

PROFILES IN CITIZENSHIP: HOW TO KEEP THE REPUBLIC



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Newt Gingrich

Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and presidential hopeful, is one of the most influential politicians of the last few decades. But before he revolutionized American politics in the 1990s, Newt Gingrich was a history professor at Western Georgia College. We interviewed Gingrich, who is now a commentator on CNN's *Crossfire*, on March 25, 2005. Here's some of his advice for students.

On why students should study history:

If you've never run out of gas, you may not understand why filling your gas tank matters. And if you've never had your brakes checked, you may not care about having your brakes checked. And if you've never slid on an icy road, you may not understand why learning to drive on ice really matters. For citizens, if you haven't lived in a bombed-out city like Beirut or Baghdad, if you haven't seen a genocidal massacre like Rwanda, if you haven't been in a situation where people were starving to death, like Calcutta, you may not understand why you ought to study history. Because your life is good and it's easy and it's soft.

But for most of the history of the human race, most people, most of the time, have lived as slaves or as subjects to other people. And they lived lives that were short and desperate and where they had very little hope. And the primary breakthroughs have all been historic. It was the Greeks discovering the concept of self-governance, it was the Romans creating the objective sense of law, it was the Jewish tradition of being endowed by God—those came together and fused in Britain with the Magna Carta, and created a sense of rights that we take for granted every day. Because we have several hundred years of history protecting us. And the morning that history disappears, there's no reason to believe we'll be any better than Beirut or Baghdad.

On keeping the republic:

Be responsible, live out your responsibilities as a citizen, dedicate some amount of your time every day or every week to knowing what is going on in the world, be active in campaigns, and if nobody is worthy of your support, run yourself. . . . The whole notion of civil society [is] doing something as a volunteer, doing something, helping your fellow American, being involved with human beings. America only works as an organic society. . . . We're the most stunningly voluntaristic society in the world. And so if voluntarism dries up, in some ways America dries up.