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## Newt's nastiness comes back to haunt him



By [Dana Milbank](#), Published: December 9

The campaign of Mitt Romney, the Rip Van Winkle of presidential politics, finally awakened this week with a savage counterattack against Newt Gingrich, the man who against all odds is threatening to wrest the Republican nomination from Romney.

In a conference call Thursday sponsored by Romney's campaign, two surrogates of the former Massachusetts governor let fly with a barrage against Gingrich that was shockingly harsh even by today's caustic standards.

"For Newt Gingrich, in an effort of self-aggrandizement, to come out and throw a clever phrase that has no other purpose than to make him sound a little smarter than the conservative Republican leadership," said former White House chief of staff John Sununu, "is the most self-serving, anti-conservative thing one can imagine happening . . . just the latest in a pattern of anti-principled actions that really irritated his own leadership and produced 88 percent of the Republicans in Congress voting for his reprimand."

"He's not a reliable or trustworthy leader," former Missouri senator Jim Talent said of Gingrich's labeling the House Republican budget a "radical" proposition. He "says and does those kinds of things because he's not reliable as a leader."

Self-serving. Self-aggrandizing. Anti-conservative. Anti-principled. Hints of corruption, hypocrisy, and bizarre and destructive behavior. These were brutal descriptions, and yet there was something poetic about the belated Romney assault on Gingrich. The attacks used terms that were popularized by Gingrich himself in his rise to power.

Nearly two decades ago, Gingrich's political action committee, with the help of GOP

wordsmith Frank Luntz, issued a [now-famous memo](#) telling Republican candidates which words they should use to describe their opponents. Among them: “anti,” “betray,” “bizarre,” “corrupt,” “destructive,” “disgrace,” “shame,” “lie,” “pathetic,” “radical,” “self-serving,” “selfish,” “shallow,” “shame,” “sick,” “traitors.”

“These are powerful words that can create a clear and easily understood contrast,” this Gingrich-endorsed memo explained. “Remember that creating a difference helps you. Apply these to the opponent, their record, proposals and their party.”

With that memo, and with the slashing style of politics that brought Republicans to power in the House for the first time in generations, Gingrich did more than anybody else to set the tone in Washington. Now, in a form of rough justice, the savagery has come full circle and is being used against its sponsor.

Romney and his surrogates — many of whom served under Gingrich in the House — are portraying Gingrich as erratic, unreliable, hypocritical and a betrayer of friends and principles. They are contrasting that with Romney, a “leader” and champion of “reform” — terms that Gingrich’s memo, based on focus-group research, coached Republicans to use to define themselves.

Gingrich has followed his own philosophy over the years, making an art of name-calling. He once said that Democrats created a “sick society” and were the “enemy of normal Americans.” Democratic congressional leaders were “sick” and had a “Mussolini-like ego” that led them “to run over normal human beings and to destroy honest institutions.”

He called the Clintons “counterculture McGovernicks.” More recently, he accused President Obama of having a “Kenyan, anti-colonial” worldview and called him “the most serious, radical threat to traditional America ever to occupy the White House.” Gingrich said schools should use children as laborers instead of “unionized” janitors — all phrases rich in the “contrasts” that Gingrich’s team advocated in the 1990s.

[Kevin Drum of Mother Jones](#) recently dug up a [1978 Gingrich quotation](#) lamenting that “one of the great problems we have in the Republican Party is that we don’t encourage you to be nasty.”

Thanks to Gingrich, this is no longer a problem, in either party. Embracing Newtonian Nastiness, Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) called Gingrich “[too erratic](#),” “too self-centered” and lacking “the capacity to control himself.” Former congressman Guy Molinari (R-N.Y.) called Gingrich “[evil](#)” and the prospect of him becoming president “appalling.”

Then came the Romney-hosted teleconference.

Gingrich “says outrageous things that come from nowhere, and he has a tendency to say them at exactly the time when they most undermine the conservative agenda,” Talent reported.

Gingrich “is more concerned about Newt Gingrich than he is about conservative principle,” Sununu contributed. The “off-the-cuff thinking . . . is not what you want in the commander in chief.”

Now, Gingrich said he doesn't want to be “[the attack dog in the Republican Party.](#)” But it's a bit late for purity. He's Newt Gingrich, and he approved this message.

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