



## *Big thinking, bold Newt Gingrich is America's real-life Captain Kirk*

By James P. Pinkerton

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The [Washington Post wrote](#) recently that Newt Gingrich's presidential campaign "will go down in the annals as just another unsuccessful enterprise, along with so many other presidential wannabes whose bright expectations crash into the reality that it was not their time and perhaps was never to be."

Well, okay, but there's another side to Gingrich: He has always been one of the most intellectually interesting, and politically questing, figures on the national stage. And so if there's a little bit of Don Quixote in Gingrich, there's also a lot of Captain James T. Kirk; he really did want to boldly go where no politician had gone before. Indeed, we might say that progress depends on Captain Kirks, or their non-fiction equivalents.

And Gingrich's impact was real.

I first met Gingrich 30 years ago, in the spring of 1982, when I was a junior staffer in Ronald Reagan's White House.

Gingrich, then a sophomore Congressman, had set up a day-long seminar on organizational change at the [Hyatt Regency Hotel on Capitol Hill; the main speaker was Daryl Conner](#), then and now a recognized expert in the field of organizational change.

Gingrich had invited my boss, the late Lee Atwater, to come to the seminar, but at the last minute, Atwater dropped out and sent me in his place. I was many notches below Atwater on the White House protocol hierarchy, but Gingrich didn't feel slighted: "Call me Newt," he said to a nervous 24-year-old.

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In 1982, America was in the depths of a deep recession, part of the economic mess that President Reagan had inherited from President Jimmy Carter. Yet Conner, the change expert, was an optimist. We can think our way out of these problems, he said; even if the macro-economy is in trouble, individual companies can find new ways to compete in the global economy.

Conner's message was exciting to all of us; Gingrich, in particular, was an eager student. Although he listened that day much more than he talked, I remember him saying that bureaucracy--public, as well as private--was a great invention from the late 19th century, but that now, in the late 20th century, we needed a new organizational invention, a new way of doing things.

I had never thought about things that way.

As a libertarian-leaning Reaganite, I was suspicious, if not hostile, to bureaucracy, and so I assumed that the best way to deal with bureaucracy was simply to de-fund it--to turn Big Government into Small Government. Gingrich had the same ultimate goal, but he argued then--and has over the last three decades--that if conservatives and libertarians are going to be effective at shrinking government, they will have to show how the essential functions of government can be done in new ways, cheaper and better. The head-on assault just doesn't work.

So that seminar on Capitol Hill was just one of many skull sessions that Gingrich helped facilitate in the 80s and 90s.

He worked closely with forward-looking DC think-tanks, including the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, as modernizing conservatives tried to formulate a new post-bureaucratic model of governance; once-obscure ideas such as school choice, greater competition in healthcare delivery, and the privatization of some government functions all gained momentum during these years.

Yet Gingrich's mind roamed well beyond the Beltway.

During the 80s and 90s, Gingrich invited me--and anyone else who was interested--to meet with other experts who were focused on larger issues of technological potential and economic acceleration.

Two of these experts, W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran, were men who, during their long careers, had focused on "quality"--improving production lines and, indeed, all corporate processes.

Interestingly, both Deming and Juran first found attentive audiences in Japan; in the 50s and 60s, after their country had been devastated by World War Two, the Japanese were hungrier for new ideas than the Americans.

Yet by the 80s, corporate America, fearful of being overtaken by Japan and other Asian “tigers,” were listening closely to Deming and Juran. And so was Gingrich; he wanted to take phrases commonly heard in corporate America--such as “reinvention,” “TQM,” and “Six Sigma”--and apply them, as well, to the government.

When he said he wanted to “renew American civilization,” top to bottom, he meant it.

Perhaps the most controversial Gingrich collaborators were the husband-and-wife writing team of Alvin and Heidi Toffler.

The Tofflers had written many books about technology and transformation in the future, the most consequential of which was "The Third Wave," published in 1980. They argued that the economic malaise of the 70s and early 80s was bigger than just the failings of Jimmy Carter; instead, the nation was experiencing the breakdown of the old industrial order, to be superseded by a new information order--the Information Age.

Human civilization had seen two earlier waves, the Tofflers said; the first wave was agriculture, beginning 10,000 or so years ago, and the second wave was industrial manufacturing, beginning in the early 18th century.

Of course, agriculture didn't disappear with the coming of industry, but it was demoted; the great powers of the industrial era were manufacturers, not farmers. And so it was during the third wave of information; industry and agriculture would continue, even flourish, but information would be in charge.

Today, when Google, founded in 1998, has a stock-market-capitalization of roughly \$200 billion, while GM, founded in 1908, has a market cap of around \$36 billion, it is easy to see how information is now the hegemonic force in our society and economy. But when the Tofflers saw it coming, more than three decades ago, and offered a myriad of suggestions for dealing with this paradigm shift--most of which suggestions were not “conservative”--Gingrich was right there with them, listening and paying close attention. He didn't pretend to agree with them on everything, but he trusted not only their insight, but also their good will.

It's easy to make fun of “management gurus” and “futurists,” but one lesson of history is clear: In a changing environment, those who can see the change, and figure out what it means, have a huge advantage over those who can't--or won't.

Yet Gingrich didn't seek to understand change for the sake of lording it over others; like his friend and colleague in the House, the late Jack Kemp, Gingrich had the vision of the “good shepherd,” looking out for his flock--the whole of it. That is, they would use new

ideas and new thinking to make life better for all Americans. Not through liberalism, but through a progressive conservatism.

Indeed, the rap on Gingrich for much of his career was that he was not a “hardcore” conservative, like most activists.

Even in that 1982 seminar on Capitol Hill, I could see that he was not trying to turn the clock back to pre-New Deal days; he was not an anarchist or a libertarian.

He accepted the basic functions of the welfare state, but he wanted to modernize and transform it, according to the ideas that he had garnered from Conner, Deming, Juran, the Tofflers, and many others.

Moreover, he could see that as bureaucracy decayed--most visibly in inner-city public schools--the beneficent purpose of 20th century liberalism had gone horribly wrong, as billions and trillions were spent on wrong-headed and even destructive programs. And if liberals of Gingrich’s era would defend the programmatic status quo, well, Gingrich would call them on it. Loudly.

He did, to be sure, have his pugnacious side--he was, after all, in partisan politics.

Moreover, from the day he took office in 1979, his self-declared mission was to help Republicans win back the House, which Democrats had controlled since the 50s.

To that end, Gingrich built his own political machine; his team-building currency was as much a two-way political loyalty as it was the power of his ambitious ideas. Gingrich would cheerfully come and campaign for just about any Republican who wanted him.

Yet as his ideas gained momentum inside the Republican world, he started using innovative communications tools, such as cassette tapes, to deliver his message. John Boehner, the current Speaker of the House, once told me that he listened to Gingrich’s tapes as he was driving from campaign stop to campaign stop in his successful 1990 bid to defeat an incumbent.

Yet Gingrich was not only smart, he was also politically courageous. That same year, 1990, he refused to go along with George H.W. Bush’s “pledge”-breaking tax increase; in the next election year, 1992, Bush loyalists did their best to defeat Gingrich as he ran for another term. Gingrich survived his re-election campaign, but Bush, of course, did not.

After 1992, Gingrich became the effective leader of the House Republicans, and two years after that, he led them all to victory using the [Contract with America](#), one of the most effect team-campaign efforts in the history of Congressional elections. Thus he became the first Republican Speaker of the House in four decades.

By the mid-90s, Gingrich was a household name. And the rest of his political career, including the fizzle of his 2012 presidential campaign, is well known.

However, as I think about Gingrich, I will recall his [televised speech to the nation on April 7, 1995, at the end of his first 100 days in office](#). In a text that ran almost 4,000 words, Gingrich barely mentioned President Bill Clinton or the opposition Democrats. His real focus was on the future and the good things it could bring, and so he brought with him a length of fiber-optic cable, which he held up for the camera:

"You know, another reason for optimism is the tremendous opportunities being created by the new information technologies. Tremendous is a big word, so let me show you an example. This is a traditional telephone cable. This -- I hope you can see it; it's pretty small -- is a fiber-optic cable. You can barely see it. This almost invisible fiber-optic cable . . . is equal to not one of these -- to 64 of these big, bulky, traditional cables. Now, that is a tremendous opportunity. With these breakthroughs, the most rural parts of America can be connected electronically to the best learning, the best health care and the best work opportunities in the world."

And then Gingrich described his vision of distance learning and distance medicine, connecting all Americans in the embrace of information, which by then had become the Internet. And from there Gingrich moved on to thoughts about using new technology to cure Alzheimer's Disease, cancer, and diabetes, among other ailments--still a pretty good agenda, many might say.

So that's the big-thinking Gingrich who came up with the suggestion of lunar colonies during the 2012 campaign.

Yes, that idea was mocked.

If this were a more imaginative and future-building era, the idea of rocketing to the moon and staying there would have been embraced.

Captain Kirk would have loved it, and so would the martyred leader he was modeled after, John F. Kennedy.

A half-century after JFK's death, the naysayers who opposed the "moon shot" are forgotten, while Kennedy's vision lives on--if not necessarily in the US government.

And so while Gingrich will never be president, he is in good historical company. And who knows: Out there somewhere in America there might be someone listening to Gingrich, even now, and thinking to him or herself: "Why aren't we further improving Internet access? Why aren't we curing Alzheimer's? Why aren't we colonizing the moon?" And out of those questions could come a genuinely renewed American civilization.

*James P. Pinkerton is a writer and Fox News contributor. He is the editor/founder of the [Serious Medicine Strategy blog](#).*

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