

# You Are Not the Speaker

Politicians like Newt Gingrich who cling to their old titles are pretentious, incorrect, and un-American.

By [Emily Yoffe](#) | Posted Tuesday, March 20, 2012, at 12:32 PM ET



Mr. Gingrich, not Speaker Gingrich  
Photograph by Jessica McGowan/Getty Images.

Newt Gingrich can be called many things: garrulous, grandiose, philandering. But one thing he should not be called is "Mr. Speaker." Gingrich ceased to be entitled to that title when he left the House on Jan. 3, 1999. But you would never know it from the obsequious way journalists have addressed him during the campaign, where "Mr. Speaker" and "Speaker Gingrich" have become standard. It's as if he is *Downton Abbey's* Earl of Grantham, his honorific adhering to him for life.

Gingrich is not the only figure in American politics who's attached to a job title he no longer has. Every ex-Cabinet official seems to think he or she is a permanent secretary. John Nance Garner, who served as a vice president of Franklin Roosevelt, [famously declared](#) that the office "wasn't worth a pitcher of warm piss." But oh, how former vice presidents hold onto that piss pitcher now. When [Al Gore](#) or [Dick](#)

Cheney shows up to be interviewed, it's all "Mr. Vice President." And, of course, we have a gaggle of former presidents running around who are loath to abandon being called "Mr. President." As the indispensable Judith Martin [slyly notes](#) of the recent president-for-life trend, "Miss Manners would have thought that having reached that position would surely have cured anyone of status anxiety."

Such title inflation is not only pretentious and incorrect, it's un-American. Our forefathers so disliked the notion of an aristocracy that they forbade it in the Constitution. [Article 1, Section 9, Clause 8](#) begins: "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States." It's a little noticed proscription these days, but at the time it represented a profound break with the ways of the old world. As [Alexander Hamilton wrote](#), "Nothing need be said to illustrate the importance of the prohibition of titles of nobility. This may truly be denominated the corner stone of republican government; for so long as they are excluded, there can never be serious danger that the government will be any other than that of the people."

Jay Wexler, professor at Boston University School of Law and author of [The Odd Clauses](#), about the lesser-known provisions of the Constitution, says the increasing practice of title-keeping—while not strictly unconstitutional—is unseemly: "It does by analogy speak to the issue of creating a small but nonetheless permanent class of citizen who get titles forever and can be distinguished from everyone else. So it's inconsistent with the spirit of the clause."

But is there really any harm in humoring the pompous ex-official who enjoys that toasty feeling that being called "speaker" or "secretary" or "president" brings? I think so. Those who hold the highest offices in the land deserve a bit of deference. The problem arises when the people who hold those offices start to take the deference personally. To ease the shock of losing power, the former official, like a kindergartener taking a teddy bear to school, may prefer to cling to an old honorific. But our country was founded on the notion that certain people don't get to lord it over the rest of us just because of the title they carry.

It is rare to see politicians correct someone for over-inflating their title. Admonishing people who don't give them their due is another matter. A good example of the latter came when Sen. Barbara Boxer [verbally boxed](#) the ears of a brigadier general testifying before her who, in proper military fashion when speaking to a high-ranking woman, called her "ma'am." Boxer's response: "You know, do me a favor. Could you say 'senator' instead of 'ma'am'? It's just a thing. I worked so hard to

get that title, so I'd appreciate it," In her last re-election campaign that moment was used against her as an illustration of [her arrogance](#). But former officials who don't set straight those who incorrectly call them by their old titles should come in for criticism as well. Even if Gingrich doesn't twist journalists' arms until they call him "Mr. Speaker," he clearly basks in the undeserved esteem the title brings. (If you believe that, in declining to point out that he should be called "Mr. Gingrich," the candidate's real goal is to save others awkwardness and embarrassment, then you don't know Newt Gingrich.) The websites of the presidential libraries are also lousy with references to [President Carter](#) and [President Clinton](#). And if they didn't want to be called "secretary" in their [joint appearance](#) at the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Ft. Worth, surely James Baker or Condoleezza Rice would have made that clear before they were introduced. And what of the reporters who slather on the titles? Journalists could argue they use appellations as sign of respect, but I think it's a feint—a touch of obsequiousness before sticking in the shiv. So, as CNN's John King's did, you preface your question to Gingrich about [whether he suggested to his second wife that they have an open marriage](#) by calling him Mr. Speaker. But the press should get things right, and not implicitly misinstruct the public.

That titles are important is illustrated by the month-long congressional debate that took place in April 1789. At issue was what to call the first president of the new nation. Historian [David Currie described](#) how the Senate, always the more la-di-da half of Congress, proposed, "His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties." The House refused, and it was pointed out that this form of address was likely unconstitutional, as [Article 2, Section 1](#) designates, "The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America."

George Washington had an exquisite understanding of the power of symbols, so when (not-His Highness) President Washington retired from public life, he chose to cease being called "president" and revert to his previous military title of "general." And when Harry Truman left office to return to Independence, Mo., his neighbors appreciated, David McCullough writes in [Truman](#), "the way 'Mr. Truman' conducted himself, as a fellow citizen."

Just think, a president returning to the life of a private citizen sans imperial retinue—how quaint. Robert Hickey, deputy director of the [Protocol School of Washington](#) and author of [Honor & Respect: The Official Guide to Names, Titles, and Forms of Address](#) writes that the

rules of the road vary for former officials. Hickey says that for those who held offices filled by only one person at a time—such as president, vice president, secretary of state, and even governor or mayor—it is confusing to the public, and disrespectful to the current office holder, to hang onto the title. People with titles held concurrently by many, such as senators or judges, are not violating tradition by keeping their honorifics.

There's an exception for members of the House: Despite hearing Ron Paul endlessly called "congressman," there is no such official title. Members of the House of Representatives are supposed to be referred to by their social title (that is Mr. or Ms., or Dr., Mrs., or Miss as preferred). But when everyone around you has a fancy title, lacking one grates. So the [State Department's Office of Protocol](#) notes, with some resignation: "The titles 'congressman' and 'congresswoman' are becoming more common in social usage, but are not, strictly speaking, correct forms of address."

Retaining an aura of power has obvious benefits—including being able to trade on that power. Hickey says the military is particularly sensitive to title abuse in the business world. He explains that after 20 years of service a retired officer is entitled to use his or her former rank socially, but they are not supposed to use that title in business if it can be misconstrued. A former colonel can call himself that on his daughter's wedding invitation, for instance, but if he's employed by Boeing, he's supposed to be Mr. when he's on the job. Although, Hickey adds, "Around Washington it's very typical for defense contractors to encourage employees to use their rank."

Hickey says the best rule for any ex-official is, "Who are you at this moment?" If you're a former senator who's now a lobbyist on K Street, you should work your contacts as a private citizen, not as "senator." (As for the use of "the Honorable," Letitia Baldrige [says it is properly affixed for life](#) to those who have served high office at the federal, state, or local level. But the important nuance is that "the Honorable" is a way for others to describe the former official—in an introduction or on a place card, say. It's not how exes should style themselves.)

In her book on American manners and their origin, [Star Spangled Manners](#), Judith Martin writes that despite Americans' reputation as being brash and uncouth, "we have had an enormous and beneficial influence on the way people everywhere behave." Among our good work is modernizing the way people are addressed, "so as to minimize the differences between the weak and the powerful." We diminish that accomplishment if we treat the once-powerful as if they have ascended to a peerage.

As an exemplar of American unpretentiousness, look to John Quincy Adams. During his remarkable and distinguished career he was our ambassador to the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and the United Kingdom. He was a senator, secretary of state, and president. After he finished his presidency, he was elected to the House of Representatives, where he vigorously opposed slavery. Joseph Wheelan, author of *Mr. Adams's Last Crusade*, about Adams' last 17 years in the House—he died in the Capitol— says that during that entire time this man of many titles was known simply as “Mr. Adams.”\*

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