

## White House Vandalized In Transition, G.A.O. Finds

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The General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, said today that "damage, theft, vandalism and pranks **did occur** in the White House complex" in the presidential transition from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush. The agency put the cost at \$13,000 to \$14,000, including \$4,850 to replace computer keyboards, many with damaged or missing W keys.

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Some of the damage, it said, was clearly intentional. Glue was smeared on desk drawers. Messages disparaging President Bush were left on signs and in telephone voice mail. A few of the messages used profane or obscene language.

"A Secret Service report documented the theft of a presidential seal that was 12 inches in diameter from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building," next to the White House, on Jan. 19, 2001, the accounting office said.

Six White House employees told investigators that they had seen graffiti derogatory to Mr. Bush on the wall of a stall in a men's room. Other White House employees saw a sticker in a filing cabinet that said, "Jail to the thief," implying that Mr. Bush had stolen the 2000 election. The report said all these employees were members of the current White House, but did not make clear whether any had also worked in the Clinton White House.

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The accounting office said similar pranks were reported in prior transitions, including the one from Mr. Bush's father to Mr. Clinton in 1993. "We were unable to conclude," it said, "whether the 2001 transition was worse than previous ones."

The accounting office interviewed more than 100 government employees, but said it could not establish who was responsible for the damage and the pranks.

"Any intentional damage at the White House complex, which is a national treasure, is both inappropriate and a serious matter," the report said. "The theft of or willful damage to government property would constitute a criminal act."

The investigation was undertaken in response to a request from Representative Bob Barr, Republican of Georgia, one of Mr. Clinton's harshest critics. "The Clinton administration treated the White House worse than college freshmen checking out of their dorm rooms," Mr. Barr said today.

The Bush White House was deeply disappointed with the report. Alberto R. Gonzales, counsel to President Bush, had demanded that the accounting office provide more detail, including the full text of graffiti and other messages that were "especially offensive or vulgar."

The accounting office said such details were unnecessary and inappropriate. But Bush administration officials said the details would have revealed the "mind-set or intentions" of Clinton administration pranksters. Moreover, in a response much longer than the actual report, the Bush administration said, "It appears that the G.A.O. has undertaken a concerted effort to downplay the damage found in the White House complex."

In several instances, it appears, Clinton and Bush administration officials simply disagreed about the normal condition of federal offices. Bush officials said they had found offices full of trash, broken furniture and filthy carpets. Clinton administration officials insisted that the dirt and damage reflected normal wear and tear.

The accounting office confirmed that \$9,324 had been spent to repair or replace various items and to clean offices. That included \$4,850 for 62 keyboards, \$2,040 for 26 cellphones and

\$1,150 for professional cleaning. In addition, the White House and the General Services Administration estimated that it cost \$3,750 to \$4,675 to replace missing doorknobs, medallions and office signs and the large presidential seal, the accounting office said.

Julia M. Payne, a spokeswoman for Mr. Clinton, referred questions to Jennifer Palmieri, a spokeswoman for the Democratic National Committee.

"The real scandal here," Ms. Palmieri said, "is how much time and money the Republicans have wasted in a vendetta against the Clinton administration. It's troubling that the White House cooperated so enthusiastically with this investigation, but refused to provide the G.A.O. with records of the energy task force headed by Vice President Cheney."

Anne Womack, a spokeswoman for Mr. Bush, said: "The G.A.O. confirmed that damage was done at the White House. We have considered this matter closed for more than a year. Our focus is on moving forward."

To minimize damage in future transitions, the accounting office said, the government should inspect office space, furniture and equipment of departing White House employees and penalize those who willfully deface federal property.

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