

The Three Faces of Newt

Newt's book is alternately frightening, sensible, and just plain loony—much like the man himself

BY MATTHEW MILLER

To Renew America
Newt Gingrich, *HarperCollins*, \$24

Test your understanding of the Republican revolution. Newt Gingrich is: (a) an original thinker-politician, whose fear for America's sagging trajectory prompts him to offer fresh solutions that go beyond politics as usual; (b) a manipulative propagandist, whose benign facade masks a ruthless hunger for power that he'll use for God-knows-what if we don't stop him; or (c) a jargon-loving management consultant in disguise, whose bromides and futurist visions get loonier with each new one he spews.

If you said "all of the above," maybe you've already read *To Renew America*, in which the traits that make Gingrich both fascinating and scary are on neon display. *Renew* is a breezy screed that purports to explain the source of Gingrich's ambitions, his diagnosis of what ails us, and his inventory of cures. There's plenty to question or dismiss here. Yet for liberals, the only thing that should be as troubling as Newt's agenda is their own illiberal refusal to admit there might be a sincere or worthy thought in his head.

After an opening reflection on his formative years (where we're told, among other things, that at age 14 the future speaker consecrated his life to "understanding what it takes for a free people to survive and to helping my country and the cause of freedom"), the book speaks in successive chapters to "the six challenges" Gingrich

sees facing the country. These are, in his words, "Reasserting and Renewing American Civilization"; "America and the Third Wave Revolution"; "Creating American Jobs in the World Market"; "Replacing the Welfare State with an Opportunity Society"; "Balancing the Budget and Saving Social Security and Medicare"; and "Decentralizing Power." There's little new here if you've heard his spiel before.

Gingrich also offers a mini-memoir of the Contract With America, from inception to execution in the new Congress's first 100 days. The last 100 pages of the book consist of 17 bite-sized chapters in which Gingrich offers short takes on subjects ranging from Rush Limbaugh to the flat tax.

As with most Gingrich utterances, the book is bursting with ideas—some sensible, some inflammatory, others daffy. Among the sensible: Gingrich wants prisoners to work and study in prison, not lift weights and channel surf. He'd expand the Earning by Learning program he helped pilot in Georgia, which gives poor kids a dollar for each book they read and has created scores of ghetto bibliophiles. He also points persuasively to the religious spirit at the heart of American tradition, quoting Ben Franklin's quiet appeal for divine aid when the Founders nearly faltered.

Then Gingrich's brain burps. He predicts that honeymoons in space will be the rage by 2020 and that bold new merchandising can renew America's status as a premiere shopping destina-

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tion. If people like our clothing stores and boutiques, he says, then they'll love our heart, liver, lung, and kidney transplants. And so on.

Meanwhile, sophistries and disingenuous analyses abound. A cheerleading Gingrich claims high-tech medicine will be our savior, bringing better care at lower costs without anyone having to give up anything. Sounds nice, except technology (combined with our aging population) is largely to blame for rising health costs, meaning that we'll soon face anguished choices between limiting some care or going broke.

No nasty tradeoffs like that for Newt. He says only market reforms and choice can improve our schools, failing to explain why such nations as Japan and Germany admirably educate their young with evil state monopolies. He peddles the old canard that liberals alone are big spenders, when GOP heretics from David Stockman to David Frum have shown their party's own complicity at the federal trough. And in a triumph of hypocrisy, to bolster his case for welfare reform, Gingrich offers a nostalgic discourse on how social reformers once knew that giving people help they don't deserve is destructive to the human spirit. If that's heartfelt, why does Gingrich ignore the billions in mortgage interest deductions and windfall health and pension entitlements now corrupting the souls of the

undeserving rich?

Scratch the Speaker's solutions, and often there's nothing there. Gingrich's cry for "a series of commissions" on technology or to "rethink our entire approach" to economic growth exemplify the many empty calls to action that sprinkle his book. When he gets specific, the results can be shocking. Wrapping up his discussion of the budget, for example, Gingrich casually adds that a reasonable federal government would probably spend \$1 trillion, about \$850 billion less than Republicans today say we'll need *after* they've made all their cuts between now and 2002. Reporters (and the Clinton White House) may want to follow up on the Speaker's plan to cut another 45 percent off of federal spending at that point.

The book suffers from two maddening stylistic tics. Dickens was paid by the word; Rupert Murdoch must be paying Newt by the superfluous superlative. "Extraordinary," "remarkable," "amazing," "stunning," "astounding," and "unprecedented" describe everything that catches Gingrich's eye, from scientific discoveries to congressional elections. It doesn't stop there: They're usually the most remarkable (astounding, stunning) on "the planet," "the globe," "on earth," or "in history." I started circling these words and quit by page 10, averaging a remark-

Newt Romances the Reich

When I agreed to review *1945**, my friend Edmund Morris, the eminent biographer, instructed, "Be fair, it could be imperishable literature." I tried, honest I did, struggling through 382 pages of tortured prose. But I have concluded that the book is a convoluted, cliché-riddled literary debacle. The best I can say is, mercifully, the print is very large. The worst, the promise of a sequel. The book ends with three ominous words: TO BE CONTINUED.

Co-authors Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen, both historians, have popped every vein and twisted every sinew in an effort to produce high-octane sci-fi. What they have come up with instead is a muddled, military mishmash: part *Rambo*, part Tom

Clancy, with *Pulp Fiction*-esque gore tossed in. Their fantasized, sanitized view of Nazi Germany might well be retitled *Romancing the Reich*.

Though they can wax lyrical over the nitty-gritty of macho, martial hardware, (these finite descriptions take up approximately half the book), the posturing of their major characters—a fatuous hero named James Mannheim Martel and the flamboyant villain, Otto Skorzeny—are ludicrous. The plot, if it can be called that, is based on the premise that the United States won the Great Pacific War against Japan, but never entered the European war, opening the door for a Nazi conquest of the Soviet Union. Now, Nazi Germany is ready to take on the United States. Hitler plans to invade Great Britain, but his main target is the Manhat-

**Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen, Baen Books, \$24*