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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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November 1, 2012

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The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

On April 10, 2012, the Committee sent you a letter to request information related to overnight conferences attended by State Department employees. To date, we have not received a response. The April 10, 2012, letter and this letter pertain to the Committee's investigation of wasteful and excessive spending by federal agencies on conferences and similar functions. The Committee began investigating conference spending after learning about an October 2010 conference in Las Vegas held by the U.S. General Services Administration.

An October 25, 2012, report in the *Washington Examiner* heightened the Committee's concerns about wasteful event spending by the State Department. The story stated:

President Obama has spent far more lavishly on White House state dinners than previous chief executives, including nearly \$1 million on a 2010 dinner for Mexico's president, according to documents.¹

According to the story, President Obama and the White House staff retained Boston-based celebrity event planner Bryan Rafanelli last year.² Hiring an outside event planner appears to be a departure from the practice of previous administrations, which relied on in-house planners for state dinners and other events.³ The use of an expensive outside event planner for state dinners raises concerns about unnecessary expenditures. Allegations that there was an improper relationship between Rafanelli and the State Department official responsible for reimbursing the White House executive residence for state dinners only heightens these concerns. Rafanelli is reportedly the business partner

¹ Richard Pollack, *Spending on White House Dinners Soars Under Obama*, WASH. EXAMINER, Oct. 25, 2012.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

of the Deputy Chief of the State Department Office of Protocol—the office responsible for overseeing state dinners.⁴

During these tough economic times, Americans are reining in their spending wherever possible. The Executive Branch should be mindful of this. Reports of excessively lavish events, however, indicate the opposite. For a May 2010 state dinner honoring Felipe Calderon, the President of Mexico, the White House hired Beyonce and celebrity chef Rick Bayless. The event cost nearly one million dollars. The *Examiner* reported:

A performance by pop star Beyonce cost \$969,793, or more than \$4,700 per attendee, the documents show. The Calderon dinner was held on the South Lawn in a massive tent adorned with decorated walls, hanging chandeliers, carpeting and a stage for Beyonce's performance. Guests rode private trolley cars from the White House to the tent. Celebrity guest chef Rick Bayless from Chicago's Topolobampo restaurant was imported to prepare Oaxacan black mole, black bean tamalon and grilled green beans.⁵

Indeed, compared to similar events in the past, the cost of the May 2010 dinner seems extremely high. The *Examiner* reported that, according to individuals familiar with the process of planning and executing state dinners during the previous administration, costs typically ranged from \$190,000 to \$200,000.⁶ Reports of excessive costs for the May 2010 dinner creates the appearance that the White House and State Department are not planning and executing state dinners responsibly. The Committee is charged with investigating allegations of waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in the federal government. To assist the Committee in the investigation of this matter, please provide the following documents and information:

1. Documents, including, but not limited to, guidelines and memoranda, relating to the planning, organization, and execution of a state dinner.
2. An itemized list of costs and expenses for each of the last six state dinners, including, but not limited to, amounts paid, including reimbursements, for non-government event planners, entertainers, and chefs. Please include a copy of all contracts or agreements entered into with all non-government event planners, entertainers, chefs, and other non-government contractors.
3. All documents and communications between and among staff of the White House and the Department relating to the planning and execution of state dinners since January 1, 2009.

⁴ *Id.*; see also Richard Pollock, *Cronyism Seen in Relationship Behind White House State Dinners*, WASH. EXAMINER, Nov. 1, 2012.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

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Please provide the requested information as soon as possible, but by no later than 5:00 p.m. on November 15, 2012. When producing documents to the Committee, please deliver production sets to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2471 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The Committee prefers, if possible, to receive all documents in electronic format.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and may at "any time" investigate "any matter" as set forth in House Rule X.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact Ashley Callen of the Committee Staff at (202) 225-5074. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Darrell Issa
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Elijah, E. Cummings, Ranking Minority Member