

JACK ANDERSON and MICHAEL BINSTEIN**PAC-Busting Afoot**

If war is too important to leave to generals, political reform has become too important to leave to politicians—at least incumbents.

That's the lesson of the Claremont covenant—the handshake agreement between President Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) in Claremont, N.H., to appoint a blue-ribbon panel that would tackle the thorny issues of campaign finance and lobbying reform.

What neither man knew at the time was that a blue-ribbon-style panel was already open for business, though it has yet to issue its first press release or fire off its first fax. Instead, the two-month-old Campaign for America Project is quietly conducting polls and focus groups and enlisting an eclectic group of political, corporate and Hollywood luminaries from across the ideological spectrum to serve on a board.

This nonpartisan blueprint is the brainchild of former representative Mike Synar (D-Okla.), who was a PAC-buster during his 16 years in Congress and topped the hit list of special interests from the National Rifle Association to industry lobbyists for tobacco, oil and insurance. Fighting the good fight won him the 1995 Profile in Courage Award from the family of President John F. Kennedy.

Synar's sidekick could be the biggest surprise: former representative Vin Weber (R-Minn.), a popular conservative whose retirement from politics in 1992 has been followed by a career that has included lobbying.

A close friend and adviser to Gingrich and vice chairman of the conservative group Empower America, Weber is said to be seriously weighing forging a partnership with Synar. Between Synar and Weber, who bridge the ideological divide and have powerful friends in high places, this commission could have the chance to succeed. Weber is confronted with the GOP's resistance to surrendering the cash machine that comes with majority status.

Gingrich himself understood the bottom-line implications of last November's contests when on the eve of the midterm elections he threatened PACs that might donate to Democrats: "For anybody who's not on board now it's going to be the two coldest years in Washington." (Is this the same Gingrich who in 1990 blasted the congressional "system of corruption in which money politics is defeating and driving out citizen politics?") Last February, Gingrich headlined a

Republican National Committee gala that raked in more than \$11 million—the most money ever collected in a single fund-raiser.

In addition to Gingrich's dubious commitment to the cause, some Republican senators are threatening to filibuster the creation of the kind of commission endorsed by Clinton and Gingrich. They oppose capping the amount candidates can spend in an election, and vehemently oppose any public financing of campaigns—which Synar has supported.

Synar has battled Democratic elders as well as Republicans on political reform, rejecting the notion early in the Clinton administration that it should be put on the back burner in favor of other domestic initiatives. Both Democrats and Republicans talk a good game on campaign finance reform, yet both retreat when it means going their own special interest oxen.

Synar's battle plan revolves around an end-run strategy: Galvanize the grass roots against the current system in which a senator who plans to run for reelection must raise an average of about \$12,000 every week of his six-year term, and draft a statement of principles that would serve as a "Contract With America" both Democrats and Republicans could rally behind.

A pledge would be extracted from every presidential candidate that these reforms would be raised in the first days of the 105th Congress. Raising the heat at the start of a session, before the annual fund-raising fetes begin in earnest, is key.

Basically, he's betting that the court of public opinion can compel Congress to go cold turkey. Focus groups have already been conducted in Baltimore, Atlanta and Columbus, Ohio.

"Much of the same way term limits was successful in bringing the issue to the public attention with the huge media campaign is exactly what we hope to do," said one source involved with the Campaign for America Project. "We're going to run this issue like it's a presidential candidate. We're going to have television ads in targeted markets all over the country—including New Hampshire and Iowa."

Synar envisions raising \$15 million for his endeavor from foundations and—curiously—Republican and Democratic business people who understand the entree the current system affords the well-connected.