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The Political Scene

The Good Wife

Can Callista Gingrich save her husband?

by [Ariel Levy](#) January 23, 2012



“The woman is always the grownup,” Newt Gingrich says. “I think no matter what.”

Eight days before Christmas, on the last non-holiday weekend before the Iowa caucuses, the Republican candidates for President darted across the state, dropping in at factories and shopping malls and pizza parlors, like birds surveying a beach and swooping down for food. But not Newt Gingrich. He was sitting in front of a portrait of George Washington and his horse in the gift shop at Mount Vernon, drinking a Diet Coke next to his wife and a man in an elephant costume. “I’m Callista, and this is Ellis the Elephant,” Mrs. Gingrich told one person after another. About two hundred people had lined up to have the wife of the former Speaker of the House sign a copy of “Sweet Land of Liberty,” a children’s book she wrote about a patriotic elephant who travels through American history, delivering lessons in rhyming couplets: “Independence was not so easily won. / It would take years of fighting and fighting’s not fun.”

Even for Newt Gingrich, who thrives on conflict, the fighting this primary season has not been that much fun. In December, forty-five per cent of the political ads in Iowa were Gingrich takedowns; the Super PAC Restore Our Future, which supports Mitt Romney, spent nearly three million dollars on such ads, and in one month Gingrich went from top

horse to underdog. Until recently, Gingrich was fond of citing what he called Ronald Reagan's eleventh commandment—"Thou shall not speak ill of fellow-Republicans"—and he often told audiences, "Barack Obama is my only opponent." But since January 3rd, when he came in a distant fourth in the Iowa caucuses, he has found denigrating other Republicans considerably more palatable. "If there's a clear distinction with Santorum, it is that I actually know how to build a nationwide campaign," Gingrich said, on his campaign's press bus in New Hampshire last week. He reserves his real disgust for Romney: at a debate in Concord, Gingrich snarled, "Mitt, I realize the red light doesn't mean anything to you because you're the front-runner," and then suggested that Romney "drop a little bit of the pious baloney." A video released earlier this month by the pro-Gingrich Super PAC Winning Our Future depicts Romney as a heartless corporate raider, to whom "nothing mattered but greed."

At Mount Vernon, though, Gingrich was still at the top of the polls, and his smiling, grandfatherly aspect was on display. Newt, who is sixty-eight, wore a suit with a red tie and a blue lapel pin depicting Washington's Commander-in-Chief flag. Callista, who is forty-five, was dressed in a black skirt and a cherry-red Armani jacket and wore a triple strand of pearls around her neck. As a couple, the Gingriches are a bit like Jack Sprat and his wife in reverse: he is pudgy and soft-featured, with droopy jowls and hooded eyes, while she is slender, with a sharply angled nose and bright-blue eyes that are always wide open. Her hair is platinum blond and very stiff, with one remarkable lock styled into an immobile, upward swoosh.



"I was spreading some risk around, and apparently it all wound up in your portfolio."

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"Where do you get your hair done?" a red-haired woman asked as she got her book signed.

“At Sugar House in Old Town,” Mrs. Gingrich said quietly, referring to a salon in Alexandria. (Her stylist, Tatjana Belajic, told me she has yet to get a request for “the Callista,” though that would surely change if Mrs. Gingrich became First Lady.)

“You and I have such beautiful natural color,” the redhead said, chuckling conspiratorially. “Yeah, right!”

Mrs. Gingrich kept her face frozen in a smile, but she did not really look amused. “Have you met Ellis the Elephant?”

Callista Gingrich has a firm formality that can be very effective in curtailing conversations she does not wish to engage in. In April, 2010, she appeared with her husband on “Hannity” to promote a documentary they made about Pope John Paul II. (The two of them are partners in a film company, Gingrich Productions, but Callista holds the title of president. “I’m just talent—she does all the hard work,” Newt told Sean Hannity.) At the end of the interview, Hannity said to Mrs. Gingrich, who was dressed in a crisp violet suit, “He won’t answer this. How do you feel about him running for President?”

She replied, “We haven’t talked about that yet.”

“Not once? Not even over dinner?” Hannity persisted. “Are you planning on a long discussion about it, maybe in the near future?”

Callista Gingrich raised her eyebrows slightly and replied in the implacable tone of a kindergarten teacher scolding a six-year-old, “We’ll discuss it early next year.”

Gingrich announced his candidacy in May, and his wife’s role in the campaign has been controversial ever since. At the end of the month, Gingrich outraged his staffers by refusing to cancel a cruise through the Greek isles that he and Callista had planned. The campaign had suffered a series of embarrassing reports—that he and his wife had a half-million-dollar line of credit at Tiffany, that he’d been paid nearly two million dollars for consulting work with Freddie Mac—and the staffers were concerned that a luxury cruise to Mykonos would not help make Gingrich seem like a regular guy, or like a serious candidate. Virtually all of them quit. Gingrich has called the months of June and July “the hardest in my career” and credited both his wife and her elephant with keeping him in the race. “One of the things that actually saved us, in addition to Callista’s stubbornness, was Ellis the Elephant,” Gingrich recently told the *Times*. He might have been speaking of his wife when he described Ellis as “happy, positive, interesting, creative.”

In the gift shop, a young woman wearing a leather jacket and a cross told the former Speaker, “I’m going to vote for you—my first vote!”

Her mother, a woman with long white hair who was wearing a fisherman’s sweater and a prairie skirt, nodded and said, “We raised them right.”

After they'd had their book signed, I asked why they supported Gingrich. "I've read a lot of his books, and he's a very intelligent person," the daughter, a student at Northern Virginia Community College, said. Her mother, who went to work for the Navy after homeschooling her four children, said she was unaware that Callista Gingrich was the former Speaker's third wife—and that he'd had an affair with her for six years before divorcing his second wife, Marianne, and that he'd had an affair with Marianne before he left his first wife, Jacqueline Battley, the mother of his children. The woman and her daughter agreed that Gingrich's committing adultery was between him and God. "But, I mean," the mother said, "I'd prefer he hadn't."

While Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum hustled between events in Iowa, Gingrich stayed home that entire weekend and acted as his wife's date. On the evening after her book signing, he received a round of applause as he entered the Fairfax High School auditorium, near their house in McLean, Virginia, and took a seat in the fourth row. Fairfax is in one of the wealthiest counties in America, and the thousand-seat auditorium looked more like a well-kept theatre than a place for teen-agers to put on Christmas pageants. The hall was nearly full of people who'd come to hear a concert by the City of Fairfax Band, in which Callista Gingrich plays French horn. She looked elegant in a long black skirt, a black jacket with a jewelled clasp, and pearls, seated behind a row of red poinsettias at the edge of the stage. Before the lights went down, she gave her husband a wave and a smile, and then the band launched into the snappy suite from the animated Christmas movie "The Polar Express." A boy in the row in front of Gingrich looked back at the former Speaker, turned to his friend, and whispered, "He might be the next President!" As the band began playing "Silent Night," Gingrich drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, he attended Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the largest Catholic church in the country, where Callista sang with the choir, a well-rehearsed group of paid musicians in royal-blue robes. Gingrich converted to Catholicism at sixty-five, and has said that his wife played a crucial role. "When Newt became a Catholic, it was one of the happiest moments of my life," Callista told me.

"Newt does things for her," Rick Tyler, a former Gingrich campaign spokesman, told me. "He never played golf before Callista was around, even though that's what you do as a politician, but he plays now, because she does. You would never find him at the Kennedy Center at the opera, but now he's a member." In New Hampshire, Gingrich described having his wife on the campaign trail as "extraordinary—it's like everything else about hanging out with her." He added, "If she wasn't with me, who would fix my hair in the morning?"



*"Who'da think guys like us would ever
have found ourselves looking forward
to Social Security like this?"*

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On the press bus, he told me that Callista is “the grownup” in their relationship. “The woman is always the grownup,” he said. “I think no matter what.”

I asked Callista, who was sitting next to him, if she agreed. “Most days,” she said, and laughed.

Though Callista is central to Gingrich’s life, her public role in his campaign has been largely ornamental. She accompanies him on the trail, smiling behind him at events; in December, she appeared with him in a Christmas video to ask, “Is there anything more inspiring than American towns and neighborhoods brightly lit for the holidays?” But she does not have a stump speech, and though she’s happy to exchange pleasantries with reporters, she has not been granting interviews, with the exception of a brief on-camera conversation with the Christian Broadcasting Network. The resulting story, which also included interviews with Rick Perry’s wife, Anita, and Jon Huntsman’s wife, Mary Kaye, was called “A Tale of Three Wives.” Until recently, the title appeared on the home page of Gingrich’s campaign Web site, leading many visitors to wonder if they could click through to an explanation of the candidate’s complicated marital history.

But, of course, this is not a topic Gingrich wishes to highlight. His “personal baggage,” as his opponents call it, is one of his biggest liabilities with conservative religious voters. Mitt Romney likes to emphasize that he is a “man of steadiness and constancy,” married for forty-two years to his high-school sweetheart, Ann. One of Rick Santorum’s ads shows him strolling through a garden with his arm around his wife, and explains that they’ve been married twenty-one years and homeschooled seven children. Callista

Gingrich is a reminder of her husband's wayward past, which may explain why she is the only one of the Republican candidates' spouses to keep quiet.

Gingrich's spokesman, R. C. Hammond, a tall, bald young man, told me that it was just the first campaign team who felt that Callista ought to be kept out of the spotlight. The current operation, a handful of mostly young true believers, views her as "a very important part of the campaign," Hammond said. "I've referred to her many times as our chief morale officer." I asked if it was time to present her to the public, and Hammond said, "People who think we're running a normal campaign think that, but that's not what we're about." What exactly is Gingrich running, then? "I work here," Hammond said, dryly, "and I still can't figure it out."

At the Al-Jon scrap-metal plant in Ottumwa, Iowa, Gingrich, too, insisted that the ordinary rules of campaigning didn't apply to him. "I am running the most insurgent campaign since Ronald Reagan!" he told the twenty reporters who'd assembled in a back room, after watching him give a speech in front of a giant car-crushing machine. "The establishment deeply wishes I would go away, and I hate to tell them this, but I'm not leaving." Asked if he was fighting for the survival of his campaign, Gingrich replied, "No more than I was every day for the last eight months. It's just a normal everyday business for us."

Callista, who had stood by silently through the speech, was seated to the side of the room when I asked Gingrich how he viewed the role of the potential next First Lady. "She is a very disciplined, professional person," he said. "She's a classical pianist by training"—she majored in music at Luther College, in Decorah, Iowa. "She's helped make seven documentaries. Just a very talented, competent person. She works very, very hard." I asked when we'd be hearing from her, and Gingrich looked over at his wife and said, "I don't know. What do you think?"

"When R.C. says yes," she said brightly.

"We're waiting for R.C. to unleash her," Gingrich said with a smirk.

It is unlikely, however, that Hammond has much say in whether Callista Gingrich goes public. According to current and previous staff members and friends, Mrs. Gingrich wields a great deal of decision-making power. Of the notorious Greek cruise, one former Gingrich strategist told me, "She said, 'Either go on this vacation or we're done.'" There were rules, he said, about "how many nights he could be away and what time he had to be home for dinner—which led to a huge abuse of private planes which we could not afford. There's a sense that, I'm not gonna have a third failed marriage."

Will Rogers, Gingrich's Iowa strategist until last May, said he left the campaign because he could not get the candidate to commit the requisite time to meeting voters. "I would send requests through channels, and they would largely go unreplied to. When people are providing really good opportunities to meet face to face with county chairmen and you're not getting a response, it's very frustrating."

Matt Gunderson, a good friend of Callista's since junior high school, told me, "One of the sad parts of the initial stages of the campaign is that she was perceived as being an obstacle, perceived as being cold and stiff." Unlike the other candidates' spouses, she has never had to face the scrutiny of a campaign, or of life with an elected official. "There's a level of cautiousness in her personality—not the most overly ambitious personality you're going to run into," Gunderson said. "So when you look at the daunting task of a Presidential campaign, you go, Ugh, really?"



"Pants in or out?"

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Her job as a campaign spouse is largely arduous and dull. She spends most of the day onstage, staring at her husband as he makes the same speech in Manchester, then Bedford, then Concord, then Merrimack, while photographers squat at her feet, taking pictures. With each iteration, she must look freshly impressed. Asked what she thinks about while she's standing there, she replied, "I think, if anything happens to him, I could probably finish the speech." There is very little room to be anything other than dutiful.

The former strategist had a different assessment. "She's the single most self-centered person I've run into in politics—it's all about her. They do these movies together, and she does a word count: she has to have the same number of words on camera as he does or they have to reshoot." (A spokeswoman for Gingrich Productions denied this.) The strategist allowed that the marriage has been good for Newt: "This is the most adult relationship the guy's ever had." But he suggested that it hasn't been good for his campaign. "The core problem was that he was not willing to do the things he'd have to do to run for President. And Callista did not want him to run for President. That's why he had to buy her so much damn jewelry."

Karen Olson, who says she has had a “sibling-like” relationship with Callista since the second grade, travelled with the Gingrich campaign for several months this summer. “Newt is madly in love with Callista, and he would do anything for her,” she said. “The disgruntled people who left, they thought he was supposed to drop everything and do whatever they said. It was like, no, it’s not going to work that way!” She felt it was “beyond their imagination” that a marriage could be such an equal partnership. “It’s easy to blame the spouse,” Olson continued. “I will tell you this: if she really hadn’t wanted him to do it, he wouldn’t have run.”

In the unlikely event that Callista Gingrich did become First Lady, she would be unusually well suited for the position. She is good with children, bending down to touch their hands in Manchester, hoisting them onto her lap to meet her elephant at Mount Vernon. She told me that if she were First Lady she would focus on promoting music education—precisely the kind of uncontroversial passion that plays well with everyone, like Laura Bush’s crusade against illiteracy. She has an old-fashioned politeness that borders on primness, and she ends many interactions with the words “God bless.” Throughout his political career, Newt Gingrich has tried to summon voters’ nostalgia for a bygone and probably imaginary America; he has spoken longingly of the kind of small Midwestern town where “a lot of Norman Rockwell still exists.” Callista is from that place.

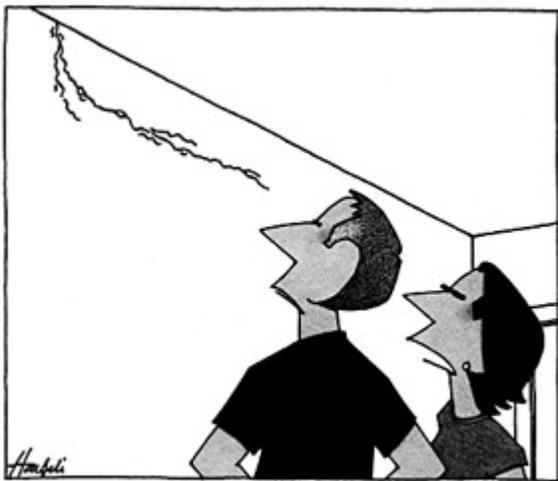
She does not seem like a forty-five-year-old, or at least not like a forty-five-year-old of this era. She has the style and smile of an astronaut’s wife, even in her downtime. Once, in Cedar Rapids, I happened to run into her in the women’s bathroom at the airport. In her suit and pearls, with her stiff coiffure, she looked as if she had just exited a beauty parlor in 1962. “I don’t think she owns a pair of jeans,” R. C. Hammond joked. “Casual Friday is not something that happens a lot around Callista.” This is the way she was brought up. Matt Gunderson told me that Callista’s mother, Bernita Bisek, “was probably the last woman to wear slacks in public in our town.”

Bisek still lives in the house where she raised Callista, in Whitehall, Wisconsin, population 1,589. “There are less stores here now than when we moved here,” Bisek, who is seventy-nine, told me. “There used to be a ladies’ dress shop, and there was what they called the farmers’ store—furniture, drygoods.” When her daughter was born, in 1966, she named her Callista because “before I got married I worked at the Merchants Bank in Winona, Minnesota, and the president’s wife’s name was Callista, and she was the nicest lady, a very pretty lady.” She gave her the middle name Louise, after her mother. “We call her Cally Lou for short,” Bisek said. “It started out when she would do something wrong when she was little: she’d look at me and I’d say, ‘Cally Lou!’ Later on, Newt thought that was cute, so he started calling her Cally Lou, too.”

Bisek was a secretary, and her husband, Allie, worked for twenty years in a packing plant. “Then it locked up, and he went to work at a place where they made car switches,” Bisek said. “Money was always tight.” When Callista took an interest in the piano, in the fourth grade, it wasn’t easy to buy her an instrument. “I had one of those little electric organs, and when she did start taking lessons she practiced on that first.” By junior high,

she was singing in the choir during the school year and playing the organ in church all summer, and she had also taken up the French horn. Her involvement in politics came largely through music: sometimes she would sing on parade floats for Representative Steve Gunderson, her friend Matt's older brother.

She and Karen Olson, who also played the piano, went to Luther College together, and Olson told me that Callista practiced the piano six hours every day. "We were in a sorority called Delta Alpha Delta—the anti-sorority sorority, in that there was no such thing as hazing, and anyone who wanted to be in got in. I wouldn't quite call us outcasts, but strong-willed women who didn't play a normal game." Olson said that she and Callista both decided to pursue careers outside of music. Callista was accepted in a graduate program in broadcast journalism at Emerson College, in Boston. But before she left, Olson told me, "Matt Gunderson said, 'You should just go out and do an internship with Steve this summer.'" She decided to go.



"Can't we just get some load-bearing wallpaper?"

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At home, Bisek had hand-sewn all her daughter's clothes and "used to knit her little vests"—even when, in junior high, "some of her friends were going into name brands." It was not until Callista went to work for Gunderson that she started buying her own clothes. "When she went out east, she said to me one day, 'Well, you know, I have to pay a lot for my clothes because I'm used to your homemade clothes, and if I want something that's going to wear like yours does I have a hard time finding it,'" Bisek said. "We thought she would work that internship and then be back again, but it never happened." Steve Gunderson indicated that Callista was not politically ambitious; she was "probably just more curious about the process." But, he said, Callista is a "very determined person." At the end of the internship, he asked her to stay on, and she agreed. As Olson put it,

“You don’t look a good job as a gift horse in the mouth.” Callista told me, “I sometimes wonder how my life would have been different had I gone to Boston.”

According to Olson, Callista “did not really date” in college. “She was not so skinny growing up. Not fat, but . . .” Olson searched for the right words. “She has grown into her beauty.” Bisek told me that Callista was always independent. “She did go with this one man a few years,” she said. “He also worked for one of the politicians out there, and he was a nice person, her age—we liked him. I think the deal was she had forgotten something at his apartment and she went to get it, and he had another girlfriend there, and that was the end of that.”

Callista met Newt Gingrich while she was working for Gunderson, and, after she took a job as a clerk with the House Agriculture Committee, they began their affair. Her parents learned about it only when they returned from a camping trip and found dozens of messages from reporters on their answering machine. “I got a call from Callista saying, ‘You probably will be getting questions asked,’” Bisek told me. “She said that she was dating Newt then. It was a shock, you know, obviously.” At that time, Gingrich was leading the charge against Bill Clinton for his dalliance with Monica Lewinsky, an intern more than twenty years his junior. As it happened, Callista was a congressional staffer twenty-three years Gingrich’s junior, the same age as his daughter Jackie. “There was an age difference, and I said, ‘Maybe you should give it some further thought,’ ” Bisek told me. “She said, ‘I’ve thought about it.’ But then, you know, the age difference is exactly what her grandma and grandpa Bisek’s was.”

Olson told me, “I certainly remember saying, ‘Callista, please be careful—nobody wants to see anybody get hurt.’ ” But she said that she felt concern rather than disapproval. “We grew up where there was a moral code, so I don’t think anybody thought, ‘Oh, this doesn’t matter; it’s no big deal. But we’re also fairly nonjudgmental, because that would be presumptuous.’ ” (When Olson came out as a lesbian, she told me, Callista was similarly open-minded.) Olson was surprised that her friend had fallen in love with the architect of the Contract with America: “Initially, you certainly go, ‘Wow, this doesn’t make a lot of sense.’ But, as we’ve gotten to know him, he is not only married to my friend, he *is* my friend.”

It is not lost on Bernita Bisek that Gingrich left his two previous wives. When I asked her if it worried her, she said, “It does, some. But you can’t do anything, anyway. You think about it, you know, but you don’t let it overwhelm you. You only have one child.”

If Cally Lou Bisek marched through childhood wearing hand-sewn trousers, proudly playing her horn, the boy who became her husband was, he has said, “very lonely” and “pretty weird as a kid.” His mother, Kathleen, married his father, Newton McPherson, when she was sixteen and left him a few days afterward. Nine months later, on June 17, 1943, Newton Leroy was born. He was three when his mother remarried, to a man he has described as “angry” and “totalitarian,” an Army officer named Robert Gingrich, with whom he had a volatile relationship. Once, when Gingrich was fifteen, he stayed out past curfew. When Newt got home, Bob Gingrich has said, he “grabbed him by the lapels, and

I smashed him against the wall. Newt was bug-eyed. Then I dropped him. There was no need to shout. He didn't do it again."

Family life was unstable. They moved often, and by the time Gingrich was sixteen he had lived in Pennsylvania, Kansas, France, and Germany. Recently, at a campaign event organized by a Web site called CafeMom, he talked about living with his mother's depression and bipolar disorder: "My whole emphasis on brain science comes, indirectly, from dealing, um . . ." He winced, and started crying. "See how I'm becoming emotional?" he said, with difficulty, then continued. "From dealing with the real problems of real people, in my family. So it's not a theory—it's, in fact, my mother."

As a student at Baker High School in Columbus, Georgia, Gingrich fell in love with his geometry teacher, Jacqueline Battley. She taught him to drive. "He was her little boy," Gingrich's mother has said. They were married in 1962, after his freshman year at Emory, when Gingrich was nineteen and Battley was twenty-six. The couple had two daughters, and after Gingrich got his Ph.D. in history, from Tulane, they settled in Carrollton, Georgia, where Gingrich taught at West Georgia College. "We lived on a dead-end street across from campus," Jackie Gingrich Cushman, their daughter, told me. "My sister and I would wait for him in front of the house, and you could literally hear him whistling on the way home. You could hear the happy tune before you saw the happy man." She whistled a few bars of "The Popcorn Song," one of his favorites. "It's a real happy, lively tune."



"Wow—your blood pressure is impressive."

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But Gingrich had broader ambitions. A colleague at the college said that even then he wanted to be Speaker of the House, and Gingrich has said he realized early that, for a

man like him, “your job is to spend your lifetime trying to change the future of your people.” He ran for Congress twice and lost before his successful 1978 campaign, which he organized around the slogan “Let Our Family Represent Your Family.” After he was elected, he moved the family to Fairfax, Virginia. One year later, he met Marianne Ginther at a political fund-raiser in Ohio, and within weeks, she told the journalist John Richardson, he asked her to marry him. It was “way too early, and he wasn’t divorced yet,” she said. “I should have known there was a problem.”

Before the campaign, Jacqueline had been treated for uterine cancer. “He walked out in the spring of 1980,” she told the *Washington Post*. That September, she was taken to the hospital to have a tumor removed. “I went into the hospital for my third surgery,” she said. “The two girls came to see me, and said, Daddy is downstairs and could he come up? When he got there, he wanted to discuss the terms of the divorce while I was recovering from the surgery.” (The tumor turned out to be benign.) “To say I gave up a lot for the marriage is the understatement of the year.”

Gingrich married Ginther six months after his divorce became final. With her at his side, he became the political success he’d always hoped to be, masterminding the end of forty years of Democratic rule in the House. As he has put it, “I found a way to immerse my insecurities in a cause large enough to justify whatever I wanted it to.” Gingrich was grandiose enough to warn the representatives in his party that they had to advance a conservative agenda as he defined it or he would have them replaced by younger, more malleable politicians. The process worked, but it was not a gentle one, and it made him many enemies. Gingrich, though, seems to be impervious to other people’s anger. At a campaign stop at the Hy-Vee grocery store in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, a man with a gray beard, wearing a camouflage shirt and cap, told me he’d come from hunting just to tell the former Speaker what he thought of him. The man stationed himself in front of a display of dinner rolls, and when Gingrich strode past he clasped the Speaker’s hand and said quietly, “You know what? You’re a fucking asshole.” Gingrich smirked and replied, “It’s a free country, and you’re entitled to your opinion.” He patted the hunter on the shoulder and then reached for the next hand.

Gingrich has said he identifies with the Scottish hero Robert the Bruce: “The guy who would not, could not, avoid fighting.” With his first marriage, he rebelled against his parents, who never approved of the age difference between him and Battley. (His stepfather boycotted their wedding.) To pursue Marianne Ginther, he had to abandon the family he’d put at the center of his campaign, infuriating even his former partisans. And with Callista he put himself in another impossible situation that he’d need to fight his way out of. According to Ginther, he asked Callista to marry him before he told Ginther he wanted a divorce—while he was championing the Personal Responsibility Act. “He believes that what he says in public and how he lives don’t have to be connected,” Ginther said. “If you believe that, then, yeah, you can run for President.”

Gingrich’s policy positions generally accord with those of religious voters, and, increasingly, so does his rhetoric; Gingrich Productions made a two-part documentary

called “Rediscovering God in America,” which argues that “ ‘our Creator’ is the source of our liberty, prosperity, and survival as an exceptional nation.” Yet in Iowa he polled no better with evangelicals than he did with anybody else, and in New Hampshire he lost the religious vote by a wide margin.

At the CafeMom event, a woman in the audience who identified herself as evangelical told Gingrich that she needed to be convinced he’d undergone a “fundamental change of the heart” and that his admissions of moral failings weren’t just politically expedient.

Gingrich appeared sincere when he replied, “I am a sadder and slower person than I was twenty-five years ago.”

His sister, Candace Gingrich-Jones, told me that she has seen a difference in Gingrich, which she attributes in part to his marriage. “Callista is a very sweet person, and she can be silly,” she said. “I don’t know if you can picture this, but they make each other giggle.” Asked on his campaign bus in New Hampshire if he had any regrets about Iowa, Gingrich said, “Well, I think I should probably have ordered the pork tenderloin one morning,” and his wife indulged him with a big laugh.

Many conservative voters, particularly evangelicals, do not want to see just evolution or mellowing, though; they want to see repentance for what they view as profound transgressions. “Initially, my reaction to Newt Gingrich and to Callista is that the third wife doesn’t get to be the First Lady,” Penny Nance, the president of Concerned Women for America, told me. “I came at it completely believing that evangelical women would not even consider him, and I’ve been surprised by their willingness to listen and forgive. I attended an event he had here with evangelicals, and there were some pretty tough questions. The most interesting thing to me was not the answers but how he handled them. The old Newt that I knew would not have handled it very well, but this Newt did. He really tried to divine what was at the heart of the question and didn’t come across as rude or arrogant.” Still, she cautioned, “We cannot allow Newt Gingrich or anyone else’s moral failure to be used as an excuse by others for their own wrongdoing and saying ‘Hey, I can still be President!’ ”



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Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, who won Iowa in the 2008 Presidential primaries with enormous support from religious conservatives, told me that he believed Gingrich's penitence was real. But, he said, "I hear from friends who are conservative women who say, 'I will not vote for Newt Gingrich.' I say, 'Why?' 'He's walked out on two wives.' And these are hard-core Republican women—conservative activists, women who put signs up in their yards, make phone calls. And they have bluntly said, 'I will not vote for him.' Not 'I have questions about voting for him' but 'I will not vote for him.' That sort of rocked me back on my heels." Huckabee added, "I don't hear that ever from male voters, by the way. What does that tell you? Men are pigs."

In fact, there has been an aggressive response from religious men, too. Jason (Molotov) Mitchell, a Christian television producer who has linked Obama to Nazism, released a video in which he accused Gingrich—"the Kim Kardashian of the G.O.P."—of being "the walking, talking definition of untrustworthy," sneered at Callista for being "quite the missionary," and asserted that "Newt and Callista are the last role models we want our sons and daughters looking up to."

Tony Evans, the senior pastor of the Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, a nine-thousand-member, primarily African-American church in Dallas, told me, "I teach our congregation that we should make our political decisions like we make all our other decisions: based on how closely aligned the candidates are to the Bible." I asked Evans how we could assess the sincerity of Gingrich's reform. "You can look at how long they have been married to their current mate, you can look at the support of their current mate, and you can even find out in a sense from past mates if they think this person has

changed and reformed—because they know them better than anybody else. See, you’ve got to do extra credit because you failed before.” In Gingrich’s case, Evans suggested, that extra credit ought to entail a public discussion of his marital past, ideally one that Callista would participate in. “It’s not enough to just say, ‘Yeah, I did it.’ Her speaking out would accent what he is saying and could be helpful—would be helpful, probably.”

In New Hampshire, Gingrich seemed surprisingly confident for a man at the bottom of the polls. “My goal is to come in first in South Carolina,” he said on the day of the New Hampshire primary, “and I think that’s doable.” Several days earlier, the casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson had given five million dollars to the Super PAC Winning Our Future, which will spend \$3.4 million deluging South Carolina with anti-Romney ads in the course of just two weeks. “This election is wide open,” Gingrich said.

There were, however, many more sign-wielding Ron Paul enthusiasts than Newt supporters standing in front of Gingrich’s events. On the night before the primary, he had scheduled a stop at his New Hampshire headquarters, a storefront on Elm Street in Manchester. The building was packed with volunteers and curious locals eager to meet the candidate; strangely, though, nobody was making last-minute phone calls to voters. One woman in her seventies told me that she was voting for Romney but had driven forty minutes to see Callista Gingrich: “I want to know how she gets her hair to stay like that.” Out on the street, several dozen protesters had gathered, some holding “We Are the 99%” signs, others singing “Ron Paul, Ron Paul” to the tune of “New York, New York,” a few dressed in pink pig costumes. Elm Street temporarily had the giddy feel of the parking lot outside a Grateful Dead concert. Several hours after Gingrich was supposed to materialize, his campaign abruptly cancelled the event; the head of “risk management” told me that embarrassment was a bigger threat than physical harm.

In the primary, Gingrich took fourth place, with nine per cent of the vote, but he seemed undeterred. Karen Olson told me, “I think they’re still hanging pretty tight to the possibility” that Gingrich will be the nominee. “Whether they’re letting themselves see the chink in the armor, I don’t know.”

Before he left for South Carolina, Gingrich gave a speech to supporters at the Radisson in Manchester. Callista was at his side, wearing a bright-red skirt suit and pearls, nodding in approval as her husband said the same things he’d been saying all week: That he wanted to give Americans “paychecks, not food stamps.” That he would be the second coming of Ronald Reagan. That he would change “the entire pattern of how Washington operates.” Callista watched and smiled and listened, the things she has to do the most these days. On the campaign bus, asked if her mind ever wanders at these events, she had replied, “No,” with a cheeky smile. “I hang on his every word.”

As the reporters laughed, Newt stood to leave and said, “I think there are moments when, like the rest of you, she says, ‘Will he please quit, so we can go home?’ ” ♦

