



Why Newt Gingrich Will Never Be President

by [Michael Tomasky](#)

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He's out to win the White House. But as Michael Tomasky explains, Newt's campaign is merely comic relief.

I don't know much in this life. I can't tell you who's going to win the NBA championship or when the Pakistani ISI will become a bulwark against extremism or what year Keith Richards' lungs will finally cry uncle. But I do know this: Newt Gingrich will never be president of the United States.

It will of course be fun to [watch him run](#). Following Gingrich is a form of entertainment—he's an all-around vaudevillian of [political theatre](#). Journalists have a soft spot for him, even avowedly liberal ones like me, because if nothing else he is sui generis. I met him in 1992 when I was down in Atlanta for that year's vice-presidential debate, the one remembered if at all for Admiral James Stockdale's amusing self-interrogation ("What am I doing here?"). Gingrich was in a pretty tough House race that year, but he took ample time out of an October afternoon to shoot the breeze with me, a reporter at the time for the Village Voice, of all disreputable things. He was trying to sell me on the idea that the Republican Party was going to compete seriously for the black vote over the next decade. I was young. He was, or seemed, sincere. I bought the whole package.

But since then, things have changed considerably. Far from having a serious chance of making it to the Oval Office, his actions (and inactions) have rendered himself less electable than Michele Bachmann—and for [two main reasons](#).

The first is the one everyone writes about—his legendary lack of discipline, which shows up in far more than his tendency to launch rhetorical projectiles from his mouth at regular intervals. This, at any rate, is what I took from a conversation with Gingrich's old and dear friend Matt Towery the other day. Towery is a sharp and likeable guy who runs an inside-Georgia-politics [website](#) and was a Gingrich adviser for many years.

In Towery's view, Gingrich "does have a chance to win the nomination, but Newt has to be not Newt." By this he means that Gingrich must define himself to voters who don't

remember that he was once the speaker of the House of Representatives (to Towery, most voters), and he must do so in a rigorous fashion. Gingrich needs “to interpret his history for voters, or others will do it for him,” says Towery, and he has to stick to the script: “If he’s talking energy one day and flood protection another day, he’s going nowhere.”

Alas, his 30 years in the public eye give us no sense that Gingrich is capable of doing this. But that’s nothing compared to his second, and far more damning, problem, which came to light when I asked Towery to list Gingrich’s accomplishments as a public figure.

Imagine a Gingrich who dedicated himself to broadening the GOP’s appeal instead of spreading vicious rumors and raving against the Lower Manhattan mosque. That Gingrich might have had a chance.



Newt Gingrich at an American Solutions rally, Oct. 21, 2010 in Las Vegas (Photos: Isaac Brekken / AP Photos)

Here was the third most powerful figure in American politics, behind only the president and vice president, for several years. Surely he helped shepherd historic legislation into law? Accomplished something vaguely statesmanlike? Actually, no. OK, there was the Contract with America. Its major provisions did pass the House as Gingrich promised they would in 1994, but few of them [became law](#). Two Cato Institute scholars have even calculated that by 2000 the combined budgets of the 95 federal programs the Contract sought to eliminate had actually increased by [13 percent](#).

Asked to name an accomplishment, Towery pointed to Gingrich’s role in passing a capital gains tax cut in 1996 (fair enough) and... the government shutdown. Here’s Towery’s thinking: “If you reflect on it now, the idea of making a point so that the president of the United States would come to the table and be serious about a balanced budget, that’s a good thing to Republican voters.”

I'm sure Towery is dead right about that, and maybe bragging about the government shutdown will bring Gingrich happy returns in Iowa, South Carolina, and a few other places. But it won't get him to the White House in a million years. Imagine, by contrast, a Gingrich who spent the 1990s fulfilling that vow made to the young and gullible Tomasky. Who actually dedicated himself to broadening the GOP's appeal and using his not inconsiderable intelligence toward the end of sowing the earth instead of scorching it as he has in so many ways, from the Tom-Foley-is-gay rumor (which emanated from his staff, according to this [Mother Jones piece](#)) to his pyrotechnic ravings against the Lower Manhattan mosque. That Gingrich might actually have had a shot at being president. But that Gingrich would be "not Newt," as would a Gingrich who refused to use his third wife as a prop to flog his conversion to right-wing social conservatism. "Not Newt" would be a serious contender. But plain old Newt? He's nothing but comic relief.

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