

Passport Security Breach on McCain, Clinton & Obama

State Department Contract Employees Fired, Another Disciplined for Looking at Passport File

By JAKE TAPPER and KIRIT RADIA

WASHINGTON, March 21, 2008 —

An embarrassed State Department admitted today that the passport files of all three presidential candidates -- Sens. John McCain, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton -- have been breached by its employees.

The bombshell announcement came within hours of the admission that Obama's personal file was improperly accessed several times earlier this year and no one was notified of the breach.

In a rapid series of escalating admissions, State Department Secretary Condoleezza Rice called Obama to apologize. She then had to call Clinton to apologize as well. And by noon, the department held a news conference to concede that McCain's personal file had also been improperly accessed.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Rice made it clear to the agency's inspector general that an investigation "is top priority."

McCormack also said, "We are going to take a look whether there are any systemic issues that need to be looked at."

McCain, the Republican presumptive nominee, and Obama, who is the Democratic front runner, both released statements calling for a full investigation. McCain said that any violation of passport privacy deserves an apology.

McCormack said that three employees, who were not identified, had been caught peeking at the candidates' files. All three employees worked for private companies hired by the State Department.

A State Department official confirms that Stanley, Inc., of Arlington, Virginia was one of the two contracting companies that employed two of the three people who were involved in looking up Obama's records. Those two Stanley employees have been fired.

The third employee not only looked at Obama's file, but also hacked into McCain's file. That person has been disciplined, but not fired, McCormack said.

"That individual no longer has access to that kind of information," McCormack said. He said the agency was "reviewing its options" in regard to the employee.

The passport files would provide basic information like birth dates and background on where candidates have traveled. But the files would also include sensitive information like Social Security numbers, which could be used to track down credit reports and other personal information.

The series of revelations began with a morning news conference where Rice said she phoned Obama to apologize for unauthorized breaches into his personal passport information by three workers at the State Department.

"I told him that I was sorry, and I told him that I myself would be very disturbed if someone looked into my passport file and therefore I will stay on top of it and get to the bottom of it," Rice said.

Rice expressed concern over the privacy violations as well as the fact that they weren't reported right away. Rice said the incident "should have been made known to senior management. It was not to my knowledge and we also want to take every step we can to make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen again."

Rice said the State Department will launch a full investigation.

That probe immediately turned up the violations of Clinton's and McCain's passport files.

McCormack said the three employees involved in the unauthorized looks into Obama's personal records do not appear to be connected and were in three different passport offices in the Washington, D.C., area.

This morning McCormack said Acting Inspector General Bill Todd has been in touch with the Department of Justice "so they can proceed together" in case the IG's investigation determines any laws were broken.

Today McCormack said he wasn't trying to suggest anything other than the initial assessment that the employees were anything other than curious Obama fans but was not dismissive of other possibilities.

The violations took place as long ago as January, though senior staffers at the department said they did not learn about them until Thursday.

McCormack maintains that "the system worked," but the problem was that "information didn't flow up and managers didn't know what happened...the next step was not taken."

Obama campaign spokesman Bill Burton issued a statement Thursday evening referring to the Obama revelation, saying, "This is an outrageous breach of security and privacy, even from an administration that has shown little regard for either over the last eight years. Our government's duty is to protect the private information of the American people, not use it for political purposes."

Though they heralded the computer monitoring system installed a few years ago to detect such breaches, senior officials at the State Department were said that they had only learned of the Obama breach from a reporter calling for comment earlier Thursday.

"It should have been passed up the line," said Undersecretary of State for Management Pat Kennedy. "They failed to pass the information up the chain to a sufficiently high level."

Kennedy, who learned of the privacy violations from McCormack, briefed Rice Thursday afternoon.

He also called Obama's Senate office with news of the violations, which took place Jan. 9, Feb. 21 and March 14. No dates were immediately available about when the Clinton and McCain violations occurred.

Kennedy said Rice wanted to make sure that the monitoring system in place to detect such breaches is working properly, and that the matter was investigated thoroughly.

The inspector general will determine why the three employees were accessing the private information of Obama, who lived in Indonesia as a child and traveled to the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe as a U.S. senator.

"They were supposed to use their access for the purposes of the tasks they were assigned," Kennedy said. "They violated that trust. And they were caught by the monitoring system."

McCormack and Kennedy said that the three employees had access to the passport database for their jobs and had inappropriately accessed Obama's information out of nothing more than "inappropriate curiosity."

But they admitted that assessment was based on nothing more than the reassurances of the employees' supervisors at the two outside companies. The officials said they don't know the political affiliations of the individuals.

"When we do background checks, it would be inappropriate to look into the political affiliation of individuals," Kennedy said. "Now that this has arisen, it has become a germane question i.e., the purpose of why they did this."

The incident recalls a similar incident during the 1992 campaign when State Department employees were fired for inappropriately accessing then-Gov. Bill Clinton's passport files to chase down rumors the candidate had renounced his U.S. citizenship during the Vietnam War. A subsequent investigation by an independent counsel found no wrongdoing in that case.

State Department officials didn't say what was in Obama's files, but suggested that typically such data would include passport applications.

Neither McCormack nor Kennedy would reveal any details about the contact employees, but senior State Department officials told ABC News they worked in data entry and had been employed by the company for more than a year.

An initial assessment indicated the individuals were not politically connected and there is nothing in their history of background to suggest they are political operatives, the officials said.

According to one official, such breaches have happened several times before with nonpolitical celebrities. On at least two other occasions during the last eight months, contractors were fired for accessing records of Hollywood celebrities, the official said.

ABC News' national security correspondent Jonathan Karl contributed to this report.

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