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national news

A latex welcome

Blunder or setup, the rubber gloves incident puts Clinton in the queer hot seat—again

by Inga Sorensen

Dozens of lesbian and gay officials and their partners gathered June 13 in the Indian Treaty Room, where they nibbled on chocolate-covered strawberries and mingled with the likes of Vice President Al Gore.

"I have to admit that a few of us wondered whether there was any significance to us having our reception in that particular room," said George Eighmey, a state representative from Oregon, who was among a group of 40 gay and lesbian politicians who attended the now-infamous meeting with White House officials. Ironically, the meeting had been arranged to improve relations between the Clinton administration and the lesbian and gay community. What it became was a public relations fiasco, after uniformed Secret Service guards donned blue rubber gloves to greet the delegation as it made its way through the White House gates. So much for making peace.

"There's no doubt about it. It was shocking when it happened, and it still shocks me when I think about it," says Eighmey. "There we were waiting to make our way through the White House gates. A guard saw us and took out a box of rubber gloves. The person I was standing next to also saw this; we looked at each other and said, 'Do you see what I see?' We were both in disbelief."

"I then asked the guard whether that was [standard procedure] and he said, 'No, it's optional...I could have a cut on my finger.' He said the gloves were being used to 'protect' the guards from diseases, and then he asked me if I had a 'problem' with that. I said it was nothing I couldn't handle later."

The delegation received its tour of the White House, and then sat down for a three-and-a-half-hour briefing with cabinet members and top White House advisers. The gathering, which President Clinton did not attend, was held in the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House.

In addition to the delegation—which included gay and lesbian officials from 19 states—participants included White House political director Douglas Sosnik, White House legal counsel Abner Mikva, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala; Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, and White House Office on AIDS Policy Director Patricia Fleming.

During the meeting, several delegation members reportedly told administration representatives that they feared the president has alienated many gay men and lesbians—that the perception is that he has backpedaled numerous times on sexual minority rights issues, most notably on his promise to overturn the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military. And, just last month, the administration said it would not file a U.S. Supreme Court amicus brief opposing Amendment 2, a discriminatory initiative passed by Colorado voters in 1992.

According to Eighmey, the dialogue was a healthy give and take. As for the rubber gloves incident, it has created a national controversy and forced Clinton to issue an apology. "I want to apologize for the inappropriate and insensitive treatment several of the participants were subjected to at the entrance gate of the White House. It was wrong," he wrote in a letter dated June 16, which was sent to the lesbian and gay officials. "I

deeply regret any insult or embarrassment you suffered. You are welcome in the White House, and I look forward to continuing to work with you in the future." Clinton also noted in the letter that Secret Service Director Eljay Bowron was taking steps to ensure that "it" will not happen again.

"[White House aide] Bob Hattoy thinks this was all designed to embarrass the president. I mean, let's face it, Clinton is not liked by any of the military types who work under him," says Tom Richardson, coordinator of the Oregon AIDS Hotline.

"He really seemed to think that this was a setup. He said that those folks had already received so much training around AIDS issues that it was impossible that they didn't know you couldn't contract HIV through casual contact. I would be inclined to agree with [Hattoy] because it seems impossible that in this day and age people don't even know the basics."

Others disagree: "Obviously there's been a lot of talk about this around CAP [Cascade AIDS Project]," says Philip Varnum, CAP's manager of resource development. "We're all so appalled that there is so much ignorance right there in the White House. The assumptions that were made about how HIV is contracted are outrageous, but it's also outrageous that the guards automatically assumed that all gay men

and lesbians pose a risk to their health. It was a very anti-gay action."

Three days after the incident, *The New York Times* published a harshly worded editorial denouncing the guards' actions: "If this was an act of stupidity by low-level guards, then special training and administrative punishments seem in order. But if this was a calculated attempt to insult [lesbians and gay men], dismissal from the service is the only fit response. If Secret Service superiors sanctioned use of the gloves in advance, they, too, should be disciplined or dismissed. That such an event should happen not in some benighted backwater but at the gates of the White House is a shocking reminder of how intolerant this society remains toward [lesbian and gay] citizens. The White House press secretary said officials were 'distressed' about the incident. But this is a matter upon which President Clinton should speak for himself, as he surely would if foreign guests or members of an ethnic minority or religious group had been insulted in his house as a result of ignorance or malice."

Eighmey, meanwhile, says he's trying to look at the positive side of an ugly situation. "I figure that our historic meeting at the White House would have only been a footnote in *The New York Times* if this hadn't happened. Now everybody knows a group of openly gay and lesbian elected officials was invited to the White House. That is nothing to sneeze at."

He also says delegation members received hearty handshakes from Gore during the reception following the briefing. "Once we got by the guards we were treated royally," he says.

As for why Clinton didn't attend the briefing and reception, Eighmey says: "The vice president explained to us that the president couldn't be there because he was preparing his remarks about the budget."



Bill Clinton