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Newt Dips His Toe in the Waters

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Distinctly Catholic

Newt Gingrich put his toe into the presidential waters yesterday. A man known for his brashness did not jump in head first, but the confusion that surrounded his announcement — was he forming an exploratory committee or not? — brought back the old charge that Gingrich lacked the discipline and comportment necessary for a successful presidential run. Over at Politico and in this morning's Washington Post, the main stumbling block to a Gingrich candidacy is his lack of discipline.

This concern about Gingrich is offset by what all agree is his extraordinary intellect. All are agreed that Gingrich is an "ideas guy," someone who is not content to mouth sentences penned by others, defend policies crafted by others, or look at problems based exclusively on what advisors tell him. Gingrich has original ideas. He generates new ways of looking at old problems. If you go to his website, there are no three paragraph, bullet-point, treatments of complex issues. On health care there is page after page of Gingrich's thoughts, with links at the bottom to more reading. Other issues receive similar, thorough treatment, with more reading linked at the bottom of the page. His website looks like a seminar more than a campaign site. Nor are his policy credentials unrelated to his political sense: certainly, he knows how the levers of power work sufficiently well that in 1994, he manufactured the first GOP majority in the House in 40 years.

Reporters, however, will need to spend a fair amount of time checking into some of the conclusions Gingrich has reached. Gingrich has new and big ideas but the point of intellectual exercises is to have good ideas. Nowhere is this more important than in Gingrich's understanding of history. After all, for a conservative, new and big ideas are viewed with suspicion unless they are rooted in the past, and for Gingrich, the source of America's exceptionalism is the Founding. He wants America to live by its first principles, and he purports to understand those first principles, and their importance, with unique thoroughness and vigor.

For example, on his website, he states that one of the goals for a sound immigration policy is to: "Ensure that becoming an American citizen requires passing a test on American history in English and giving up the right to vote in any other country." He notes that one of the principle features of American history is its religiosity. "History is vividly clear about the importance of God in the founding of our nation. To prove that our Creator is so central to understanding America, there is a walking tour of Washington, D.C. in Rediscovering God in America that shows how often the Founding Fathers and other great Americans, and the institutions they created, refer to God and call upon Him. Indeed, to study American history is to encounter God again and again. A tour like this should be part of every school class's visit to Washington, D.C." I have not taken that tour but I intend to. Because the role of the divine in the American Founding is not quite so clear as Gingrich suggests.

For starters, many of the most prominent founders " Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin " were Deists or, at least in Adams' case, Unitarians. They believed in a God who got the ball rolling but who, subsequently, left the world alone. Needless to say, the God of the Deists is no more. Whichever gods are worshipped in this great country of ours today, they are all of the interfering variety.

Secondly, despite Gingrich's belief that discerning the intent of the Founders and the meaning of the Founding is a fairly concise and straightforward enterprise of the mind, in fact, there is great debate about the motivations of the Founding. Indeed, the Founders themselves debated about the importance of the events they generated. There is a reason that, despite their distrust of partisanship, the Founders fell almost immediately into a two party system. They wanted different things from the Founding and engaged in a series of compromises that papered over those differences. Most famously, the Founders' inability to confront the evil of slavery left the loathsome institution to future generations who also were unable to reach compromise, resulting in the Civil War.

One thing is pretty clear about the Founders is their shared commitment to religious liberty. This was rooted in both their philosophy and their history. But, when push comes to shove, Newt has hedged on that central premise of the American political system. On the subject of the mosque planned for lower Manhattan, his website states: "Newt believes that the choice to build this structure so close to Ground Zero was a political decision designed to send a statement and thus must be viewed in that context, rather than simply in the context of whether a house of worship should be allowed to be built (there are over 100 mosques in New York City and over 1000 in the United States)." He opposed the construction of the mosque. Religious liberty for me but not for you was no part of the Founders' thinking.

Gingrich is also a fan of the great man theory of history. His documentary on John Paul II's role in the fall of communism focuses exclusively on the Pontiff's first visit to his native land after his election as Pope. Those days were critical to be sure. But, they could only be critical because they were preceded by years of mismanagement and corruption, of lies and fabrications, by the communist regime, such that the regime was hollow at its core when John Paul II returned to help kick the last leg out from under it. I like great man theories too " and the books based upon them are far more fun to read than other types of history. But, seeing history only through that one lens distorts as much as it reveals.

In short, it seems at first glance that for all his vaunted study of history, Gingrich's lack of discipline may extend to his intellectual endeavors as well as his management of his campaign apparatus. His big and new ideas may not stand up to scrutiny. His understanding of history seems marvelously calculated to support his ideological conclusions. Gingrich strikes me as a man with an interesting mind to be sure. But his agenda trumps his ideas.

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