

## SCIENCE AND THE NEW CONGRESS

# Gingrich Sees Tax Cuts, Reform as Spur for Industry

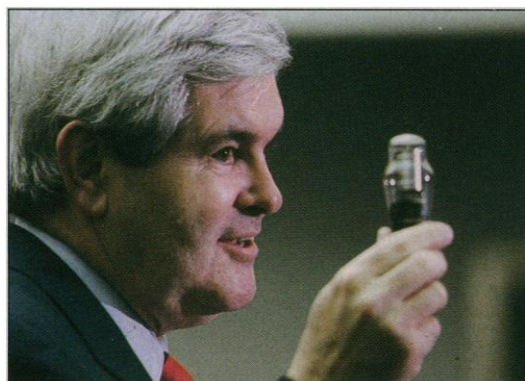
It is hard to imagine Democratic House speakers like Tip O'Neill or Tom Foley talking at length—much less with relish—about computer chips, new drugs, or advanced rockets. But last week, their Republican successor, Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich, displayed broad knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, science and technology issues. During a 40-minute session with Washington science journalists, Gingrich proposed easing the tax burden on companies to stimulate technological innovation, distanced himself from Republican efforts to abolish the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the National Biological Service (NBS), and endorsed increased federal R&D spending. All this was interspersed with references to inventor Thomas Edison, futurist guru Alvin Toffler, and talk-show host Oprah Winfrey.

The news briefing, sponsored by the D.C. Science Writers Association, was the first in-depth discussion of research issues by the new speaker. The former history professor, accompanied by Representative Robert Walker (R-PA), chair of the House Science Committee, left no doubt of his overall philosophy: provide tax cuts and ease regulations to stimulate industrial R&D, concentrate federal dollars on basic research, get the government out of the development of commercial technologies, and streamline procurement policies to ensure that the latest technologies are rapidly incorporated into weapons, space vehicles, and the like. Gingrich even brought along some props—a microchip and a vacuum tube—to make his points. The chip demonstrated the innovative spirit and competitive qualities of U.S. industry, he said, while the vacuum tube—still purchased in large quantities by the Federal Aviation Administration for a long-range air traffic monitoring system—symbolized the technological backwardness of the federal government.

Despite his avowed support for science, Gingrich warned that a “horrendous” fiscal crunch could wipe out any chance for growth in science budgets. And he predicted that, before the 104th Congress goes home next year, there could be four fewer federal departments. Some of that consolidation could take the form of a new Department of Science: Walker said he is working on legislation to combine the National Science Foundation, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Environmental Protection Agency, and parts of the Energy Department—including the nuclear

weapons program. The National Institutes of Health wouldn't be a part of the new department, Walker said. This reshuffling of the science bureaucracy could eliminate 5000 jobs, he added.

Gingrich's focus, however, is on helping industry. “How do we create a general climate, a general tax code, a general environment where the next 30 potential Edisons have an opportunity to invent the future?” he asked. For the biotechnology field, the speaker outlined a two-pronged effort to keep U.S. business ahead of its European and



**Power vacuum.** Gingrich says government's use of vacuum tubes shows technological backwardness.

Japanese competitors. He would cut the capital gains tax to provide the money necessary to develop and market new drugs while remaking bureaucracies like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which Gingrich says tie biotech products in regulatory knots. The way the FDA does its business, he declared, is “totally obsolete for the information age.” Republicans are considering a range of proposals to overhaul or even abolish the current FDA, but Gingrich declined to indicate which plan he prefers. He did, however, say that he believes U.S. companies should be allowed to sell abroad products banned in this country.

Gingrich's tax-cutting, anti-regulatory tune is music to the ears of biotech industry executives. “He's absolutely correct,” says Carl Feldbaum, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization. “He's stating our priorities just as we state them.” Strengthening partnerships between industry and government, an approach favored by the Clinton Administration, is less important, he added. Both Gingrich and Walker agree: They want to scrap programs such as the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program, which are devoted to joint govern-

ment and industry partnerships.

But while the speaker is leading the charge on slashing those programs, he says he is not targeting environmentally oriented agencies that other Republicans have set their sights on. Gingrich even offered the Administration some advice on one of its initiatives, the effort by the Interior Department to catalog biodiversity. He said he does not oppose such a survey of North America, but that the NBS is political dynamite that will blow up in the face of the Clinton Administration. “Everybody in the west and everybody in rural America assumes the [NBS] is designed by left-wingers in order to create a database so they can take over their land,” the speaker said. “I hope that we will presently have a ‘blank’ survey which will produce a database of the entire North American continent and which will be useful both for scientific, environmental, and economic purposes, but I am not sure what it will be called.”

Gingrich also stopped short of calling for the abolition of USGS, an idea floated last year by House Republicans as a way to cut the deficit. Walker said that parts of the survey—such as production of geological maps—could be privatized, and Gingrich added that “if you can in fact privatize things, I don't think that's bad.” At the same time, he defended his desire to ease some current environmental regulations and change the process of assessing environmental risks, without ignoring the value of research. “You can have a sound environment and a sound economy, and you can do it based on good science and good economics and good management,” Gingrich said, calling environmental critics “unscientific and irrational.” He's not the only one using strong words: Last month, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt referred to Republican attacks on the USGS and the Biological Service as “the resource equivalent of book-burning.”

Although Gingrich had scathing comments about most of the federal agencies he discussed, he did give high marks to NASA. Its administrator, Daniel Goldin, “is one of the most innovative and entrepreneurial managers in the entire federal government,” Gingrich said, adding with a smile, “and that may destroy his career.” He backed Goldin's plans to hire a company to operate the space shuttle and allow industry a larger hand in developing a new sophisticated launcher.

Gingrich's rapid-fire responses, enthusiasm, and familiarity with science wowed many of the media who gathered in the Science Committee hearing room. Some congressional Democrats were also impressed. “I don't think Foley could have found the room,” one minority staffer said ruefully.

—Andrew Lawler