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HEADLINE: Usher Fired Over Calls To Bushes;  
Ex-Staffer Says Barbara Asked For Help With Computer Problem

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The White House usher fired last week on instructions of Hillary Rodham Clinton was dismissed because he had kept up communications with his former employers, George and Barbara Bush.

The White House said yesterday that Chris Emery, who had served as an usher for the past eight years, was known to have spoken with Mrs. Bush several times over the last 14 months, sometimes from a telephone in the ushers' office. Emery confirmed that he had taken calls from the former First Lady and said they were solely related to the laptop computer on which she is writing her memoirs of White House life.

"That may seem harmless, for all intents and purposes," said Neel Lattimore, a spokesman for Mrs. Clinton, "but it also shows an amazing lack of discretion. We believe the position that he had, as a member of the residence staff, requires the utmost respect for the First Family's privacy. It's an extremely sensitive position, as you can imagine. This is the president's house, and Mrs. Clinton's and Chelsea's."

As to the fact that Emery apparently was returning calls from Mrs. Bush, Lattimore said, "It shouldn't have taken place from the office."

Other White House sources say that Emery was believed by some members of the First Lady's staff to have communicated more than computer advice, that he was suspected of revealing personal details about the Clintons to the Bushes. Emery emphatically denies this. He made only four calls to Mrs. Bush, he says, two from home, two from the ushers' office. And on each occasion, he was returning a call from her.

"It never occurred to me that the president and Mrs. Clinton would feel threatened by my providing brief, technical computer support to Mrs. Bush and her staff," Emery said yesterday. "I would never discuss the Clinton family matters. I am a professional."

Mrs. Bush would not comment, but her assistant, Nancy Huang, confirmed placing two calls to Emery at the White House when Mrs. Bush ran into computer problems. "This is the first we've heard of this," said Huang. "Mrs. Bush had some technical questions about programs he [Emery] had set up for her while she was still in the White House. And she called him. He didn't call her. If she had anything to say about Chris, it would be only the best things."

Even though the First Lady's office has known for months about the calls to Mrs. Bush, Emery was not fired until last Thursday -- when he was told by Chief Usher Gary Walters that Mrs. Clinton was "not comfortable" with him. The move added to a perception of a chaotic White House, coming at the same time most of the White House kitchen staff

was removed, counsel Bernard Nussbaum was readying his resignation and a half dozen White House staffers were about to be subpoenaed in connection with the Whitewater investigation.

"If people want to read anything sinister in his firing, they are wrong," says one White House staffer. "There's no connection with Whitewater, Bernie Nussbaum and the subpoenas."

Emery was apparently mystified by his dismissal. Earlier this week, he sent a letter to the Clintons, asking further explanation.

"It's the belief of the White House," said Lattimore, "that Chris Emery was given appropriate information about why he was asked to leave. Whenever you have this kind of conversation, it's unpleasant and uncomfortable -- and you don't always hear everything that's said."

Emery, 36, is the father of four children and the sole provider of his family on a \$50,000 a year salary. He is a registered Republican, and his wife, Penny, is on the Howard County Republican Central Committee. According to one White House source, he was "having difficulty making the adjustment to a new administration." Sam Castleman, now at Blair House, has been hired to replace him.

"Nobody asks or cares whether a staff member here is a registered Republican or Democrat," says Lattimore, "and it's certainly not the reason for the firing."

According to several Bush White House staffers, Emery was well liked and low-key. "In all my dealings with Chris," said Laurie Firestone, social secretary to the Bushes, "he had great integrity and always acted in a most professional manner." Firestone doesn't see any "conflict of loyalties" in helping Mrs. Bush with her computer now. "He was a computer nut. He loved the computer and because he was so good, he helped set up a computer program for Mrs. Bush before they ever left the White House. Mrs. Bush always kept her daily diaries on it."

Emery isn't the only member of the household staff to be in contact with either George or Barbara Bush -- nor the only one to call the Bushes' office in Houston. Jean Becker, who is assisting Mrs. Bush on her memoirs, has apparently requested information from several members of the residence staff, to help with fact-checking. And last fall, all the White House butlers called George Bush one afternoon from the pantry, just to say hello.

Last week, the First Lady's office described the recent upheavals as part of a "restructuring." So far, Pierre Chambrin, the chef, and three of his kitchen staff were asked to submit their resignations, after what has been described by one source as "months of trying, trying, trying to make it work." A new "American-style" kitchen is being started, according to Lattimore -- menus will no longer be written in French, food will no longer be passed by waiters, guest to guest, "European style," but placed on dinner plates ahead of time.

Early on, according to several sources, the Clinton administration considered letting all the ushers go -- before the dismissal of the White House travel office staff became a controversy. Clinton staffers have indicated that perhaps the president and First Lady might still be more comfortable with a less formal arrangement, and with less intrusion.

"The real issue is upstairs," says Lattimore. "The Clintons are wanting some privacy in their lives. They live in a fishbowl -- and it's nice to have a place you call your own."

Staff writer Donnie Radcliffe contributed to this report.

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