

Clinton Proposal to Gingrich for

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Fulfilling what the White House calls the spirit of the "New Hampshire handshake," President Clinton yesterday proposed an eight-member commission on political reform that would recommend broad changes of campaign and lobbying laws by Feb. 1.

The proposal came in a letter to House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) released by the White House in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where Clinton is attending an economic summit. White House press secretary Michael McCurry said it was the president's way of following up on their debate in New Hampshire last Sunday when the two were asked why the White House and Congress could not get together to reform campaign and lobbying rules.

Clinton and Gingrich said they were willing to do so, and in a handshake that symbolized the conciliatory tone of that debate, agreed to work together. But yesterday's proposal by Clinton drew a far from conciliatory response. Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley called the detailed proposal a "cheap political trick" that violated staff agreements earlier this week to

begin meeting on the scope and structure of such a commission.

"They agreed to get together at the staff level, and then they go to Halifax and announce a detailed proposal before we know anything about it. That is a classic formula for political grandstanding not serious compromise," Blankley said. The questioner in New Hampshire proposed that a commission structured like the recent military base-closing commission be put in place.

That bipartisan commission, dealing with the highly politicized issue of which congressional district should lose its military base, was structured so its recommendations had to be accepted by the president and sent to Congress in full, or rejected, with no alterations. Congress for its part, must accept or reject the recommendations in an up or down vote with no amendments and within 30 days of their submission to Congress. Clinton, in his letter, argued the same rules should apply to political reform if it is to have any chance. "Only in this way can the American people be assured that narrow interests do not pick apart the coherent and comprehensive recommendations," he said.

Despite the president's pledge to make such

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political reform a major effort of his first two years in office, the White House proposed but then let die its first package of reforms—as much because of Democratic opposition as opposition by the narrow interests Clinton cited in his letter.

Clinton's proposal calls for an eight-member commission appointed by the president in consultation with Congress. Clinton would have two appointments; two would be recommended by Gingrich; two by Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.); and two would be made by the Democratic leaders in House and Senate.

Clinton proposed that none of the appointees be federal officials or members of Congress or associated with the political party operations. Under the appointment process, the commission would presumably be split four-four for each party. He said the commission should have a firm deadline, Feb. 1, 1996, so action can occur before the full-scale start of the presidential and congressional campaign, even though any proposals would be unlikely to affect the rules of that election cycle.

In his letter, Clinton noted that such a setup has been used to address not only the thorny is-

sue of closing military bases but equally politically charged issues such as congressional and judicial pay. Such a format, he said, has already been endorsed by Dole. Dole had left the Capitol by the time Clinton's letter was made public and issued no comment. Nor had he said anything during the week about the Clinton-Gingrich agreement, although he has long been an advocate of using outside experts to help resolve the campaign finance issue.

In 1990, Dole convinced then-Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine) to join him in setting up a panel of lawyers, professors and political operators to recommend campaign finance reforms. But the recommendations ran into a lethal cross-fire of partisan criticism and were laid aside.

Clinton also noted in the letter that while the commission should take up issues relating to how lobbying is governed, how campaigns are paid for and gifts to members of Congress, any legislation on those subjects, including a pending Senate proposal on lobbying reform, should not be held up. He said the subject matter of such legislation should be removed from the commission's mandate. However, some advocates of the lobbying bill expressed concern

earlier in the week that even the existence of the commission could give wavering lawmakers an excuse to vote against the legislation. Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the bill's chief sponsor, said he saw "some danger" of this but believed it had enough support to pass.

Legislation to overhaul lobbying laws, including the gift ban, was approved by both houses last year but stalled just short of passage when Gingrich raised objections and Senate Republicans successfully filibustered the bill. Campaign finance legislation also died after squabbles among Democrats delayed final action until the session's final days, when Republicans found it easy to kill.

The possibility of using the base closure commission as a model drew fire from Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who has led the fight against Democratic campaign finance proposals in previous congresses. Earlier in the week, McConnell said he would filibuster any proposal for a commission if it was modeled after the base-closing commission, saying it would be "irresponsible" to consider recommendations on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

Devroy reported from Halifax, Dewar from Washington.