Christy Zercher had little contact with presidential adviser Bruce Lindsey after Bill Clinton's inauguration. A former flight attendant on the campaign plane, she knew him mainly as the taciturn lawyer who played fierce games of hearts with Clinton between stops. Certainly, she said, she never expected Lindsey to call her at her New Jersey home on March 8.

According to Zercher, Lindsey woke her up from a nap to find out if reporters had called to ask about Clinton's behavior with women on the plane. She quotes him asking: "Did you say anything to anybody? What did they want to know? Did they want to know if Clinton was flirting on the airplane?" Then he urged her to say "all positive things," she recalled.

Asked about the call, Lindsey said a White House receptionist who knows Zercher told him the former flight attendant was upset about a reporter's efforts to reach her, and he simply wanted to assure her she did not have to talk if she didn't want to.

If anyone knows that, it's Bruce Lindsey. Few in the senior ranks of the White House avoid the press so resolutely. The ultimate inside man, Lindsey looks on publicity the way flight attendants view turbulence: it only makes his job harder.

As his call to Zercher suggests, Lindsey is Clinton's political lookout. Every president has such an aide, but Lindsey is different. One of the last remaining Arkansans in Clinton's inner circle, his $125,000-a-year job includes more than the usual soothing of irritated governors and sweeping of presidential statements for contradictions. He is trying to protect Clinton from controversies rooted in the past -- sometimes the distant past.

No one in previous administrations has played quite that role, at least not to the same degree, according to presidential scholars such as Bradley H. Patterson Jr. "I don't think I can put my finger on much of a precedent," said Patterson, who worked in senior White House positions under presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford.

Lindsey led the White House defense when Arkansas state troopers said Clinton used them to procure women when he was governor. He was the point man on the Clintons' Whitewater real estate venture when it dominated the front pages through the winter and spring.

That turned into more than he bargained for: He and five other White House aides were called before a federal grand jury in March to discuss White House contacts with Treasury Department officials about a confidential investigation into the Clintons' business partner. Although special counsel Robert B. Fiske Jr. cleared White House aides of criminal wrongdoing in the matter, it remains under scrutiny by the Office of Government Ethics and is likely to dominate congressional hearings scheduled to begin later this month.

Senior adviser Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty said it is only natural that Lindsey respond to questions about Clinton's past because he knows it best. But whether the public should pay for his efforts to deflect stories
about the president's personal history is an open question. Some of Lindsey's Republican predecessors draw the line at phoning women with whom Clinton's conduct as governor might be scrutinized. "You could raise a question about that," Patterson said. "I don't know the answer, but it does raise a question."

Besides defense, Clinton uses Lindsey, 46, a former labor lawyer, as a sounding board, legal counsel, traveling companion, historian, media and personnel adviser and general trouble-shooter. Anyone who doubts his influence is "new to Washington, ignorant, or dangerously naive," said Roy Neel, Clinton's former deputy chief of staff. It stems from Clinton's long-standing faith in his political judgment and in what one person calls Lindsey's "preternatural, supernatural" loyalty.

So loyal is Lindsey that he left his wife and two daughters in Little Rock, Ark., where the girls wanted to finish high school. They communicate by beeper, with numerical signals. One means just checking in; two means the call is about something specific, and 911 means call back right away.

Too busy to find his own place, Lindsey sleeps in a room in the Georgetown house of a friend's mother. He used to eat dinner with whomever dropped by around 9:30 p.m. and dragged him out of his blue-carpeted office between the Oval Office and Vice President Gore's. Then he decided he would just skip dinner if he could not get to it before 9 p.m. Because he never liked breakfast, he said, "that left lunch."

He dropped almost 30 pounds in 10 months. At 5-foot-9, he now ranges between 135 and 140 pounds, and friends who have not seen him for some time are surprised by the gauntness of his even-featured face. His wife Bev said she worries like any spouse, but she is used to seeing him drive himself: "Generally, and across the board, he's a very intense person," she said. "I think he internalizes all of it."

The goings-on in Lindsey's office one recent late afternoon reflect the demanding, political nature of his job, and the sacrifices he has made for it. An assistant in the outer office hung up a telephone and remarked: "Another state senator from Arkansas called for a tour." Then Lindsey's teenage daughter called from Little Rock, asking why he had not called her back between his last two meetings. "I had about three minutes between the two, Sarah," Lindsey told her, signing off with, "Love ya." Meanwhile, an electronic black box on his back shelf flashed the location of the president, Hillary Rodham Clinton, the vice president and Tipper Gore.

Many in Washington would play up such proximity to power. Not Lindsey. No one would accuse him of grandiosity. If he feels others have more expertise, he may sit through an entire White House meeting without a word. "I still may draw conclusions, but I don't necessarily believe my conclusions are worthy of everybody listening to unless it's sought," he said.

He will cite occasions when Clinton asked his opinion, about how the White House was running with McLarty as chief of staff, for instance. But he adds matter-of-factly, "He may ask a dozen people."

Lindsey's like the plumber who fixes the faucet when the family is at work and slips the key back through the mail slot. No one saw him, but the problem is gone. "It's almost as if he has camouflage on," said James Carville, Clinton's campaign strategist. "If you look at a picture of him and the president, it's as if he's not really there." If the press does find out what he is up to, that's probably a sign he has failed.

One of his quiet endeavors was to find a compromise between the Environmental Protection Agency and California on car inspection sites that allowed the state to be judged in compliance with the Clean Air Act and keep its federal highway funds. He also worked out a clash of views between the EPA and the Agriculture Department over requiring the use of cleaner-burning auto fuels. He talked to both sides during last year's American Airlines strike and helped Clinton find a resolution. And he helped formulate the administration's policy on gays in the military.
Before January, Lindsey also headed the White House personnel office, a thankless job complicated by everyone’s desire for input. Though "he took a lot of hits because of the slow pace of appointments, he never shot back," Neel said. He still helps Clinton pick legal talent, including Supreme Court nominees.

But Lindsey's trickiest project by far has been trying to ward off stories about Clinton's personal life and financial ventures while Arkansas governor. His efforts there date back at least to the campaign. According to Zercher, Lindsey instructed the campaign flight attendants not to appear on the tarmac with Clinton while the cameras were rolling and told her not to accept Clinton's invitations to work out with him at the Little Rock YMCA, a warning Lindsey said he does not remember issuing.

Still, some flirtatious behavior by the candidate slipped by him: Zercher said Clinton startled her once with a hug, and made comments like: "Oh, I could get lost in those blue eyes" and "You don't know what that outfit does to me."

Lindsey's goal is to stay a step ahead of reporters. He called Zercher in March, for instance, when he heard from White House receptionist Debra Schiff that then-Washington Post reporter Michael Isikoff was trying to reach her. Lindsey said he saw nothing wrong with calling Zercher and does not believe he told her to stress the positive.

Usually, only by accident does one glimpse Lindsey's contribution to White House damage control. There was the time, for instance, when Buddy Young, former head of Clinton's security detail, broadcast Lindsey's voice over his speaker phone. Lindsey had called to enlist Young in rebutting allegations from Arkansas state troopers that Clinton used them to pick up women. Unbeknownst to Lindsey, a television crew was already sitting in Young's office, recorded the conversation and aired it.

When The Washington Post was preparing an article about Paula Corbin Jones's allegations of sex harassment, reporters put questions to another senior adviser, George Stephanopoulos. But Lindsey prepared the response.

On Whitewater, Lindsey perhaps was most visible and least successful. His strategy for months was not to release information, on the theory that it would simply lead to more negative coverage. Only the disclosure that Clinton's personal files had been taken from Vincent Foster's office convinced him that the press could not be stonewalled.

Lindsey attacked the stories that did appear with all the aggressiveness of a corporate lawyer who sees his client on the verge of a multimillion-dollar loss. Usually even-tempered, he became agitated and combative in a two-hour interview at The Washington Post last December. Then his own efforts to gather information became an issue, and he had to turn over responsibility for dealing with reporters to John Podesta, who heads the Office of the Secretary.

The issue was discussions that Lindsey and other top White House aides held with Treasury Department officials about a confidential request for a criminal investigation of the Clintons' business partner in the Whitewater real estate venture. Investigators from the Resolution Trust Corp., which made the request to the Justice Department, suspected the business partner had illegally funneled money from a savings and loan he owned to Whitewater or Clinton's gubernatorial campaign. The RTC, supposedly an independent agency, then was in the hands of Treasury officials.

Lindsey said he gleaned no inside information about the criminal referral, only confirmation of what reporters from The Washington Post and New York Times already were investigating. Clinton said Lindsey was probably the one who told him about the referral and called the White House contacts with Treasury
If Lindsey's loyalty to Clinton blurred his judgment in that case, former co-workers say it would be an exception. "In my experience, his integrity and judgment were never in question," said Howard Paster, who resigned last December as head of the Office of Congressional Affairs. "He is one of the people I would be most confident in telling the president he was making a mistake."

Not surprisingly, the White House communications office has no official biography on Lindsey. Were there one, it would resemble his father's. Both father and son practiced labor law in the same Little Rock law firm, where Robert Lindsey was a senior partner. They even teamed up on some cases.

Friends trace many of Bruce's other traits to his father, including his penchant for dress clothes on casual occasions. When Bruce Lindsey left Arkansas for the White House, his friends put their phone numbers on a patch sewn inside a blue blazer because they figured he would never be without it.

Lindsey once told a reporter that he wanted to be a lawyer ever since he was a child and watched his father from the back of a courtroom. But if law was in his background, politics was in his blood. He has alternated between the two since college, repeatedly forsaking the security of corporate practice for the vagaries of voters.

Lindsey decided more than a decade ago that he did not have what it takes to be a politician: the willingness to bare himself before strangers, with no guarantee of acceptance. Instead he hooked up with Arkansas' best-known Democrats: former senator J.W. Fulbright and Sens. David Pryor and Dale Bumpers. After Bumpers decided not to run for president in 1987, he began to help plot Clinton's presidential campaign.

Now they are so comfortable with each other they can sit side by side on a plane and read in companionable silence, the politician and the political handyman. Whatever Clinton tells Lindsey in their private moments, he can be certain few people will know. "Even with his closest friends, he's guarded," said C. Douglas Buford, his former law partner. "There will never be a casual conversation about his work."

Bob Hattoy, who worked for Lindsey in the personnel office, remembers how he admonished him in the White House bathroom after he publicly criticized administration policy. Lindsey told him very firmly, but not unkindly, that he had to decide where his loyalties lay. "He's the keeper of the loyalty flame," Hattoy said.

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