

Chief White House Usher 'Grounded'

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The White House refused today to allow the head of the office that runs the Executive Mansion to testify before a Congressional subcommittee whose Republican members had hoped to ask about the abrupt dismissal of a member of his staff.

A White House lawyer contended that the official, Gary Walters, the chief White House usher, had no obligation to appear before Congress because he was a member of President Clinton's personal staff. But some Republicans on Capitol Hill suggested that the White House may have been motivated by a desire to prevent Congressional scrutiny of the unusual dismissal.

As one of three assistant chief White House ushers, the dismissed official, Chris Emery, helped to supervise the operations of the Executive Mansion, making him privy to some of the most personal details of life in the White House. Nearly all who have held the job before have been retained for life. 'Lack of Discretion' Charged

Since Mr. Emery's dismissal earlier this month, a spokesman for Hillary Rodham Clinton has said little more than that she and the President were "uncomfortable" with Mr. Emery and that he had shown "a lack of discretion" by talking on the telephone with the First Lady's immediate predecessor, Barbara Bush.

Mr. Walters oversees an \$8 million budget for the Presidential residence. The Republican request for Mr. Walters's appearance on Capitol Hill had been relayed by Representative Steny H. Hoyer, the Maryland Democrat whose appropriations subcommittee has control over White House spending.

But on Wednesday a White House lawyer, Steven Neuwirth, telephoned Mr. Hoyer to say that Mr. Walters would not be present at today's hearing. Mr. Neuwirth said the White House did not want to set a precedent that would allow Congress to summon others on the President's personal staff.

Mr. Hoyer said today that he was satisfied with that explanation. But a Republican member of the panel who had hoped to question Mr. Walters in part about the hiring and firing of ushers said he believed the White House was improperly preventing Congress from overseeing its operations.

"They're arrogant as hell," said the Republican panel member, Representative Jim Ross Lightfoot of Iowa. "They don't give a damn about what members of Congress think. I mean, it's the President's house; the President's accountable to the people."

A White House spokeswoman, Ginny Terzano, said today that the White House believed it would be "inappropriate" for an usher to testify before Congress on budget matters. "There is no precedent for Congressional testimony by an usher or other members of the White House residence staff," Ms. Terzano said, "and I think it's easy to understand why."

The White House ushers, who work in round-the-clock shifts, cater to the needs of the First Family and supervise the butlers, chefs, carpenters, and others involved the day-to-day operations of the 132-room mansion.

The dismissal of Mr. Emery, who was hired as an assistant chief usher under President Ronald Reagan in 1987, was only the second in the century-long history of the office.

Mr. Emery, who is 36, has acknowledged taking a few calls from Mrs. Bush's office while working in the White House; in one of them, according to both Mr. Emery and Mrs. Bush's office, he spoke to the former First Lady about a glitch in her laptop computer, which he had helped to program. Usher Denies Impropriety

Mr. Emery said in an interview this week that it was not unusual for ushers to take calls from previous White House residents, and denied that there had been anything improper about his conversations with Mrs. Bush.

"Why on earth would they ever single out Mrs. Bush?," Mr. Emery said. "It doesn't make any sense. They're implying I'm sharing family secrets, but the Bushes aren't running for anything. I would call Bob Dornan if I wanted to do that."

He was referring to Representative Robert K. Dornan, a conservative California Republican who is mulling a run for the Presidency in 1996.

Neel Lattimore, the spokesman for Mrs. Clinton, said today that it would be inappropriate for him to say more than that "the family was uncomfortable" with Mr. Emery.

But when asked about the telephone calls, he said: "Making any phone calls shows a lack of discretion. The ushers' staff requires the utmost attention to the First Family's privacy. It's a sensitive position because this is the home of the First Family: the President, Mrs. Clinton and Chelsea."