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Clinton: 'I'm sorry' for affair

By Marie Grady

DUBLIN - A day after adoring crowds saluted his efforts to make peace in Northern Ireland, President Clinton attempted to make peace with himself over his admission of an affair with a White House intern.

In a break from a meeting with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, Clinton said that criticism of his conduct by U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn, was justified.

"Basically I agree with what he said. I have nothing else to say except that I can't disagree with anyone else who wants to be critical of what I have already acknowledged was indefensible. I've already said I made a bad mistake. It was indefensible and I'm sorry," the president said.

Lieberman, a longtime Clinton ally, took the Senate floor Thursday to denounce the president's behavior as "immoral" and deserving of a "public rebuke."

U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield, said Clinton's statement yesterday was appropriate.

"I think contrition in these moments is always important," said Neal, just before the president spoke at the Gateway 2000 computer plant in Dublin. "I think an acknowledgment is important and then I'd like to get on with the business of the country."

Earlier, Neal, part of a congressional delegation of about a dozen on the Northern Ireland trip, said he wanted to reserve judgment on what if any reaction Congress will have to the president's admission until after special White House prosecutor Kenneth Starr's report is delivered to legislators. While Neal said no one should condone "boorish" behavior, he said it was important to reserve judgment.

Clinton aides said Clinton is resigned to the prospect that he will have to speak out on the Lewinsky affair again publicly once he returns to the United States. While they said no plans were finalized, the president was scheduled to meet with leading clergy members at the White House yesterday, which could offer a political backdrop for a talk on redemption.

The president's statement yesterday was far more contrite than a nationwide address he gave on the Monica Lewinsky affair on Aug. 17. In that televised address, he clearly showed anger toward Starr's \$40 million probe. Residents of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have largely viewed the matter as a private one that does not affect his ability to govern.

At the Gateway plant, employee Tony Kelly, a 31-year-old Dublin resident,

described the matter as one between the president and his wife.

"It's a family affair between them. It's got nothing to do with his job," Kelly said.

At an emotional gathering outside the media limelight with staff at the residence of U.S. Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy Smith, former Sen. George Mitchell, who was named by Clinton to negotiate a historic peace settlement to end violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, credited Clinton with having the gift of solving problems of national and international concern.

He said Clinton, whom he described as the most powerful man in the world, made crucial phone calls on Good Friday to dissenting parties in the peace process and "he knew everyone's name."

Although he did not address the president's act of contrition, Mitchell made clear his regard for the man whose personal stature has come under assault in recent months.

"I am proud to have him as my friend, and proud to have him as my president," Mitchell said.

Material from the Washington Post was used in this report.