



Divisive duo returns

By Karen Finney - 11/21/11

The Republican Party has gone back to the future — again — as longtime friends and co-collaborators Grover Norquist, Republican operative and president of Americans for Tax Reform (ATR), and former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich take the lead. Despite his old baggage and new questions about his “non-lobbying” role providing Freddie Mac “advice on how to reach out to more conservatives,” Newt currently leads the polls in the Republican presidential contest. On Capitol Hill, Norquist is more powerful than ever, as his tax pledge remains one of, if not the, biggest factor preventing congressional Republicans from reaching an agreement with Democrats on how to deal with America’s debt.

The last time these two were in power together, the stalemate was also caused in part by a pledge, the “Contract With America,” which Norquist helped Newt write. The contract included dramatic cuts to programs like Medicare, so that congressional Republicans could keep their political promises to wealthy donors, at the expense of America’s seniors. Then, as now, Republicans blindly clung to their orthodoxy as they shut the government down twice, while making threats on the debt ceiling, the deficit and spending cuts.

Even then, the duo’s close ties were questioned as being more about politics than a conservative policy agenda. Edward Crane, then president of the Cato Institute, reportedly said, “Any intellectual movement is ill-served by being partisan, and Americans for Tax Reform is too closely identified with Gingrich and, after having taken all that money from the RNC, from being identified with Republicans.”

You see, just as the many “intellectual” organizations Gingrich has founded since leaving Congress are now being scrutinized as fronts for his partisan political ambition, under Norquist, Americans for Tax Reform and the ATR Foundation have been investigated for campaign finance violations and use of the organization as a surrogate of the Republican Party.

In April 1997, the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee investigated ATR for illegally coordinating with the Republican National Committee to exploit a soft-money loophole during the ’96 midterm elections in support of Republican candidates. According to the committee’s minority report, Americans for Tax Reform accepted a \$4.6 million “donation” from the RNC just a month before the midterms. Norquist claimed that the money was used in an effort to counter anti-Republican ads with 4 million calls and 17 million mailings to voters in support of the Republican plan for Medicare “reform.” An internal RNC memo outlined the effort: “Attached is a rotten rough copy of the 1st of 3 mail pieces that will be sent to 150 selected congressional districts ... We discussed this effort during Wednesday’s conference call. This is an effort

undertaken by Americans for Tax Reform.” The Senate committee’s report concluded, “The evidence collected by the committee shows clearly that ATR acted as a surrogate for the RNC, enabling the Republican Party to evade campaign finance laws. The coordinated effort between the RNC and ATR permitted the RNC to conserve hard dollars which the RNC could then expend elsewhere.”

At about the same time, Gingrich and his oversized ego overreached. In January of 1997 he was investigated for issues involving the use of a tax-exempt college for political purposes, becoming the only Speaker of the House to be reprimanded. Republicans finally realized (as they likely will again) that Gingrich was a liability; he was forced out of power and out of Congress.

If only that part of history would repeat, this time taking Norquist, a divisive, destructive force within his party, out of power.