

A CONTRACT WITH AMERICA

1994

----- *Newt Gingrich* -----

On September 27, 1994, more than 300 Republican congressional candidates met on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to sign the Contract with America, a pledge to enact ten specific bills within the first hundred days of the 104th Congress. The Contract with America gained the support of a large number of American voters: every Republican incumbent won reelection, while many Democratic incumbents lost, earning the Republicans a majority of seats in both the House and Senate. In a speech before Congress made on September 22, House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich of Georgia first introduced the Contract with America.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Motives

Does Gingrich mention specific solutions to the problems he names? Why or why not?

Mr. Speaker, I think at the beginning I want to talk tonight about the Capitol steps contract and cynicism in Washington, D.C....

Next Tuesday, September 27, we will have over 300 candidates for Congress from all over America coming to the Capitol steps to pledge a checklist and a contract. We have a basic document that says, "A campaign promise is one thing, a signed contract is quite another." Then what it outlines, in what will later on be a full page ad in TV Guide, is a basic set of commitments for the opening day, our checklist, and then a contract to bring 10 bills to the House floor and get them to a final passage vote in the first 100 days.

Mr. Speaker, I think what I am sad about about the things the White House has done so far to try to attack the contract, and the tone in some of the press coverage and the 1-minute speeches here by the Democrats today, is that I think they miss the whole point of what we are doing. There is not a word in this ad that talks about the Democrats. There is not a word in this ad that talks about the Clinton administration.

What this ad does is, it talks in a positive way about what Republicans would do to solve real problems. I'm going to read the ad, and then I'm going to explain the background of why we are doing this, and how we got to this.

The ad starts, as I said a minute ago, with a cover which says: "A campaign promise is one thing, a signed contract is quite another." That is why Republican House candidates have pledged in writing to vote on these 10

common-sense reforms.

Then it says:

GOP contract with America: We have listened to what you want and we hear you loud and clear. On the first day of Congress a Republican House will force Congress to live under the same laws as every other American.

Cut one out of every three congressional staffers.

Cut the congressional budget.

Then in the first 100 days we will vote on the following 10 bills:

One, balanced budget amendment and line-item veto. It is time to force the government to live within its means and to restore accountability to the budget in Washington.

Two, stop violent criminals. Let us get tough with an effective, believable, and timely death penalty for violent offenders. Let us also reduce crime by building more prisons, making sentences longer, and putting more police on the streets.

Three, welfare reform. The government should encourage people to work, not to have children out of wedlock.

Four, protect our kids. We must strengthen families by giving parents greater control over education, enforcing child support payments, and getting tough on child pornography.

Five, tax cuts for families. Let us make it easier to achieve the American dream, save money, buy a home, and send the kids to college.

Six, strong national defense. We need to ensure a strong national defense by restoring the essential parts of our national security funding.

Seven, raise the senior citizens' earning limit. We can put an end to government age discrimination that discourages seniors from working if they choose.

Eight, roll back government regulations. Let us slash regulations that strangle small business and let us make it easier for people to invest in order to create jobs and increase wages.

Nine, commonsense legal reform. We can finally stop excessive legal claims, frivolous lawsuits, and overzealous lawyers.

Ten, congressional term limits. Let us replace career politicians with citizen legislators. After all, politics should not be a lifetime job.

My point is, here are three reforms for the opening day that are our checklist of what we will do. Here are 10 specific bills that we are committed to bring to a vote in the first 100 days.

There is not a negative word here about the Democratic Party. There is not a negative word here about President Clinton and his administration. It is an effort on our part to be positive.

You might say, why are we being positive about this? I think that there are two very profound reasons why it would be good to have a positive campaign in October 1994, rather than a negative campaign.

The first reason is that people are so frustrated, people are so hostile, people are so angry, that you do not need to go out and get them madder. You don't have to go out and beat up on President Clinton or beat up on the Congress. People get it. They are already fed up.

What people want to know, I think, is what are you going to do differently? Our challenge to the Democrats is if they do not like our 10 bills, what are theirs? If they do not like our three reforms, what are theirs? Let us have a debate between ideas, but let us not have the kind of negative smear tactics that have driven the country, I think, to distraction, and have broken down any willingness to have a decent political debate.

We are prepared to debate on the issues: Is it a good idea to have a balanced budget amendment, a line-item veto, or not? Is it a good idea to have an effective, believable, and timely death penalty for violent offenders, or not? Should we encourage work and family in the welfare system, or not?

These are real policy proposals. We are going to have next Tuesday a whole set of bills. All 10 bills are already going to be written and available.

There is a second reason, I would argue, why it would be good to actually try to have a debate in October on the issues. I think this country is in trouble. People have talked about the economic recovery and all this stuff. Nonsense. The underlying core pattern of where America is at is real trouble.

If you do not believe me, watch any major city local television news, including Washington, for 2 nights. The child abuse, the rape, the murders, the cocaine dealing, the problems of American life are unbelievable. I am a history teacher, and I tell every audience that as a matter of history, not politics, as a matter of history, it is impossible to maintain American civilization with 12-year-olds having babies, 15-year-olds killing each other, 17-year-olds dying of AIDS, and 18-year-olds getting diplomas they cannot read. I don't think that is debatable. I think it is clear.

Yet, every single thing I just described is happening within a mile of your national Capitol. It is happening in every major city in the country. It is happening in West Virginia. It is happening on most Indian reservations. It is an objective fact, if you are going to be honest about it, that we are in the middle of the largest moral and societal crisis we have had maybe in the country's history.

The result has been a breakdown in trust in government. I think there are very deep reasons we are in trouble. I do not think what we are going to do in the first 100 days by itself is going to get us out of trouble. I think even if we pass all 10 of these bills...all they would be is the beginning. The purpose of next Tuesday, with all the Republican candidates on the Capitol steps, is to outline the beginning. It is the first 100 days.

Source: "The Capitol Steps Contract and Cynicism in Washington, DC" by Newt Gingrich in the *Congressional Record*, September 22, 1994, vol. 140

(Washington: Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. H9526–H9527.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Some students may answer that Gingrich describes specific solutions to the problems he names. They may cite his proposals to cut the congressional staff and budget and his proposal of ten specific bills to be voted on in the first 100 days of the congressional session. They may also cite such plans as building more prisons, lengthening prison sentences, putting more police on the streets, raising senior citizens' earning limit, enacting a balanced budget amendment and line-item budget veto, and limiting congressional terms in office. Other students may answer that Gingrich does not propose specific solutions to the problems he names. They may question how his more vague proposals would be put into practice, such as cutting taxes for families, ensuring a strong national defense, reforming the legal system, and rolling back government regulations. Students may speculate about the political purposes of this contract, perhaps by noting Gingrich's strategy of evoking partisanship by denying it is what motivates his contract.