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Newt to Poor: Let Them Eat Laptops

The new Speaker of the House is a technology buff. Last week Newt Gingrich expanded C-SPAN's coverage of the House of Representatives and announced that all committee hearings, bills and committee reports would be available electronically on the Internet. A few days later, Gingrich proposed a new financial gimmick that would allow low-income people to participate in their own demise. Gingrich called for a tax credit for the poor to buy laptop computers. Under the Republicans, the poor will be able to monitor Congress as it dismantles the very federal programs designed to help them: food stamps, Medicaid, mass transit and school aid.

The same politician who refused last summer to support midnight basketball for teenagers now wants to use the tax code to encourage poor people to buy laptops. Finally, we can tell the difference between Republicans and Democrats - Republicans believe the road to salvation is through technology (this year, it's the Internet). Democrats believe the poor - like everyone else - deserve to be fed, housed and educated before they take a trip, even if it's on the information superhighway.

Gingrichian tax credits to buy laptops are especially mean-spirited since most low-income households can't afford to buy a computer, never mind a printer and related peripherals. In order to take advantage of tax liability, you must first spend the money. Should the Republicans actually pass a low-income tax credit for purchasing laptops, the biggest beneficiaries will undoubtedly be the offspring of the rich - who already file separate tax returns in order to pay lower taxes on the gifts they receive from their parents and grandparents. Now, the federal government will give them another gift - laptops, back-lit with color, of course.

Rather than worry about laptops, let's make sure the poor have their own phones and that the public schools have an adequate supply of personal computers and telephone lines. More than 90 percent of the households in New York State have telephone service, yet almost one-fourth of the low-income households in the poorest urban neighborhoods don't even have a local telephone line, even when it is available for just \$1 a month.

And city kids are worse off than suburban kids when it comes to personal computers in the schools. There is one computer for every 10 - 8 students in the state's suburban public schools, but in New York City's public schools there is one personal computer for every 17.7 students. Furthermore, most New York City classrooms haven't advanced beyond the blackboard and chalk stage. Without telephone lines in the classroom, computers can't link kids to databases and educational materials. (And connecting a personal computer to an on-line service is not cheap: It costs more than \$100 a year to subscribe to America Online, not counting the phone charges.)

Last summer, when Democrats tried to include money for midnight basketball in the federal crime bill, Republicans ridiculed the idea. But basketball is actually a wiser investment than laptops, and it is more consistent with traditional values. It fosters teamwork - to win, you must pass the ball and learn how to accept authority (unless you're a New Jersey Net). It even rewards excellence (they're among the highest paid professional athletes).

Unfortunately, while Republicans were willing to wage war on basketball, the Democrats in Congress are unwilling to criticize the lunacy of tax credits for laptops. Public officials love to believe that technology can solve our problems. Reagan tried to build a "Star Wars" defense system to protect against a surprise Soviet attack. Now Gingrich wants to fight poverty via the Internet. Just as television isn't the cause of violence, computers aren't the panacea for poverty.

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