

Bill Clinton meets with attorney general on Arizona tarmac

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1 July 2016

Former President Bill Clinton held a half-hour private meeting with Attorney General Loretta Lynch Monday night, an extraordinary encounter given that Lynch may soon make the final decision on any FBI recommendation to prosecute Hillary Clinton over her use of a private email server while she was Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013.

The meeting took place on the tarmac of the airport in Phoenix, Arizona, where the private planes carrying Clinton and Lynch crossed paths, supposedly without prearrangement. Clinton said he learned that Lynch was arriving at the airport, and he asked for the meeting, which took place on her plane.

The former president had been in Phoenix to attend a Latino Leaders Roundtable and raise funds for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The attorney general was arriving to hold discussions Tuesday with local police officials.

Both Clinton and Lynch claim the meeting was a social one, and did not take up any issues now before the Justice Department, including the investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails. Lynch's husband Stephen Hargrove was reportedly present for the conversations.

The attorney general was peppered with questions about the meeting when she met with reporters in Phoenix Tuesday, but said she and Clinton had exchanged greetings but discussed nothing of substance. "Our conversation was a great deal about his grandchildren," she said. "It was primarily social and about our travels. He mentioned the golf he played in Phoenix, and he mentioned travels he had in West Virginia."

She continued: "We talked about former Attorney General Janet Reno, for example, whom we both know, but there was no discussion of any matter pending for the department or any matter pending for any other

body. There was no discussion of Benghazi, no discussion of the State Department emails, by way of example."

Asked the following day in Los Angeles whether meeting with Clinton's husband called into question her own impartiality in the email investigation, Lynch said the email probe is "being handled by career investigators and career agents who always follow the facts and the law."

The Clinton-Lynch encounter touched off a firestorm in the right-wing media, which focused on the incident to offset their disappointment over the failure of the Republican-led Benghazi investigation to find evidence that could be used to disqualify Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential campaign. The House Benghazi Committee released its report, universally considered a damp squib, on Tuesday, the day the Clinton-Lynch meeting became known.

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump denounced the meeting as "terrible," claiming that it was one of the most important events of the past year.

The number two Republican in the US Senate, Majority Whip John Cornyn of Texas, said the meeting showed why an independent special counsel should be appointed to oversee the email investigation. "This incident does nothing to instill confidence in the American people that her department can fully and fairly conduct this investigation, and that's why a special counsel is needed now more than ever," he said in a statement to the press.

Democratic commentators and officials bemoaned the "optics" of the meeting, which suggested that Bill Clinton was calling in favors on behalf of his wife. President Clinton appointed Lynch to her first top-level position in 1999, naming her US attorney for the Eastern District of New York, a post she held through

the end of his administration. Lynch left the Justice Department during the two terms of Republican George W. Bush before being appointed to the same position, US attorney for the Eastern District of New York, by Barack Obama. Obama named her to succeed Eric Holder as attorney general in November 2014.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest was careful to avoid any suggestion that Obama had sanctioned the Clinton-Lynch meeting. He said only that Lynch “certainly understands that investigations should be conducted free of political interference and consistent with the facts.”

Pressed on whether the meeting was improper or created the appearance of a conflict of interest, Earnest hung the attorney general out to dry. “I did not attend the meeting,” he said. “She’s spoken directly to how the meeting came about and what was discussed.” He then told a reporter that questions about the propriety of the meeting are “entirely legitimate” and that it was appropriate for Lynch to explain her actions.



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