survive with 12-year-olds having babies, 15-year-olds killing each other, 17-year-olds dying of AIDS, and 18-year-olds getting diplomas they can't read.”

To unite the fractious conservative coalition of big business, social conservatives, tax cuts advocates, and libertarians behind his leadership, Gingrich created a shared enemy—the “corrupt liberal welfare state.” The differences between the parties were moral, not political, he declared, and there was no room for compromise. “Either we will pull ourselves together for the effort or we will continue to decay,” he said. “There is virtually no middle ground.” There was also an urgency to his appeal. The nation stood on the brink, he told recruits, and only bold, decisive leadership could prevent the nation from moral collapse.

In 1994, Gingrich turned many of the ideas, and much of the language, from the GOPAC tapes into a “Contract with America” that led to historic Republican gains in the midterm elections that year. The journalist, James Traub, later called the 1994 election “the most consequential nonpresidential election of the 20th century.” Not a single Republican incumbent for Congress or governor was defeated. Republicans seized control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. In Senate races, they won all nine open elections and defeated two incumbent Democrats. Republicans also scored well in the states where they controlled the governor’s mansions in eight of the nine most populous states.

The tapes helped Gingrich achieve his lifelong ambition to become Speaker of the House, but they also contributed to his downfall. In his effort to save western civilization, Gingrich cut corners and violated ethics laws. In 1997, the Federal Election Commission concluded that Gingrich had received illegal support from GOPAC in 1990 at a time when it was barred from participating in federal elections. A special counsel issued a scathing, meticulously detailed account of how Gingrich repeatedly violated federal tax law by laundering political contributions through tax-exempt foundations. Despite his denials that there was no connection between his charities and his political activities, the House Ethics Committee unearthed hundreds of documents proving that GOPAC was actively involved in developing and funding the classes and criticized the Speaker for providing information that he “knew or should have known was inaccurate, incomplete, and unreliable.” In response, the Republican controlled House voted overwhelmingly, 395 to 28, to reprimand Gingrich for receiving illegal support from GOPAC.

“The Atlanta Journal Constitution” concluded that Gingrich’s action was “motivated by his thirst for power and by his own delusions of grandeur.”

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.