Newt vs. New York

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Newt Gingrich is running for president by running against New York. That’s the essence of the victory speech he gave in South Carolina when he single out “elites in Washington and New York.” The former Speaker of the House of Representatives is out of touch if he thinks New York City is dominated by elites. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For Newt, “elites” is a code word for Democrats. But he clearly has not looked at recent election results in New York City. During the past twenty years, voters have consistently elected Republicans to be mayor, rejecting the Democratic candidates in five separate elections. Independent voters, not affiliated with any political party, are the fastest growing segment of the city’s electorate. And last fall, when a special election was held to replace former congressman Anthony Weiner, an unknown Republican defeated the Democratic candidate who came from a prominent Democratic family.

No political party, ethnic group, labor union or industry dominates New York City in the 21st century. The city is neither liberal nor conservative; it’s filled with people who live by their wits and their willingness to put up with the noise, the crowds, and the fast pace of life that defines the city. Over the past nineteen years, New York has witnessed a 79 percent drop in major crimes, making it the safest large city in the United States — a key reason why more tourists come to the Big Apple than to Orlando or Las Vegas. And Times Square, once known for prostitution and panhandling, is now an all-American urban theme park, filled with dazzling high tech billboards, pedestrian plazas, and national retail stores open 16 hours a day.

Of course New York, as the nation’s financial center, is home to more millionaires than any other city in the nation. But, unlike almost every other large city in the United States, the wealthy live and work here; they don’t escape to the distant suburbs. And the super-rich who live in New York City understand that their success requires safe streets, clean parks and a mass transit system that carries five million riders to and from work every day. There is a powerful social contract that ties New Yorkers together. Upper income households are willing to pay taxes because they depend on public services as much as the poor. In fact, the top one percent of tax filers in New York City account for 60 percent of all the personal income tax collected by the city government.

Nowhere is Newt Gingrich more off-target than in his failure to know that New York City is at the forefront of the battle to improve public schools. Ever since Michael Bloomberg gained control of the city’s public schools, more than 100 failing schools have been closed and around 150 charter schools have been created. No other mayor has been willing to fight the entrenched teachers’ union when it comes to merit pay or teacher evaluation. Across the country, in states such as New Jersey, Connecticut and Louisiana, there are young, innovative leaders who got their start in the Bloomberg Administration’s Department of Education. And the superintendents of the Baltimore, Wilmington, and Chicago public school systems are all products of the New York City school management team.
Modern conservatives love to talk about balanced budgets; New York has come a long way since the fiscal crisis of the ’70s, when it was on the verge of bankruptcy. Today, it has a higher credit rating than either Chicago or Los Angeles, a product of the fiscal discipline and prudent approach the city brings to municipal spending. For more than a decade, New York City has consistently balanced its budget, and since 2009, it has outperformed the national economy when it comes to private sector job creation. Further, New York City sends far more tax revenue to Albany and Washington than it gets back from either the state or the federal government.

The site of the deadliest foreign attack on the continental United States was New York City. The 2,823 people who died at the World Trade Center were not “elites,” no matter what the former Speaker of the House says. Newt Gingrich may be a historian but he cannot rewrite history. The truth is too painful for the children who lost a parent and the families that lost a loved one.

New York’s remarkable recovery from September 11 is due in part to the outpouring of aid and assistance from people all over the country and around the world. Americans recognized that New York was a target precisely because it symbolized the values of this country: freedom, opportunity and commitment to the rule of law.

Despite forecasts that New York would decline precipitously after September 11, just the opposite has happened. The city’s population is at an all-time peak and its streets and subways are jammed seven days a week.

On a typical weekday, there are more than four million people on the island of Manhattan. Surely even Newt can do the math and realize that there are just too many people here for all of them to be elites. Most are here to make a living, attend college, visit a museum, get treated in one of our medical centers or go shopping. No matter what Newt Gingrich says, the human energy that drives New Yorkers is too intense and too competitive for a bunch of “elites,” to survive here, much less prevail.