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## Clinton, Gingrich both defend the pope

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, longtime foes in American politics, forcefully defended Pope Benedict XVI on Tuesday against a wave of Muslim criticism over a speech last week.

When asked about the controversy prior to her speech at an American Cancer Society event, Clinton, D-N.Y., said the pope's follow-up statement should have been enough to settle the matter.

"It's just outrageous and offensive that people would be threatening violence against him based on what he said, especially when there is so much they should be working on together," Clinton said.

The former first lady has a huge lead in her Senate re-election bid this year. Her opponent, Republican John Spencer, had criticized her Tuesday for not speaking out in the pope's defense.

After appearing onstage with Clinton at the cancer event, Gingrich was even more outspoken about the religious tension.

"I think what he said in his entire speech ... is that Islam has to come to grips with having a genuine dialogue of mutual respect," said Gingrich, a Georgia Republican when he was in the House. "Everything you've seen of the viciousness and the evil that has been said since then by fanatics reinforces the pope's speech."

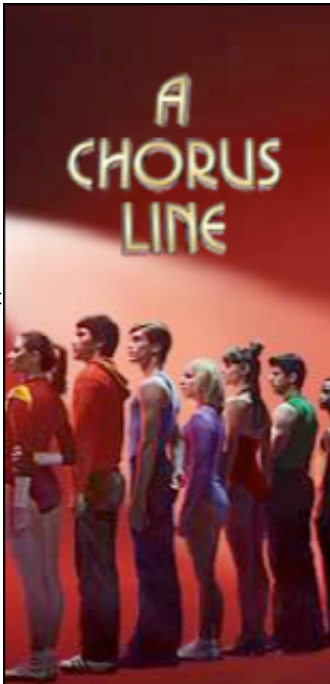
Both Clinton and Gingrich, who as House speaker sparred for years with President Clinton, are considered potential presidential candidates in 2008.

Benedict angered much of the Muslim world with a speech that cited a Medieval text that characterized some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith." He later said he was "deeply sorry" if Muslims were offended, but some Muslims demanded a more forceful apology.

The comments led to mass protests in several Muslim countries. In Somalia, a Catholic nun was slain, a shooting that may have been motivated by anger at the pope's remarks.

"I think it's amazing that a 65-year-old nun who's serving as a nurse in Somalia can be killed over words, and people aren't outraged by the vicious barbarians that killed her," Gingrich said.

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