

Can Newt Stop Himself?

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Newt Gingrich's emergence as the front-runner for the Republican nomination for president, at least according to the [most recent polls](#), is quite extraordinary. The comeback narrative is a common one in presidential politics, but it usually applies to a leading candidate who stumbles badly, but regains his footing in time for the early primaries. John McCain in 2008 and Bill Clinton in 1992 represent the best examples of that phenomenon. Gingrich's comeback is something very different. His campaign seemed quixotic from the time it began. Since his political fall well over a decade ago, Gingrich had been more of a political gadfly and reminder of another era than a serious political force. Even during most of this campaign, Gingrich has not done much to suggest that he was capable of, or even interested in, playing more than a fringe role. However, with only about three weeks to go before the Iowa caucus, Gingrich has become a plausible candidate for his party's nomination for president.

The Gingrich ascendancy is at least as much about good timing, even luck, as about anything Gingrich has done, but timing and luck always play an important role in presidential politics. Gingrich is benefitting both from the predictable collapse of Herman Cain's campaign and of being the non-Romney flavor of the month at the right time. Gingrich's challenge is to hold on to that mantle until the voting starts. Significantly, others such as Cain, Rick Perry and Michele Bachmann have been unable to maintain that position as scrutiny has increased.

Gingrich is, for all the obvious reasons, an odd choice to be the favorite of the radical right wing of the Republican Party. His history of divorce and adultery, of having spent the last three decades as a congressman, lobbyist and consummate Washington insider as well as a penchant for innovative, if occasionally goofy or frightening, policy solutions, some of which diverge from current right wing orthodoxy, would seem to create problems between Gingrich and the anti-government, fundamentalist Christian base of his party. Thus far, they have not. This is partially a reflection of the dissatisfaction and rancor felt by many in the Republican base towards Romney. Moreover, Gingrich, for all his faults, is able to rile liberal voters and activists to a degree far greater than Romney can. Romney's failure to emerge as a target of liberal hatred and scorn has made him suspect among his party's base, while Gingrich has been hated by liberal Democrats since before most of the other Republican candidates were involved in politics. This too is part of the reason for Gingrich's current surge in the polls.

Gingrich's appeal, despite what the former Speaker of the House may have persuaded himself is not due to his shiny policy ideas or proven leadership, but rather simply that he is the non-Romney candidate at the moment the music is about to stop. The more clearly Gingrich understands that, the stronger his chances will be. Accordingly, the best strategy

for Gingrich at this time is probably to present himself as a generic right wing candidate, stress his conservative credentials and stop trying to persuade everybody of how smart he is. This is also a strategy which will be uniquely difficult for Gingrich to pursue. Most candidates stumble when they try to be something other than who they are, or when they seek to conceal their true self. In this respect, Gingrich is an exception. His current popularity is occurring in spite of Gingrich's personal story and quirky ideas, not because of them.

For Gingrich, the days before the January 3rd Iowa caucus will feel like an eternity. If he can make it through the next three weeks without making one too many gaffes or policy proposals which irritate primary voters while avoiding any serious examination of his record or background, he will have a good chance of winning in Iowa and stopping what once seemed to be the inevitable nomination of Romney by the Republican Party. However, as Gingrich's already ample ego and confidence grows as he stays in first place in most polls, it will be increasingly difficult for him to avoid the mistakes of hubris and over-confidence that have plagued him throughout his political career. In the 1990s, Gingrich was a clever and formidable political force, but one that could be reliably depended upon to overplay his hand. It is far from clear that he has changed in that respect.