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Clinton, Lynch, and a 'scandal' that doesn't exist

The former president talked to the Attorney General about his grandchildren at an airport. That's not a scandal.



— U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch holds a news conference, where she announced a federal civil rights investigation into the legality of the Baltimore's police department's use of force and whether there are \"systemic violations\" as well as any pattern of discriminatory policing, at the U.S. Justice Department in Washington on May 8, 2015.

July 1, 2016, 8:22 AM EDT / Updated July 1, 2016, 8:40 AM EDT

By Steve Benen

When news reports surfaced yesterday about a private meeting between Attorney General Loretta Lynch and former President Bill Clinton, Republican outrage went from 0 to Hair-On-Fire with remarkable efficiency. It wasn't long before Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Texas) actually called for an independent prosecutor to investigate the "controversy."

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Given the apoplexy, one might have assumed that Lynch and Clinton arranged some kind of secret meeting in an undisclosed location to plot some nefarious scheme. The truth -- the two crossed paths at an airport -- appears to be far less interesting.

Ms. Lynch said at a press conference that the Clinton meeting was unplanned. Mr. Clinton was apparently waiting to fly out of the Phoenix airport when Ms. Lynch's plane coincidentally landed there. The former president then walked over to the attorney general's plane to speak to Ms. Lynch and her husband. "Our conversation was a great deal about his grandchildren. It was primarily social and about our travels," Ms. Lynch told reporters in Phoenix on Tuesday.

I realize there's nothing the political world loves more than a Clinton "scandal," but as an objective matter, it's tough to get worked up about a casual chat at an airport between a president and an A.G. If your first reaction to Bill Clinton talking about his grandchildren is, "I hear Ken Starr is unemployed, so let's give him something to do!" you might be a little too eager to exaggerate the significance of harmless social interaction.

The trouble is, the political world remains deeply invested in the idea that Hillary Clinton's cabinet-level email server management is one of the most important issues in the country right now. Folks hear about Bill Clinton saying hello to Loretta Lynch, and their first reaction is to assume that this was an effort to prevent an indictment.

But that's silly. For one thing, an indictment is ridiculously unlikely. For another, if Bill Clinton intended to launch some kind of back-channel pressure campaign to interfere with an investigation, he'd probably take steps less overt than a public chat at an airport.

The obvious explanation may sound naive, but it's also the easiest to believe: the former president wanted to say hello to a prominent official he knows so he could talk about his grandkids. He wasn't considering "media optics," because as far as Clinton is concerned, there was no reason to care -- why would anyone make a fuss about something so innocuous?

Nevertheless, the Attorney General will reportedly announce today that she will remove herself from any decision making role in the email matter, and will "accept whatever recommendation career prosecutors and the F.B.I. director make."

And with Benghazi conspiracy theories having been discredited again this week, the far-right suddenly has something new to obsess over for a while.



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