



Gingrich reaches for Reagan's mantle; Reaganites flip out

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No Republican has claimed the mantle of the late president, former California governor and GOP icon Ronald Reagan with more unabashed relish than former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

“We created 16 million jobs,” Gingrich claimed in South Carolina this month. “I helped Governor Reagan become President Reagan,” he told Floridians last week. Gingrich said his wife, Callista, considers herself “a cross between Nancy Reagan and Laura Bush with just a slight bit of Jackie Kennedy tossed in.”

The claims have been so frequent, and so bold, that they have become an issue in the pivotal GOP presidential primary in Florida on Tuesday. They have also provoked a ferocious battle among conservatives over Gingrich's claims to a central role in the “Reagan Revolution” that gave birth to modern conservatism.

Alarmed by the possibility of a Gingrich victory over former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, several conservative leaders and former Reagan officials have denounced Gingrich's claims as fantasy. Defending himself in Thursday's GOP debate in Jacksonville, Gingrich cited a 1995 speech by Nancy Reagan saying her husband had passed the conservative torch to him.

Lou Cannon, Reagan's definitive independent biographer, said Gingrich's role in the Reagan presidency was “practically nonexistent.”

“Here's a guy who doesn't rate a line in Reagan's memoir and whose only line in the Reagan diaries is a reference in which Reagan is saying that his proposal is not a good idea, which it wasn't,” Cannon said in a telephone interview from his home near Santa Barbara, referring to a Gingrich proposal for a budget freeze.

Cannon said Gingrich has real political accomplishments, leading Republicans to a House majority in 1994 for the first time in 40 years. But connections to Reagan, Cannon said, are “fanciful.”

“We were foot soldiers in the Reagan army,” said former Rep. Vin Weber, a Minnesota Republican who worked closely with Gingrich in the minority during the first two years of Reagan's presidency in 1981 and 1982, when the core of Reagan's economic program was enacted.

“We were not sergeants, we were not majors, and we were not generals,” Weber said. “You need foot soldiers to win a war. But I know I wasn't giving the orders. I know I wasn't mapping the strategy. I was just there to help out and that's true of Newt, too. ... The notion that he played any part in forging the Reagan Revolution is just reinventing history.”

The most blistering critique has come from Elliott Abrams, Reagan's assistant secretary of state, who wrote in the conservative magazine *National Review* last week that Gingrich "spewed insulting rhetoric at Reagan, his top aides, and his policies to defeat Communism."

Abrams said Gingrich was contemptuous of Reagan during one of the toughest battles of his presidency, the attempt to arm the Nicaraguan Contra rebels as part of his strategy to block Soviet expansionism.

On the House floor in 1986, Gingrich said that Reagan was "failing," at one point faulted Reagan for his lack of "discipline" in his language, and called the Soviet Union superior to the West "at the vision and strategy levels."

Gingrich's allies said his role in the Reagan years may have been small — after all, he was a junior member of the House minority — but Reagan knew who he was.

"Newt has good reason to recall the Reagan years; he was part of it," said Annelise Anderson, a former Reagan deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget who is now at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. "Newt Gingrich was a creative and thoughtful young backbencher in the Reagan years. Reagan was aware of him. ... We were all much aware of Newt Gingrich."

Gingrich does not appear in Reagan's autobiography, "An American Life."

Reagan mentioned him once in his diaries, on Jan. 3, 1982. Reagan described a tough budget meeting at which Gingrich proposed a spending freeze. Reagan rejected it, concluding that it would kill his defense buildup that he considered critical to confronting the Soviets.

"Met with a group of young Repub. Congressmen," Reagan wrote. "Newt Gingrich has a proposal for freezing the budget at the 1983 level. It's a tempting idea except that it would cripple our defense program. And if we make an exception on that, every special interest group will be asking for the same."

Kiron Skinner, a Gingrich foreign policy adviser and author of "Reagan in His Own Hand," a collection of Reagan's handwritten radio addresses before he became president, said Gingrich's role in the Reagan era is less important than the fact that both men spent their years out of public office reading, writing and thinking.

"The deeper question is if there is a parallel between these two men," said Skinner, director of the Center for International Relations and Politics at Carnegie Mellon University and a Hoover Institution fellow. "There is no one else in the Republican field who can claim that kind of political interregnum where they study, reflect, write and there's a paper trail of their own work."

On policy, Reagan was not a pure conservative by today's standards. Facing a Democratic Congress, he raised taxes three times and signed into law an expansion of Medicare that was later repealed, said Daniel Mitchell, an expert on supply-side tax policy for the libertarian Cato Institute.

Gingrich championed welfare reform and a balanced budget in the 1990s during the Clinton administration, but later supported efforts to combat climate change, an individual health care mandate and other conservative apostasies.

"People who think of themselves as indispensable historical figures are prone to do big things, and big things are usually bad things in Washington," Mitchell said. "There's a Good Newt with an angel on one shoulder, and a Bad Newt, with a devil on the other shoulder. That's why I genuinely do not think anyone can say with accuracy what it would mean for Newt to be in the White House, and I've known him since 1978."

Lee Edwards, a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation who has written a Reagan biography and a book on the conservative movement, places Gingrich in a pantheon of four conservatives, with Reagan, Robert Taft and Barry Goldwater.

Edwards said Gingrich earned that spot for leading House Republicans to victory in 1994, but faulted his performance once in office. He said Gingrich lacks two of Reagan's core attributes, "prudence" and "wisdom."

On style, he finds little similarity between the two men. Reagan was "much more engaging, much more charismatic, much better at connecting with people than Mr. Gingrich is," Edwards said. "Reagan was always very, very self-deprecating and very modest about his achievements," while Gingrich's posture tends to be, "I'm very, very smart, look at me."