

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The man who poisoned politics

I registered as a Republican when I turned 21 in 1970 and mostly voted Republican for the next two decades, including voting for George H.W. Bush as president in 1988.

But I was appalled by the 1992 Republican National Convention. President Bush's courteous, consensus-building style of governing was completely overshadowed by one speaker after another who demonized Democrats as an enemy of the people who were out to de-



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

stroy America.

No one talked about policies and practices to best serve the public good. It was about hating people who weren't part of your tribe.

The GOP convention was the harbinger of a new Republican Party largely shaped by Newt Gingrich, a Harrisburg-born academic who moved to Georgia to teach at West Georgia College and run for Congress, succeeding on his third try in 1978.

Gingrich's political philosophy is best summed up by a talk he gave to College Republicans that year:

"One of the great problems we have in the Republican Party," Gingrich said, "is that we don't encourage you to be nasty. We encourage you to be neat, obedient, and loyal, and faithful, and all those Boy Scout words, which would be great around the campfire but are lousy in politics."

Republicans need to recognize that politics is a cutthroat "war for power," he said. "Start acting like it."

Gingrich practiced what he preached. In Congress, he refused to work with Democrats on any issue, viewing bipartisanship as weakness.

As he rose in prominence within the Republican Party, he recruited like-minded candidates, many of them extremists, to run for Congress.

He urged them to use inflammatory words like "traitors," "shallow," "sick," "corrupt," "loony" and "stupid" to describe political opponents.

Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1994 for the first time in more than 40 years, which gave powerful credibility to Gingrich's "take no prisoners" style of politics.

Basking in the GOP's electoral triumph, Gingrich was elected Speaker

of the House in 1995, where he used his newfound power to further encourage the polarization of the country.

He even discouraged new Republican members of Congress from moving their families to Washington, D.C., where they were likely to form social ties with Democrats and their families.

By refusing to negotiate with President Clinton and Democrats, he torpedoed most efforts to get anything done, and then blamed Democrats for the resulting gridlock.

He even cheapened the impeachment process by pressuring the Republican majority in Congress to impeach Clinton for lying about his dalliance with a White House intern.

By 1999, Gingrich had alienated so many members of his own caucus he resigned from speakership and soon after his seat in the House.

But the new norms he established of "anything goes to win and keep power" has grown so powerful that polarization now has a death grip on the American political process.

The decline of traditional news institutions and the dominance of social media have amplified the political savagery many times over.

And the rise of Donald Trump, as former President Obama has noted, "is a culmination, a logical conclusion of the rhetoric and tactics of the Republican Party."

The ugly, derisive, abusive — and often extreme — comments that appear on The Mercury's "sound off" column almost every day are a testament to Gingrich's revolution. It even affects Pottstown.



NEWT GINGRICH sees politics as a war and bipartisanship as weakness. He preaches winning at all costs.