

Passport files of McCain, Clinton, Obama all breached

A day after word came out that three State Department workers had taken unauthorized looks at Obama's records, additional incidents are uncovered. Condoleezza Rice apologizes to the three candidates.

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Washington -- The passport files of the three remaining major presidential candidates were improperly accessed by State Department workers, officials said today, in a disclosure that prompted personal apologies from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Embarrassed officials said an investigation begun Thursday has revealed that since last summer, one staff trainee and three contract workers in the department's passport bureau poked into passport application files that contain Social Security numbers and other personal and family information.

Officials said they believe the workers were motivated by nothing more than "imprudent curiosity," but they have not ruled out more serious motives, and have asked the department's inspector general to investigate the issue.

Rice said this morning that she had called Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) "and told him that I myself would be very disturbed that somebody had looked into my passport files.... None of us wants circumstances where any American's passport files are looked at in an unauthorized way."

Later in the day, Rice called both Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Sen. John McCain to express similar sentiments, and to promise that the department intended to get to the bottom of the issue, officials said.

The incidents came to light Thursday evening with the disclosure that three contract workers had snooped in Obama's file in incidents between January and mid-March. State Department officials began additional checks, and by this morning had discovered that supervisors in the Office of Passport Services knew of incidents involving all three of the major candidates.

The disclosures brought statements of concern from the candidates, advocates of greater privacy protection, and critics of the administration. The blogosphere came to life with theories that the incidents had political motives.

Obama said he wanted a congressional investigation into the incidents, while Clinton's campaign said in a statement that she intended to "closely monitor" the State Department's probe. Two of the contract workers have been fired, while one contract worker and the trainee have been admonished but remain on the payroll.

Officials said they are still investigating whether the workers broke any law, and whether the lower-level supervisors broke any rules by failing to pass along to superiors word of the explosive incidents.

The extent of the information gleaned was unclear. Passport application information includes personal data such as name and age, but it also includes more sensitive information, including Social Security numbers.

In a morning session with reporters, Rice said she was sorry about the incident involving Obama.

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

"None of us wants to have a circumstance where any American's passport files are looked at in an unauthorized way," she said.

At an Oregon news conference, Obama said he expects a "full and thorough investigation in conjunction with those congressional committees that have oversight."

He said wasn't worried about the information but was rather was concerned about how people saw their government.

"This is something that has to be investigated diligently and openly," Obama said. "One of the things that the American people count on in their interactions with any level of government is that if they have to disclose personal information that it is going to stay personal and stay private."

The incident, which is under investigation by the department, raises two broad questions: Why did the contractors look at Obama's file and why weren't top State Department officials told of the security breach.

Rice, who said she spoke with Obama by telephone, said this morning she was particularly disappointed that the incident wasn't brought to the attention of senior officials.

"We also want to take every step to make sure that this kind of thing doesn't happen again," Rice said.

The contractors, who have not been named, apparently looked at Obama's file on three occasions: Jan. 9, Feb. 21 and March 14.

In 1992, a Republican political appointee at the State Department was demoted over a search of presidential candidate Bill Clinton's passport records. The State Department's inspector general said the official had helped arrange the search in an attempt to find politically damaging information about Clinton.

In a statement, Rep. Congressman Howard L. Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called the incidents unacceptable, and said his committee, which oversees the State Department, will also investigate.

"The circumstances in this case may be different from the George H.W. Bush administration's snooping into Bill Clinton's passport records during the 1992 presidential campaign. But it is worth noting that that earlier situation also was characterized as isolated and non-political when the news initially emerged," according to the statement.

"This time, as then, Congress will pay close attention to the depth of executive branch involvement in the rifling of presidential candidates' passport files."