GOP-issued laptops now a White House headache

Democrats say a private e-mail system was used in violation of federal rules.

By Tom Hamburger, Times Staff Writer
April 9, 2007

WASHINGTON — When Karl Rove and his top deputies arrived at the White House in 2001, the Republican National Committee provided them with laptop computers and other communication devices to be used alongside their government-issued equipment.

The back-channel e-mail and paging system, paid for and maintained by the RNC, was designed to avoid charges that had vexed the Clinton White House — that federal resources were being used inappropriately for political campaign purposes.

In addition, Democrats point to a handful of e-mails obtained through ongoing inquiries suggesting the system may have been used to conceal such activities as contacts with lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was convicted on bribery charges and is now in prison for fraud.

Democratic congressional investigators are beginning to demand access to this RNC-White House communications system, which was used not only by Rove's office but by several top officials elsewhere in the White House.

The prospect that such communication might become public has further jangled the nerves of an already rattled Bush White House.

Some Republicans believe that the huge number of e-mails — many written hastily, with no thought that they might become public — may contain more detailed and unguarded inside information about the administration's far-flung political activities than has previously been available.

"There is concern about what may be in these e-mails," said one GOP activist who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject.

"The system was created with the best intentions," said former Assistant White House Press Secretary Adam Levine, who was assigned an RNC laptop and Blackberry when he worked at the White House in 2002. But, he added, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, last week formally requested access to broad categories of RNC-White House e-mails.

Waxman told the Los Angeles Times in a statement that a separate "e-mail system for high-ranking White House officials would raise serious questions about violations of the Presidential Records Act," which requires the preservation and ultimate disclosure of e-mails about official government business.

Waxman's initial request to the RNC seeks e-mails relating to the presentation of campaign polling and strategy information to Cabinet agency appointees. He is also expected to ask for e-mails relating to Abramoff's activities, which Waxman is also investigating.
The Senate and House Judiciary Committees are also expected to formally request e-mail records from the RNC that relate to last year’s firing of eight U.S. attorneys.

The private e-mail system came to light in the U.S. attorney controversy because one of Rove's deputies used an RNC-maintained e-mail domain — gwb43.com — to communicate with the Justice Department about replacing one of those prosecutors.

White House officials said the system had been used appropriately and was modeled after one used by the Clinton White House political office in the late 1990s.

"The regular staffers who interface with political organizations have a separate e-mail account, and that's entirely appropriate," said White House spokesman Scott M. Stanzel. "The practice is followed to avoid inadvertent violations of the law."

Stanzel said he did not know how many officials used the separate system. Another White House official called it "a handful."

Some Republican activists say the e-mail request will not create great difficulty for the White House because nothing nefarious happened and because the RNC automatically purges some e-mails after 30 days.

RNC officials are expected to meet with House Government Reform and Judiciary Committee lawyers as early as this week to discuss the first document request.

"We'd like to cooperate to whatever level is appropriate," Republican Party spokeswoman Lisa Camooso Miller said Friday.

Waxman focused on the e-mails after a hearing last month examining a presentation of campaign forecasts and polling data made by a Rove deputy to top appointed officials of the Government Services Administration, some of whom believed they were being instructed to help GOP candidates.

White House staff arranging for the GSA briefing by a Rove deputy, Scott Jennings, used the gwb43.com e-mail domain name. That caught the attention of Waxman's investigators, who had previously examined e-mails from Abramoff to Rove's executive assistant, Susan B. Ralston, to object to an impending Interior Department decision. The decision, he wrote, was "anathema to all our supporters it's important if possible to get some quiet message from the WH [White House] that this is absurd."

Ralston used outside accounts — including at rnchq.org — to communicate with Abramoff and his partners. One e-mail from an Abramoff associate said that White House personnel had warned "it is better to not put this stuff in writing in [the White House] … e-mail system because it might actually limit what they can do to help us, especially since there could be lawsuits, etc."

Abramoff's response, according to a copy of his e-mail released by Waxman's committee, was: "Dammit. It was sent to Susan on her rcn pager and was not supposed to go into the WH system." Ralston later resigned in connection with the lobbying scandal.

Waxman told RNC Chairman Mike Duncan in a letter that such exchanges "indicated that in some instances White House officials were using nongovernment accounts specifically to avoid creating a record of communications" that could be reviewed by congressional committees or released under the Presidential Records Act.

Lawyers for the committees say that use of campaign-connected e-mail addresses may make it easier to gather information because it would be harder for the White House to make a broad claim of executive privilege. Lawyers for congressional Democrats have anticipated that the White House will invoke executive privilege in an effort to block requests for information about its role in the firing of U.S. attorneys, Abramoff and other matters.

In the U.S. attorney case, Rove deputy Jennings used the RNC e-mail system to write to D. Kyle Sampson, then Atty. Gen. Alberto Gonzales' chief of staff, in August 2006 about replacing Arkansas U.S. Atty. H.E. "Bud" Cummins III with former Rove protege Tim Griffin.

"We're a go for the U.S. atty plan. WH leg, political and communications have signed off and acknowledged that we have to be committed to following through once the pressure comes," Jennings wrote in an e-mail from the gwb43.com domain name. Sampson noted in a related e-mail that "getting him appointed was important to" Rove, then-White House Counsel Harriet E. Miers and other officials.

The gwb43.com account, and others like it, have been traced to the Republican National Committee computer servers, Waxman's staff said.

Doug Sosnik, White House political director under Clinton, says that his office had a
small number of separate computers and cellphones for campaign-related matters but that the scope of the political operation was smaller than that in the Bush White House.

For both administrations, the separate system was an acknowledgment that certain White House jobs necessarily mixed policy and politics. Though campaign-related activity is prohibited for federal workers on the job, White House appointees typically work extraordinarily long hours and are required to be available around the clock.

Sosnik said only a handful of people used the political computers in the Clinton White House, which were purchased with campaign funds. However, he said, the political messaging from the Bush team appears to have been broader than that of Clinton's. He could recall no instance, for example, in which campaign computers or cellphones were used to communicate with the Justice Department.

Levine, the former Bush press aide, said he saw senior White House colleagues, including Rove and his top staff, moving fluidly between the two computer systems, which often sat on officials' desks along with their government computers.

But Levine said he found the two computers with their separate purposes and log-in procedures confusing and inefficient. So he quietly slid his RNC laptop into a desk drawer, deciding to use the telephone rather than e-mail to communicate anything that was not considered official government business.

"In retrospect," he said last week, "I was lucky."

* 

tom.hamburger@latimes.com

MORE NEWS
- U.S playing catchup with medical diplomacy
- Charges fly over hauling of Gardena trash
- L.A. Unified to pay epileptic boy $7.6 million

Want to get away from it all in "Yosemite"? View our readers' photos and share your own at Your Scene.

Submit your photo now >>

Ads by Google

Are You Gay?
Take the Quiz. Find Out Free!
TheGayQuiz.com/gay

How good is Kobe Bryant?
Can any player in the NBA compete? Talk Smack, Debate NBA, Win Prizes
www.FreeTheFan.com

Free Kobe Bryant Jersey
LA Lakers Kobe Bryant Jersey. Complete Our Survey & Get It Free!
www.consumeroffersource.com

Oakland Raiders Ringtone
Send this ringtone to your phone right now!
RingRingMobile.com

Los Angeles Lakers News
Photos, articles and interviews Complete news online
examiner.com