House Speaker Newt Gingrich Discusses the Contract with America

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NBC's Katie Couric interviews Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich about his first 100 days in office and his landmark "Contract with America."

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KATIE COURIC, co-host:

On CLOSE UP this morning, the first 100 days. That's the time frame usually used to assess the president's initial months in office, but this time we're talking about the man on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

Mr. Speaker, good morning. Welcome.

Reps. SPEAKER GINGRICH: Katie, it's good to be here.

COURIC: What was your proudest accomplishment in the last 100 days?

Rep. GINGRICH: Oh, I think, emotionally, it was standing there the other night on the 91st day passing the tax cuts, realizing we had done nine out of the 10 things we promised to do. We voted on all 10, and it was amazing. It was on schedule. Dick Armey had done a great job, and to look around at the whole team and just think we were able to do this.

COURIC: What was your biggest regret?

Rep. GINGRICH: Not passing term limits. I think...

COURIC: Really?

Rep. GINGRICH: ...I think when we get 85 percent of the Republicans to vote yes, and--and you only get 12 percent, or 18 percent of the Democrats, I was--I was surprised and I...

COURIC: But Henry Hyde, in fairness, the...

Rep. GINGRICH: Henry Hyde was fabulous...

COURIC: ...Republican was the most vocal opponent.

Rep. GINGRICH: ...I mean, you have to recog--you have to respect the member of either party who is that articulate, who gets up and tells you how they honestly feel and what their moral conviction is. And, just as I said about Mark Hatfield in the Senate, if somebody on a constitutional amendment as a matter of personal conviction feels that way ought to vote the way they feel. But to see a split--we have the
Republicans with 85 percent approval and the Democrats 82 percent disapproval--I thought was sort of amazing.
COURIC: In poll after poll, Mr. Speaker, a majority of the people say that deficit reduction is more important than--than tax cuts. So you're under...

Rep. GINGRICH: We're going to do both...
COURIC: ...Congress is under incredible pressure, more pressure than ever before to come up with some very concrete spending cuts. And many political observers believe that--that it won't be one big happy family, that the--the coalition might be torn apart when it comes down to these hard choices. Are you worried about that?

Rep. GINGRICH: Well, I'm very worried about how do we go in a country that has not had a regularly balanced budget in over 60 years to having a budget that's balanced every year at peacetime; and it's a huge change. And, as you know, we have a 190--125 page briefing that we've already given to our members. Virtually every Republican House member had the briefing. I'm going to speak tonight at 8:00 for about a half hour and talk about where we're going to balance the budget, how we're going to do it. It's going to be one of the great efforts of--of modern times to remake the federal government so that we can get to a balanced budget.

But when you see the numbers, $187,000 is what a child born this year will pay in taxes just for interest on the debt in their lifetime. You can't keep doing that. None of us can keep doing that. And, so, I think you're going to see a real effort on our part in May, led by Congressman John Casey, and I think, frankly, we're going to produce budget balanced in seven year.

COURIC: How successful do you think the Democrats have been in portraying the Republicans as the party of the rich. I understand they have been sporting buttons that say pick on someone your own size, and they have made much of the fact that the savings from the school lunch program will go to--to finance tax cuts for wealthy Americans. That is their spin on it...

Rep. GINGRICH: Well...
COURIC: ...many people in an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll believe, or are afraid that the Republican Party is going to go too far and eventually hurt the poor. How worried are you about that perception?

Rep. GINGRICH: Very interestingly, 96 percent in yesterday’s New York Times poll said they want welfare reform. We're doing it. In this morning's poll over 90 percent said they want to see work required and training required for welfare. We're doing it. Our child tax credit goes directly to help children. The school lunch program increases every year by 4 1/2 percent. The only people we cut out are the Washington bureaucrats. As people learn the facts, and you see this in the polls today, as people learn the facts, our plan gets more and more popular. And the Democrats look like they're negative and whining and petty. And I just think it's the--it's the wrong strategy on their part to be negative.

COURIC: But can you honestly say, Mr. Speaker, that in three years the same number of kids who receive school lunches will continue to receive them?

Rep. GINGRICH: I cannot--in the first place, I can't honestly say that because there are children going to private schools that charge thousands of dollars of tuition who are being given a free lunch at the expense of their own future. They're going to spend the rest of their life paying interest on a debt because we are
borrowing the money to given them, quote, "a free lunch" they will pay for the rest of their life.

COURIC: Speaker of the House...

Rep. GINGRICH: Good to see you.

COURIC: ...Newt Gingrich, thanks so much.

Rep. GINGRICH: Thank you.

COURIC: Good to see you, have a good time at your celebration today.