

Congressional agency debunks charges of vandalism by Clinton White House

Barry Grey
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“Vandalism-Gate” has become the latest anti-Clinton scandal to be exposed as a Republican-inspired fraud. The Paula Jones sexual harassment suit was thrown out of court. After eight years of investigations, at a cost of more than \$50 million, the Independent Counsel’s office was unable to document any crimes in connection with the Whitewater real estate deal or subsequent scandals, from “Travel-Gate” to “File-Gate.”

In the end, Kenneth Starr and his right-wing Republican allies—with the enthusiastic support of the media—attempted to pollute public opinion with lurid accounts of sex in the White House in their attempt to destabilize and topple the Clinton administration. But the charges of impeding an investigation and suborning witnesses proved groundless, and Starr’s successor concluded that prosecuting the former president for concealing an embarrassing private relationship was a losing proposition.

Now the General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of the US Congress, has taken the wind out of Bush administration allegations that Clinton officials trashed the White House before turning it over to the Republicans in January of 2001. The GAO issued a 217-page report on June 11 summarizing the results of a year-long investigation into Republican charges of wanton and widespread vandalism. The report concludes that minor and scattered acts of vandalism did occur, putting the total cost at \$13,000 to \$14,000, but says such damage is typical of recent White House transitions, including that carried out in 1993 by Republican officials in the outgoing administration of the elder George Bush, the father of the current president.

Even the figure of \$13,000 to \$14,000 seems inflated, based on the details of the GAO report. Most of that

cost, a total of \$9,324, went to repair or replace various items and to clean offices. Items repaired or replaced included 62 computer keyboards and 26 cell phones. An additional \$3,750 to \$4,675 was spent to replace nine historic doorknobs and one presidential seal.

Given the fact that some 500 officials and staffers work in the White House, the picture presented by the GAO suggests little more than normal wear and tear, combined with a few harmless pranks—such as a sticker in a filing cabinet reading, “Jail to the Thief.”

But in January of 2001, the anti-Clinton vandalism charges, though unsubstantiated, were widely reported by media news outlets still smarting over Clinton’s acquittal in the Senate impeachment trial of February 1999. Both the Republicans and the media remained embittered over their failure to stampede the public behind the Monica Lewinsky witch-hunt, and hoped to justify their past actions with a new round of mudslinging against the outgoing president. They knew, in any event, they had little to fear from Clinton and the Democrats, who had sought to conciliate their Republican assailants and refused to expose the right-wing conspiracy underlying the impeachment campaign.

The instigator of the GAO investigation was Republican Congressman Bob Barr of Georgia, who in June 2001 formally requested the probe. Barr was the most belligerent advocate of Clinton’s impeachment on the Republican-controlled House Judiciary Committee. He had begun agitating for Clinton’s impeachment in 1997, many months before the world had ever heard of Monica Lewinsky.

Barr’s ties to extreme-right and racist organizations were direct and well-known. In December of 1998, only weeks before the House voted to impeach Clinton, Barr’s office acknowledged that the Georgia

congressman had been the keynote speaker earlier that year at a convention of the Council of Conservative Citizens, an organization that views interracial marriage as “white genocide.”

The Bush administration has reacted to the GAO’s findings with a combination of bitterness and indignation. The bulk of the agency’s official report—130 of its 217 pages—is an extraordinary exchange between the White House and the GAO. The report contains 77 pages of White House rebuttals—paragraph by paragraph—of the GAO’s findings, and 53 pages in which the GAO responds to Bush administration complaints.

“It appears that the GAO has undertaken a concerted effort in its report to downplay the damage found in the White House complex,” says the Bush White House response. White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, in a separate letter to the GAO comptroller, complains: “The GAO underreports the number of observations for nearly every category of damage.”

The Bush administration devoted substantial time and resources to the GAO investigation. Gonzales’s office interviewed 78 Bush White House staffers who worked in the West Wing during the first three weeks of the current administration.

In light of the record of the Bush White House since the September 11 terror attacks, this preoccupation with the most detailed possible exposure of Clinton White House pranks and self-righteous demand for “accountability” are at once bizarre and politically obscene. Bush demands accountability for the alleged theft of doorknobs and writing of graffiti on bathroom walls, but he refuses to accept any accountability for his administration’s failure to prevent the destruction of the World Trade Center and bombing of the Pentagon—attacks that took the lives of more than 3,000 people.

Even as he was working furiously to block any investigation of the September 11 attacks, and concealing the identities of suspects in last fall’s anthrax mailings, his top aides were diligently pursuing an investigation of supposed vandalism that might prove embarrassing to Clinton and the Democrats.

Not surprisingly, none of the media pundits have pointed out this obvious contrast, precisely because it highlights the methods of provocation and deceit that characterize the Bush administration.



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