

## **Gore Emails Swallowed by Blackhole**

By William Nicoson

The period March 1998 to April 1999 might be remembered in history as Vice President Al Gore's blackhole era. The White House recently revealed that during this period, email-savvy Gore and his staff lost all records and backups of electronic mail. Unlike the other lost email now being reconstructed at the White House, these Gore messages have been lost forever.

History will suffer from this "technical error", as the White House called it. The blackhole era was a busy time for Gore. It was during this period that 1996 fund-raising activities by the Clinton-Gore campaign and the Democratic National Committee were coming under increasing press scrutiny and investigation by Congressional committees and by the Justice Department.

Prosecutors were considering whether to appoint an independent counsel to investigate Gore's telephone solicitations from his government office for political contributions (about which Gore had claimed there was "no controlling legal authority") and whether he lied to investigators in claiming ignorance about a predetermined split of funds raised between hard and soft money (between money donated to his campaign and money donated to the DNC for party-building purposes).

If the money Gore solicited was hard, it's likely he committed a crime; if soft, it's likely he didn't. In fact the funds he brought in were split between hard and soft, and some 13 memoranda on the split were forwarded to Gore. Then-Presidential Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta said Gore seemed to be attentive at a meeting on the subject. Gore claimed he never read the memos and may have been absent from the meeting when the split was discussed since he drank a lot of iced tea beforehand.

Gore's longtime associate and fund-raiser, Maria Tsia, was also under investigation during these blackhole months for raising more than \$100,000 in illegal contributions from foreign nationals, of which \$65,000 was collected the day after Gore himself appeared at a Buddhist temple rally. Gore first called the event "community outreach" but, as details of straw donors became known, admitted it was "finance related." Ms. Tsia was convicted of multiple felonies last March.

In blackhole June of 1998, a House committee was investigating a \$1 million payment by Tennessee developer Franklin Haney to Peter Knight, Gore's former chief of staff and manager of the Clinton-Gore campaign in 1996. The payment apparently related to a decision by the Federal Communications Commission, under prodding by Knight, to pay increased rent by moving into the Portals complex developed by Haney. That's our money.

Could any of the lost email have shed light on these matters? We'll never know, though partisans in a political season will have strong and opposite opinions. Does the email loss shed any light on Gore's performance in high office? Oh, yes. I'm willing to assume that the message

dump into an electronic blackhole was one more inadvertent glitch by a glitch-prone administration rather than the criminal destruction of subpoenaed evidence. But any high official who mislays more than a year's worth of federal records he was legally bound to retain seems an unlikely candidate for promotion. Destruction of federal records is in fact a felony requiring forfeiture of office and disqualification from further office.

Remember the 18 ½-minute gap on one of President Nixon's tapes? Al Gore has topped all historic losses of subpoenaed official records by misplacing beyond recovery 14 months' of electronic messages. Oh well, great inventors are often absent-minded about their discoveries.

*William Nicoson is a D.C. lawyer and former publisher of Connection Newspapers.*