

The Washington Post

THE MAN HILLARY USHERED OUT

By Martha Sherrill March 23, 1994

A few Secret Service agents have called him, upset and sympathetic. The National Enquirer has checked in -- to see if he's ready to blab -- and a British paper has offered money. Four members of Congress have gotten in touch -- one Democrat who said she'd heard "things were pretty bad over there," meaning the White House, and one Republican who was dying to have lunch, probably hoping Chris Emery had some dirt to dish.

He doesn't. Only a puzzling account of how he was abruptly fired by Hillary Rodham Clinton three weeks ago -- and how he says he still doesn't have a clue why.

"I'm very comfortable that I didn't do anything indiscreet," says Emery, 36, a White House usher for the past eight years. "And I never made a pass at anybody, insulted anybody, made a racial joke, took money from the cash box or ever snooped around in their private affairs. But this is the kind of thing that's been waking me up in the middle of the night for three weeks."

Sitting in the living room of his home in Howard County, Emery is wearing blue sweat pants and a white T-shirt. His haircut is smooth and fresh, but his face is tense. He has been supporting his wife and four children on his \$50,000-a-year salary -- which stops coming in on April 4 (he also gets eight weeks severance).

"I thought I had another 22 years there," he says. "When I was hired by {chief usher} Gary Walters, he told me it wasn't a steppingstone to anything else. You die or retire. I'm the 18th usher since 1891, and the first one ever fired."

Originally, the White House explained his dismissal as part of a "restructuring" of the residence; then, when pressed, the First Lady's office confirmed that "indiscretion" was another reason Emery was fired -- he was known to have kept up contact with his old employers, George and Barbara Bush. Mrs. Clinton's office has suggested that Emery hadn't "made the adjustment" to the new administration, but according to several Clinton White House sources, it was feared that the usher was behind rumors about the Clintons' private life, which seemed to be bubbling out of Houston early last year.

"We were never searching for a source, because the rumors were so ridiculous," says Neel Lattimore of the First Lady's office. "But useless, silly gossip does take on a life of its own -- and ends up in newspapers and magazines as fact. And feelings get hurt."

Right now, Chris Emery's feelings are hurting. He says his two telephone conversations with Mrs. Bush -- made from the ushers office in the past 14 months -- were exclusively about a laptop that she was using to write her memoirs of White House life. Emery, who was a computer specialist at the White House before applying for an usher's job in 1986, helped George Bush pick out the IBM laptop he gave his wife for Christmas two years ago, then configured the software. According to her office, when Mrs. Bush lost a chapter of her book, she called the usher for technical assistance.

"Nobody respects and understands the Clintons' needs for privacy better than the Bushes," says Jean Becker, who has been helping with the memoirs. "And Mrs. Bush feels strongly that she did not violate that, and feels certain her only conversations with Chris were about her laptop."

As for indiscretion? Emery admits to expressing "general unhappiness" during the early months of the Clinton administration, but he doesn't remember doing so in a phone call to Houston -- as is now alleged by a former Bush aide.

"If that's the reason I was dismissed," he says, "then the entire residence staff should go. We were all miserable -- and talking about it."

Emery's two-story house, in a comfortable but distant subdivision, is decorated in Ethan Allenish American. He was born and raised in Howard County and attended several Maryland colleges, but he never completed his degree. He got his first White House job, in 1986, by answering an advertisement in *The Washington Post*. "I never thought I'd get the position," he says, "but I wanted a rejection with a White House letterhead." Once hired as a computer specialist, he automated the executive clerks office, the travel office and the White House food and beverage inventory. A man who is described by past and present White House employees as "a very likable guy," Emery quickly became friendly with members of the residence staff and was encouraged to apply for a rare opening in the ushers office when Nelson Pierce, an usher from 1961 to 1987, announced his retirement.

"The term 'usher' is very misleading," says Emery. "You don't wear a red coat and carry a flashlight."

As his wife, Penny, watches, he reaches for his two White House scrapbooks -- full of pictures and notes, engraved invitations. The Reagan years and Bush years are kept in a leather binder. The Clinton years are housed in plastic. As an usher, he was the junior member of a four-person office sharing the duties of overseeing the mansion, managing the entire residence staff of 89 -- cooks, butlers, maids, florists, carpenters, engineers, housemen. The office is largely responsible for the proper execution of events, the maintenance of the house and grounds, and the redecoration of the private quarters -- when a new family arrives. In a note found in Vince Foster's briefcase after his death, the deputy White House counsel alleged that the ushers had "plotted" to beef up the Clintons' redecoration costs -- "taking advantage of ... HRC."

The ushers operate out of a small first-floor room in the White House, the window on the right as you face the North Portico. There are two shifts -- from 5:45 a.m. to 3 p.m., and another from 3 until the family retires -- "if the family knows to call and tell us they are retiring," says Emery. He laughs a little now about working in an office so grand, surrounded by bright red carpets and extravagant gold curtains. "Looks like a bordello," he says, "but I guess it goes with the rest of the White House, which is pretty gaudy. But the public loves it."

Emery flips through his books, remembering highlights -- the White House tours he gave to Dana Carvey, Barbra Streisand, Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams. ("Last month, when I saw on the ushers office television that Ted Williams was in the hospital," he says, "a couple Clinton staffers had to ask me who he was.") Another photo reveals Emery, on the night NAFTA went through, standing in the Red Room with five presidents -- Clinton, Bush, Reagan, Carter and Ford. Last Halloween, for Mrs. Clinton's birthday bash, he dressed up as an 18th-century servant to match Bill Clinton, who went as President James Madison. In a photo, Emery stands next to Hillary, who is wearing an enormous brunet wig.

"One of the greatest parties ever thrown in the history of the White House," Emery says. "Hilarious, amazing."

Until the day he was fired -- when Gary Walters pulled him aside and told him that he had one more day of work -- he never sensed that anything was wrong, Emery says. Nobody had ever mentioned a performance problem, as is now being suggested by a member of the White House social office. "All my evaluations were exemplary or the highest rating," he says. Nobody passed on complaints from guests. "I know the Clinton family members and extended family enjoyed me," he says. Nobody told him that he was suspected as a Republican sympathizer -- or a mole.

"I don't want to make the other ushers feel bad," he says, "but many people told me I was their favorite usher." And indeed, after dozens of interviews with current and former White House employees, that appears to be the case.

And initially, it appears that the Clintons considered eliminating the entire ushers office -- all nonpolitical positions -- and replacing them with more trusted, political employees, according to several sources familiar with these discussions. (As was the case with most permanent employees of the White House interviewed for this story, they did not want to be identified.) When the travel office firings caused a controversy, the decision was put off. "There were horrible rumors all year," says Emery, "that the entire ushers office was slated to be cleaned out. ... But why was I singled out?"

The truth is, the White House isn't required to have an explanation to fire any member of the residence staff. They all serve "at the pleasure of the president" -- or in this case, at the pleasure of the First Lady. "It's never easy to let someone go," says Lattimore, "and we're trying to be sensitive to the usher who was dismissed. That's why we don't want to elaborate on why he was let go. It's a personal issue."

Nobody disputes that the members of the First Family have a right to surround themselves with personal staff they trust and feel comfortable with. "The White House isn't an easy place to live," says Rex Scouten, former chief usher and now White House curator. "Whatever they want to do to make it more pleasant is their prerogative."

But, like so many prerogatives in this White House, just because it's legal doesn't mean it's so smart politically.

"You'd think they would know how this sort of thing is done," says another longtime member of the residence staff. "When the Kennedys came, they replaced a housekeeper with someone they'd known for years. The Nixons made all kinds of changes. I think Mrs. Roosevelt fired all the white staff -- wanted only blacks there. You can do whatever you like, but you do it gracefully. And you don't embarrass people. You give them notice, find them another job, relocate them to another department or gently force them into retirement."

A few days ago while sitting in the lobby of the Madison Hotel, Emery -- in town to have his photograph taken for this article -- watches a woman race by, a brunet blur. It turns out to be Marilyn Quayle. "Wait a minute," he says, getting up and approaching Mrs. Quayle. She recognizes the former usher immediately.

"Oh my gosh! Hi-yaaaa!!!" she yells out. They talk for a few minutes. She's a little confused, thinking it was Walters who had been fired. She passes on her condolences.

Emery, who is a registered Republican, says that he has never commented on politics at work. "It really doesn't matter what I think," he says. "I have a belief -- an opinion -- but I also had a job and it was paying the bills. I'm interested in politics and watch all the talking

heads on TV, but God -- I would never express what I thought. ... I always just tried to be supportive of their effort, whatever it was. And I've done that with everybody."

The Chicago Tribune and the Philadelphia Inquirer recently reported that Emery had driven to the White House with a Bush-Quayle bumper sticker on his car -- after the new administration had arrived. "That is totally untrue," he says. "I remember going out, the day after the election, and peeling it off."

Transitions between administrations are tough, he admits, sometimes taking months of adjustment. "But we used to think that the greatest thing about being an usher was it was going to change every four years. Or eight."

As he walks through Lafayette Square, getting closer and closer to the White House, an unmistakable feeling of gloom starts to surround him, like a cloud of bad weather. He stops as far as across the street -- and no farther -- for his picture. Last week he went back to the residence, he says, to return a White House computer he had borrowed. Security passed it to canine inspection -- and that's when reality hit him, he says. Suddenly he was like any guy, any outsider, who might have a bomb, who might be suspect, who can't be trusted. Having lost the job as White House usher, it's almost as though he's sunk into a pale sort of Everyman limbo, as if his life doesn't make the same kind of sense anymore. And he says he can't quite believe it.

"You know, Mrs. Clinton never threw that lamp," he says, referring to one of the most widely disseminated White House rumors. "I wasn't in a position -- when that rumor happened -- to make a statement," he says, squinting into the wind. "Now I can. Totally untrue."