

Back to the Nineties With Newt

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Before there was Michele Bachmann, Sarah Palin, Scott Walker or any of the other current radical conservatives seeking the national spotlight and perhaps the Republican nomination for president, there was Newt Gingrich. The recent boomlet around a potential presidential bid by the aging right wing revolutionary feels like a strange hybrid of the unique quirks that has always been part of Gingrich with nostalgia for the 1990s. Next thing you know, we'll be talking about impeaching a Democratic president and shutting down the government. Maybe the 1990s really are back.

Ironically, in the mid-1990s, when Gingrich was at the height of his power after engineering a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades, the idea of a Gingrich presidency was implausible. He was too radical, too conservative and even a little too quirky to be a serious candidate for the White House. In 1996, the one presidential campaign between the time he became speaker and the time his political career ended, although only temporarily, in scandal, Gingrich's name was not even seriously floated for his party's nomination for president.

As the 2012 election approaches, however, Gingrich is potentially a major candidate for his party's nomination for president. Whether or not he gets the nomination, Gingrich could play an interesting, and possibly important, role in the nominating process. Although he was an important figure in the party more than 20 years ago, well before people like Bachmann, Palin, Boehner, Mike Huckabee or others were important in the party, Gingrich lacks the stature and temperament to be a true elder statesman. He is more like the quirky uncle who moved back to town and now finds himself at your house a few nights a week for dinner where he holds forth with long, occasionally interesting and often bizarre speeches about how the world works. Accordingly, Gingrich's candidacy will likely generate the most notable, and not infrequently, strange ideas of the upcoming election season.

Gingrich despite being a right wing extremist, was extremely influential, bold and successful politician, driven by new ideas and a willingness to take risks. The 1994 Republican campaign for congress was a radical departure from most previous congressional races. Gingrich persuaded his party that rather than run in hundreds of different local races, they should nationalize the campaign and make it a referendum on the Democratic congressional leadership who voters were beginning to see as having been around too long. Gingrich's Contract with America encapsulated this sentiment creating a single platform around which all Republicans could rally. Before 1994, congressional races were rarely national in nature, but since Gingrich's Republicans took

over in 1994, they have almost all been.

Gingrich was not just innovative with regards to political strategy, but seemed constantly obsessed with the next great idea drawing inspiration from disparate sources including [futurologist Alvin Toffler](#), [giraffes](#) and [dinosaurs](#). Gingrich was, and remains, a man interested in big ideas. He is not, however, a man enamored of rigorous methodology or research. Rather he seems to like to riff off of whatever interesting idea serves his purpose.

In this regard, Gingrich is better suited to today's political environment where voters and politicians get their information from partisan, narrowly focused and often inaccurate web sites, or other sources. Gingrich's autodidacticism complete with its faith in off-beat theories and wacky ideas, regardless of their source, fits far better in this decade than it did in the 1990s. In the age of the internet everybody can be an autodidact and believe anything they want. If you believe the President is not a U.S. citizen or that some secret cabal runs the country, it is not hard to find websites and other sources that support this opinion and strikingly easy to find major media outlets who are willing to a platform for you to discuss it.

Gingrich is not exactly a birther, but he has a weakness for precisely those kinds of theories that thrive in the internet age. His obsession a few months ago with what he saw as President Obama's [Kenyan, anti-colonial worldview](#) is a good example of this. A somewhat interesting idea caught Gingrich's attention and he ran with it. The earnest academics and others who sought to point out that this idea was nonsensical and not grounded in any rigorous thought whatsoever, could not keep up with Gingrich's energy and audacity, so the idea got more attention than it should have.

Gingrich's chance to become president, to some extent, rests upon finding a potent if offbeat idea through which he can capture the imagination of his party's base. If he succeeds in doing this he will be a formidable candidate, far more formidable than he could have been in the 1990s. Hucksterism has long been a part of politics, but Gingrich's style of hucksterism is uniquely well suited to the internet age. It remains to be seen how far it will take him.