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Of Golf and Justice

Kenneth Starr's investigators arrive in Nashville

By Willy Stern

Matt Pulle contributed to this story.

It started innocently enough--a round of golf one summer day at Hillwood Country Club in West Nashville. But the casual conversations on the lush fairways among the four duffers--three of them Nashville businessmen--have now become a major focus of interest to criminal investigators working for independent counsel Kenneth Starr.

The *Nashville Scene* has learned that as Starr expands his probe into the so-called "Travelgate Affair," his investigation has led to conversations that took place both during and after the Hillwood outing. Importantly, one of the duffers that day was former White House administration director David Watkins, who oversaw the White House travel office. The other three players were Charlie Cloud, a relative newcomer to Nashville with ties to Arkansas; Mike Patton, a Nashville real estate executive; and John Haley, who is chairman of Nashville-based Southeastern Telecom.

Investigations are focusing on whether Watkins related during the game to his fellow duffers that he had been ordered to fire the staffers in the travel office in May 1993. Hillary Clinton has denied in sworn statements making such an order; Watkins himself testified under oath before Congress that the decision to fire the travel office staffers was his, and his alone. If investigators are able to prove that Watkins lied to Congress, he could be subject to criminal charges of perjury.

In addition to conversations that are said to have taken place on the golf course, investigators are pursuing post-game conversations that took place at Patton's home. Those conversations included Patton's wife, Terri.

Mike and Terri Patton were interviewed by investigators working for Starr at their Nashville home "a few weeks ago," according to Terri Patton. Patton

confirms she and her husband have been subpoenaed to testify before a federal grand jury in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday of this week.

Meanwhile, Haley told the *Scene* that he was visited "several weeks ago" by FBI agents. He says he has not been subpoenaed to testify. Cloud did not return numerous phone calls from the *Scene*, and it remains unclear if he has been subpoenaed.

The narrative of the golf game is certain to receive widespread attention as Starr prepares a final report on his investigation, which is expected to be released sometime next year. The report's release is expected to generate yet more conflict between the Office of the Independent Counsel and the White House. Some think it might also complicate Hillary Clinton's anticipated 2000 campaign for the U.S. Senate in New York.

The background to the golf game is this: In May 1993, Watkins was serving as the White House administration director. A former businessman and ad executive in Little Rock, Watkins had become an ally of Clinton's when he helped place the Arkansas governor's television ads during a number of his gubernatorial campaigns.

When Watkins summarily dismissed seven employees of the White House travel office not long after Clinton took office, Republicans alleged that Hillary Clinton was behind the firings. As the furor over the event and other controversies intensified, Watkins was eventually fired from his White House post. He has since returned to the private sector in Arkansas.

According to her sworn statements and to press accounts, Hillary Clinton has insisted that while she was concerned about possible instances of mismanagement of the travel office, she never ordered the firings. In January 1996, Watkins confirmed Hillary Clinton's account when he told a Republican-led House committee investigating the Travelgate affair that while Hillary Clinton might have pressured him to dismiss the employees, she did not order the firings.

"It was my decision to terminate the travel office employees," he testified under oath to the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. "[Hillary Clinton] did not direct me to fire them."

But according to the Pattons, Watkins may have sung a different tune that summer in Nashville. (All agree that the game was played in the summer, although no one is sure if it took place in 1997 or 1998.)

The golf game reportedly owed its origins to the longstanding friendship

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between Watkins and Cloud. Apparently, Watkins was in Nashville and decided to hook up with Cloud for lunch and golf. Cloud and Watkins shared a cart; Patton and Haley joined them in the other cart.

Mike Patton was somewhat close-mouthed when asked what he was told by Watkins that day on the course. While he confirmed he would be testifying before Starr's grand jury, he said, "I met a guy through a friend, played a round of golf, and that's it."

But his wife, Terri Patton, told the *Scene* she clearly remembers when, while sipping cocktails by the pool at the Patton's Hillwood home after the game, Watkins said Hillary had called him about the travel office staffers and said, "fire their asses." Terri Patton says she related these comments to the two investigators working for Starr who recently visited her and her husband at their Nashville home. Investigators interviewed the Pattons separately, Terri said, so they couldn't hear what the other was saying.

Terri Patton said she and her husband expect to testify about what Watkins allegedly said during that fateful round of golf and in the later chitchat at the Pattons' home. The Pattons, who own and manage several real estate ventures, say they are cooperating fully with Starr's office.

As for Haley, he told the *Scene* that although he was visited by the FBI agents, he told them that he wasn't present when the travel office matter was discussed. Haley did tell the *Scene* that he recalled Watkins telling entertaining stories about Bill Clinton's fondness for women.

Legal experts consulted by the *Scene* say it appears logical that Starr and his prosecutors are trying to set up Watkins for the possible perjury charge, then offer him immunity if he's willing to be a government witness against Hillary Clinton. "It's a classic way of trying to corner someone, to what end we don't know. Maybe he'll have something for his report," explained Mary Cheh, professor at George Washington University School of Law and an expert in criminal proceedings.

If Starr's office is able to conclude that Hillary Clinton falsely denied in sworn statements to investigators the true extent of her role in the travel office firings, she could technically be indicted for perjury. A far more likely scenario, however, is that in Starr's final report, he hopes to chastise Hillary Clinton for misleading investigators and the public.

Says Cheh, who is also a former U.S. special assistant attorney: "The only serious problem that [Hillary Clinton] faces is that she'd be named in some kind of blistering attack. Her exposure seems to lie only in public relations, which is

not minor because she seems to be running for Senate."

Hillary Clinton declined comment through her spokeswoman.

For now, however, Watkins seems to be the immediate target. It's a matter of public record that Watkins is among those under investigation by Starr's office for possible criminal violations regarding his role in Travelgate. That's confirmed by documents on file in the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia Circuit. Efforts to reach Watkins were unsuccessful. The Office of the Independent Counsel declined comment.

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