

The Boston Globe

MONDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2011

Frank, Gingrich are back in the ring

Old-time foes show
enmity still strong

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GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — Neither shies from a fight. Lately, they might even be spoiling for one. And neither Barney Frank nor Newt Gingrich is known for mincing words.

A recent exchange of sarcasm between Frank, the liberal Democrat from Newton, and Gingrich, the former House speaker from Georgia and now a top contender for the GOP presidential nomination, has advocates for civility in politics ducking for cover.

►Gingrich could gain the most from Cain's departure. A2.

In the past week, as Gingrich surges in the polls, it's been Frank turning up the heat. Yesterday, all the candidates were fair game, but he saved his most incendiary jab for Gingrich.

"As I look at the Republican debate, I have been casting 'The Wizard of Oz,'" said Frank on the ABC news pro-

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gram “This Week.”

“Newt is the Wizard of Oz,” he said. “There’s nothing there.”

That followed an interview last week in which Frank, who is retiring from Congress, called Gingrich “a despicable human being. . . . I think he’s just one of the worst people that I know of who didn’t commit violence against somebody.”

Gingrich spokesman R.C. Hammond returned fire: “Grumpy is no way to spend your retirement.”

Although that was a relatively mild retort issued by a staffer, Gingrich is getting the bulk of the blame in the he-started-it-first game. Wagging fingers point to Gingrich for kicking up the latest dust when, during a GOP presidential debate in October, he suggested a new place of residence for Frank, the former chair of the House Financial Services Committee.

“If you want to put people in jail . . . you ought to start with Barney Frank,” Gingrich spouted during the debate, contending that Frank sought to help others benefit from a dysfunctional housing program and blaming him in part for creating the environment that led to the economic meltdown of 2008.

When news broke a month later that Gingrich earned at least \$1.5 million in consulting fees from embattled mortgage giant Freddie Mac, a favorite target for blame from conservatives for the crisis, Frank had his opening.

“He’s a man with no ethical core whatsoever,” Frank said. “Newt’s just never had any principles.”

For two diametrically opposed figures on politics, Frank and Gingrich are remarkably similar otherwise. Close in age — Frank is 71, Gingrich is 68 — they began their congressional careers two years apart, with Gingrich arriving first in 1978.

Both are whip-smart and feisty. Frank earned a law degree from Harvard. Gingrich, a college professor before being elected to Congress, holds a doctorate in European history.

They have become perfect

foils: two oversized characters whose wicked wits, acerbic and sometimes smug personalities, and razor-sharp tongues have added to the spectacle and high drama of American politics.

“It’s about two of the most forceful speakers coming from completely opposite ideological positions,” said Harry Gural, Frank’s spokesman. “These are titanic forces who are emblematic of this age and their parties.”

They were hardly friends from the start, but at least they were civil, according to Stuart Weisberg, a former Frank congressional aide who wrote Frank’s biography, “Barney Frank: The Story of America’s Only Left-Handed, Gay, Jewish Congressman.” The book, released two years ago, had Frank’s blessing. Frank insists that his disdain for Gingrich is nothing personal.

When the enmity began is uncertain. Even Frank doesn’t recall.

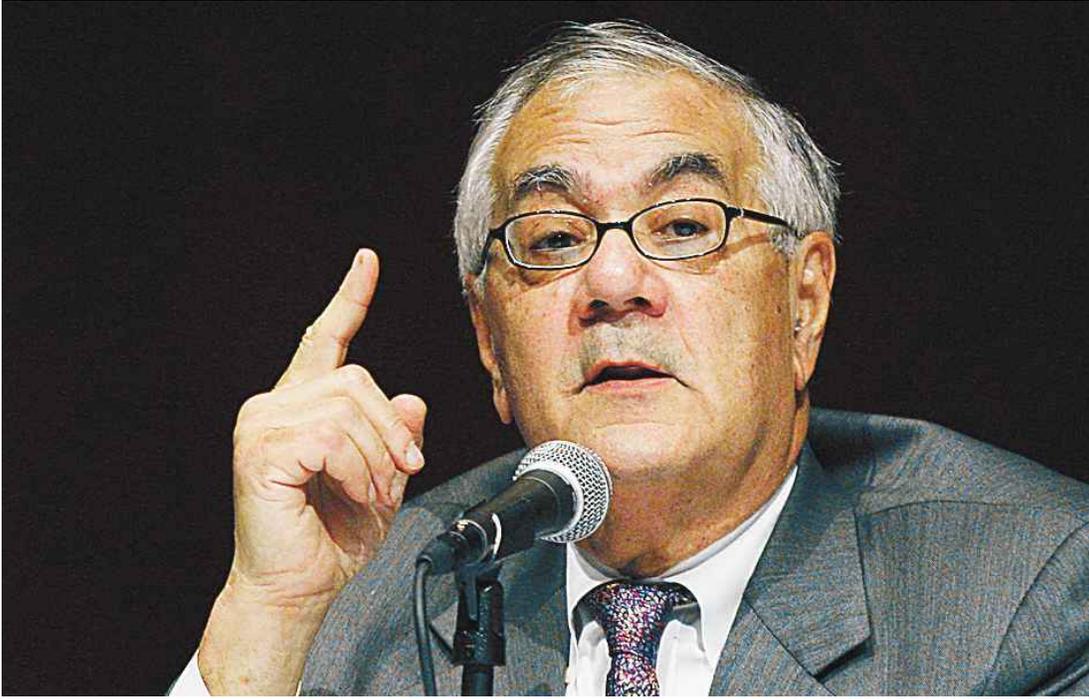
Frank, who arrived in Congress in 1980, was pressed into service to help shore up his fellow Massachusetts Democrat, Tip O’Neil, then the speaker, who was under assault from a new generation of uncompromising Republicans, including Gingrich.

As each man’s stature grew in a House cleaved by partisanship, hostilities escalated.

“Barney Frank hates me,” Gingrich told the Republican National Committee during a 1995 meeting.

The genesis of that hatred, Gingrich told his colleagues, was the scandal that enveloped Frank in 1989. Republicans contended Frank knew a gigolo was running a gay prostitution ring from Frank’s apartment. Frank denied he knew and disputes whether the ring even existed. Ultimately, he was reprimanded solely for using his House privileges to influence the prostitute’s probation status on a prior felony and to waive 33 parking tickets. Frank, who had publicly revealed his homosexuality in 1987, also admitted to paying the man for sex.

“For the life of me, I cannot imagine a member of Congress who would say they think this is acceptable behavior,” said Gingrich as he led a pitched battle for



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Representative Barney Frank (top) and Newt Gingrich have revived a long-running enmity. Gingrich recently said Frank belongs in jail; Frank called Gingrich a “despicable human being.”

the more serious penalty of censure.

Some observers contend Frank’s sexual orientation has been a particular point of friction. Frank would call Gingrich one of the most homophobic lawmakers on the Hill. Gingrich would later opine: “I think there is a gay and secular fascism in

this country that wants to impose its will on the rest of us.”

As for censuring Frank, Gingrich lost that debate, but the political tides were turning. With Gingrich plotting strategy and heralding his “Contract with America” conservative manifesto, the GOP won control of the House in 1994. Gingrich became

the first Republican speaker in 40 years.

Democrats anointed Frank, a skilled parliamentarian, as a crucial foot soldier to toss procedural obstacles in the way of Gingrich’s effort to overhaul House rules.

On the first marathon day of Gingrich’s tenure, Frank strode

to the microphone: “When you are in the majority, you inevitably have to defend some dumb things. But in one day, you have been dumber than we were in two years.”

For the rest of the decade, scandals would fuel the feuding. In 1996, the House reprimanded Gingrich for improperly using funds from a tax-exempt foundation for political purposes. Then, revelations of a tryst between President Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky emboldened Gingrich, who launched impeachment proceedings even though he faced criticisms for his own infidelities.

Frank, as a senior member of the Judiciary Committee, the arena for the proceedings, became Clinton’s chief defender. Early on, when Gingrich called for decorum when discussing Clinton’s predicament, Frank quipped: “Newt Gingrich issuing rules of decorum is like Mike Tyson reissuing the Marquess of Queensberry rules” of boxing.

When it comes to political entertainment, both men know their audience, said Danny Hayes, assistant professor of government at American University in Washington. “It’s easy for them to get applause from their respective constituents by attacking the other,” Hayes said.

The Clinton scandal was central to the GOP effort to pad its House majority. Instead, Republicans lost seats, and a revolt was underway. Gingrich resigned in 1999.

A dozen years later, Gingrich is the comeback story of the year. His strong performances in debates, coupled with foundering rivals, have catapulted him into a GOP front-runner.

For Frank, the bigger the target, the sharper his barbs.

“He’s negative, unprincipled, and gives my business a bad name,” he said of Gingrich. “I don’t find anything admirable about him. . . . The more I dislike people, the more I enjoy the fact that I make them angry.”

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