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White House Plays Down a New Age Visitor

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

WASHINGTON, June 23 — A new book has caused a stir with its detailed descriptions of White House visits to Hillary Rodham Clinton by a New Age psychologist, but President Clinton's spokesman said today that the meetings were nothing more than "a brainstorming session" for the First Lady's book-writing project.

"Nothing mysterious here," said Michael D. McCurry, the White House press secretary, commenting on a detailed account of one meeting in which the psychologist, Dr. Jean Houston, proposed that Mrs. Clinton imagine morale-building conversations with famous figures she admires, including Eleanor Roosevelt.

She did so, Mr. McCurry said, as "a graceful First Lady who enjoys listening to women with ideas and perspective that differ from her own."

Two White House meetings with Dr. Houston are described in a new book about the 1996 Presidential campaign by Bob Woodward, an assistant managing editor and investigative reporter for The Washington Post, which devoted two front-page articles today to the book. Newsweek magazine, which is also promoting the book, "The Choice" (Simon & Schuster), characterized the visits as séances, a term that Mr. McCurry criticized as far from factual.

"I think that's very, very unfortunate," he said, adding that "Hillary's recollection is that it was, in fact, nothing more than brainstorming" for her book, "It Takes a Village."

Commenting on Dr. Houston, Mrs. Clinton's deputy chief of staff, Melanne Verveer, said: "She is neither a spiritual adviser nor a policy adviser. Any suggestion that emerges from the book that she is a central figure in the First Lady's activities or world view is inaccurate."

The Woodward book is about the Clintons and Bob Dole, the Republican candidate for President. It describes Mrs. Clinton's efforts to imagine meeting Mrs. Roosevelt, an earlier First Lady who stirred controversy and faced heated criticism. That session was tape recorded, according to the book, which, however, paraphrased Mrs. Clinton as saying in the meeting that the White House had been a shock for her in terms of the attention she attracted and the expectations placed on her.

Dr. Houston has described herself as a "sacred psychologist" and "global midwife" who in 30 years of research, world travels and practice has studied trances, hypnosis and drugs as tools of therapy. The Woodward book stresses that none of these were employed in the White House visits, only self-help conversation.

Administration officials, mindful of the controversy that engulfed the

THE CHOICE



BOB WOODWARD

Simon & Schuster

A book — "The Choice," above — says Hillary Rodham Clinton met with a New Age psychologist.

White House after it became known that Nancy Reagan, while she was First Lady, regularly consulted an astrologer, described Dr. Houston's visits as far from occult.

"There's a lot less here than the people marketing the book would have you believe," said George Stephanopoulos, senior adviser to the President. He said it was as common for White House figures to ponder history and imagine what their predecessors might have done in trying situations as it was for "utilizing" exaggerations to be offered in the marketing of books about the White House.

Present at the session with Dr. Houston was Mary Catherine Bateson, an anthropologist, who considered the meeting "a kind of meditation, reflection or even prayer," according to the Woodward book. A similar self-help lesson was attempted in imagining guidance from another of Mrs. Clinton's heroes, Mahatma Gandhi, the book said, but the First Lady drew the line at a suggestion that she imagine a conversation with Jesus, saying such an exercise would be too private.

In her newspaper column two weeks ago, Mrs. Clinton cited both women in a longer list of female writers, historians and thinkers she praised as creative and provocative. She described Dr. Houston as an expert on philosophy and mythology who had "shared her views with me on everything from the ancient Greeks to the lives of women and children in Bangladesh."

Mrs. Clinton wrote: "As women, talking can be our greatest friend. I don't always agree with what I hear."

Both women had been members of a group of self-help authors and lead-

ers of the New Age human-potential movement invited by President and Mrs. Clinton to Camp David as they sought to come to grips with the loss of Congress in 1994 and other political setbacks. That visit was previously reported, just as Mrs. Clinton had earlier noted how she regularly felt the need for an inspirational chat with Mrs. Roosevelt.

In her column two weeks ago, written as the Woodward book was near publication, Mrs. Clinton noted: "I occasionally have imaginary conversations with Mrs. Roosevelt to try to figure out what she would do in my shoes. She usually responds by telling me to buck up or at least to grow skin as thick as a rhinoceros."

Asked whether Mrs. Clinton had expected Dr. Houston's White House visits to remain private, Mr. McCurry replied that "normally, friends keep confidences," but that, in any case, Mrs. Clinton had advised Dr. Houston to simply "tell the truth" if the subject arose. "The sad truth now is the First Lady expects people to mischaracterize things," Mr. McCurry said.

President Clinton had no direct comment on the visits. His chief of staff, Leon E. Panetta, said the book excerpts merely showed that Mrs. Clinton reaches out regularly to friends and experts to draw strength from other experiences in order to bear up under White House pressures. Speaking on the CBS News program "Face the Nation," Mr. Panetta said, "I can't tell you how many Hail Marys I've said since I've taken this job."

Democrats Urge Dismissal

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Reuters) — Two leading Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Paul Simon of Illinois and Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, suggested today that the White House dismiss its director of personnel security because of the growing furor over its acquisition of more than 400 sensitive F.B.I. background files.

The director, Craig Livingstone, is a political appointee who was placed on paid administrative leave last week.

"My impression is that they should fire him," Mr. Simon said on the Fox TV program "News Sunday." "The White House has to be very forthcoming on this. They can't just drag this out."

Mr. Leahy, the ranking Democrat on the committee, called for Mr. Livingstone's dismissal on the ABC program "This Week With David Brinkley."