

Guest Lists at White House Didn't Include Rap Sheets

Some at DNC Fund-Raising Coffees Ran Afoul of Law

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The coffee Russ Barakat sipped with President Clinton at the White House back in April 1995 had to be a whole lot better than the brew he was served a few days later when he surrendered to federal marshals in South Florida.

The chairman of the Broward County Democratic Party, Barakat was indicted just five days after his meeting with Clinton on criminal charges that ultimately resulted in a conviction for tax evasion. The Justice Department investigation into Barakat's affairs was the subject of five stories in the Miami Herald before Barakat's visit to the Executive Mansion. A simple computer check would have disclosed that, but the White House did not conduct one.

Barakat was one of dozens of major Democratic donors and fund-raisers invited to the White House for coffees in 1995 and 1996. The screening for those gatherings consisted simply of an identity check of a guest's birth date and Social Security number, according to a White House official who asked not to be named. President Clinton said last month that the White House needed to improve its screening methods after *The Washington Post* reported that one coffee guest was Wang Jun, the head of a state-run Chinese weapons firm under investigation for allegedly smuggling arms into the United States.

A compilation of guest lists for White House political events, obtained by *The Post*, shows just how open some were—and the degree to

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Guest Lists for Fund-Raising Coffees Received Little Scrutiny From White House

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which White House aides sought to accommodate the wishes of fund-raisers.

The White House began holding coffees for donors and fund-raisers in early 1995, when the Clinton-Gore campaign was in the thick of its money-raising efforts. The Democratic National Committee intensified the practice last year as part of its effort to cultivate donors to pay for the party's ambitious ad campaign. Party officials said the coffees had two purposes: to reward those who had already contributed and to prospect for new donors.

A White House compilation of the events shows 70 coffees were held over 18 months. At the peak, the White House hosted one or two a week, and occasionally two in a single day.

The coffees typically included one or two top DNC officials, and often, White House per-

sonnel director Robert J. Nash. Nash was included because his office handled appointments to presidential commissions and boards that attracted some donors and fund-raisers, according to a White House official. Harold Ickes, then deputy chief of staff, also attended some events.

Some coffees targeted specific groups, the documents show. In the fall of 1995, for example, the president hosted a small coffee for the executives of some of New York's largest corporations. The next month, china cups clinked again at the White House for Puerto Rican contributors and businessmen. At another coffee in 1996, big donors from Texas gathered at the White House.

Many of the guests were clearly impressed by the intimacy of the events. Roger Tamraz, a Lebanese American businessman, attended a White House coffee on April 1, 1996, at the invitation of DNC fund-raisers. "The president

received seven or eight businessmen to hear his views on the political election and the campaign," Tamraz said in an interview from his home in Manhattan. "We had the chance and privilege and honor to sit with the president."

Tamraz described the coffee as a casual get-together to discuss the campaign and said no one solicited him for a contribution. His oil company contributed \$72,000 to the DNC in 1995 and 1996, according to federal election records.

The businessman said the only topic of discussion at the coffee was domestic politics. "You have to understand what it's like to have seven people meet who don't know each other, and who want to have the honor of being with the president," Tamraz said, describing the 45-minute coffee. "We were looking for topics. We asked him, 'How are the elections going? Are we going to win?'"

Had it known more about some of the

guests, the White House might have reconsidered inviting them.

Barakat was one, Chong Lo another.

Chong Lo was convicted of income tax evasion in the late 1980s under the name of Esther Chu. She reverted to her Chinese given name of Chong and her maiden name of Lo after a divorce, started a California mortgage company and billed herself as a successful Democratic fund-raiser.

In July 1996, 11 months after she attended a White House coffee with Clinton, Lo was arrested on 14 charges of falsifying mortgage applications. She has pleaded not guilty.

Federal prosecutors have said she used several aliases, seven addresses, three birth dates and two Social Security numbers in official papers. According to a spokesman for the FBI's San Francisco office, agents there are now investigating solicitations to an Asian American fund-raiser she planned that was canceled af-

ter her arrest. And the DNC has returned \$20,000 in contributions from an Asian American organization she headed, saying it was impossible to sort out if the money was tainted.

Some major contributors not only got to meet the president, they got to bring their friends. Rashid Chaudary, a Chicago-area cosmetics executive whose company contributed \$340,000 to the Democratic Party, was invited in May 1996 for a second coffee with Clinton. His friend Izzat Majeed and Majeed's wife happened to be visiting at the time, so Chaudary said he asked if they could come along.

Majeed is identified in a 1991 trade publication as a Saudi oil adviser. As foreigners, the Majeeds could not vote for Clinton or make a political contribution. Nor would the president have any obvious interest in meeting them.

Nonetheless, the Majeeds were added to the guest list.