

Obama's stylish aide is under withering scrutiny

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She arrived in Washington with more of a splash than any White House social secretary before her, and no wonder: Desiree Rogers had obvious style, wealth, a Harvard MBA, years of corporate experience, and friends at the top, most importantly Barack and Michelle Obama.

She defined her goal as nothing less than bringing life to the Obama presidency. And she pulled off a series of innovative, high-wattage events that seemed to be doing just that. She even got the nation's governors to dance in a conga line.

Enter Tareq and Michaele Salahi.

Now Rogers is under withering scrutiny for her office's role in the infamous security breakdown at the state dinner. A woman with a reputation as a consummate perfectionist is being criticized for dropping the ball — and, by some, for putting her own aggrandizement over her job.

For now, the White House seems firmly on her side, and is protecting her from appearing before a congressional panel. But the turn of events is bewildering to Rogers' friends and associates, who say she's being misunderstood and unfairly targeted, and her accomplishments ignored.

"It's extraordinary to see someone's life's work mischaracterized in this way," says John W. Rogers Jr., Desiree's former husband, with whom she remains close. "I just don't understand it. She's working 12-15 hours a day, just trying to do a great job. Desiree has brought excellence to everything she's done in her life."

John Rogers, who spoke in a telephone interview from Chicago, was a guest at the state dinner, and though he admits he's biased, he found it to be "extraordinary — if you watched her work, you saw her attention to detail." Indeed, by virtually all accounts, the social secretary pulled off an elegant evening, a logistically complicated affair for 300-plus guests under a romantic pavilion lined with magnolia branches.

The chef was whisked in from one of New York's top restaurants, and the entertainment was headlined by Oscar winner Jennifer Hudson. Rogers herself appeared in a couture dress by Comme des Garçons, befitting her reputation as a fashionista.

But it was another part of her reputation that soon came into question: that of an executive who pays sharp attention to detail. When it emerged that the Salahis had managed to get through security without being on the guest list, blame fell on the Secret

Service, which has admitted failures, but also on the social office, which didn't have staff stationed at the checkpoints — a departure from past administrations.

"I mean, come on, even Wal-Mart has a greeter," Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.) told Politico.com.

Did Rogers simply think staff was better used elsewhere? She has not spoken since the breach, and the White House has said she won't testify before the congressional panel, citing separation of powers. (It has also conducted its own review, saying it could have done more, and changed its security procedures.)

But criticism of Rogers has gone far beyond security arrangements. Meredith Vieira noted on NBC's "Today" that Rogers had seated herself at the dinner as a guest, and asked guest Valerie Jarrett — a close friend of Rogers — if that was appropriate.

And Maureen Dowd of the New York Times wrote: "Instead of standing outside with a clipboard, eyeballing guests as Anne Hathaway did in 'The Devil Wears Prada,' Desiree was ... the center of her own table of guests, just like the president and first lady."

The notion that a social secretary can't be seated at a state dinner is "ridiculous," says Letitia Baldrige, who served as social secretary under Jacqueline Kennedy.

"I have sat at state dinners and so have many other social secretaries," says Baldrige. "Of course, you're constantly getting up. But I don't begrudge her at all for seating herself at the dinner."

Some have pointed out that social secretaries of the past cast a lower profile than Rogers. But Rogers also has a different job than most — she's a special assistant to the president, too, meaning she works for both the East and West wings of the White House.

She has certainly contributed to some of the attention. Not long after her arrival she appeared in *Vogue*, dressed in designer fashions, and in *Wall Street Journal's* magazine.

But it's hardly unusual for an incoming social secretary to be profiled in the media, says historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony of the National First Ladies Library. "They're almost always profiled, whether they cooperate or not," he says.

Interest in Rogers — just as with the first lady she works for — has been intense. When she appeared at a New York cultural event in June, two days after her 50th birthday, she could barely move during a cocktail reception for all the well-wishers eager to meet her and press business cards into her hand.

Social secretaries weren't known for headlining appearances outside Washington, but Rogers told *The Associated Press* then: "When it comes to arts and culture, we need to be out there. We need to see what people are doing."

She proudly told the crowd she'd already organized 150 events at the White House, among them that governors' dinner. She didn't want the governors to just be sitting the whole time. "So we got Earth, Wind and Fire," Rogers said. "And by the end, they were doing a conga line."

Baldrige, who met briefly with Rogers after she got the job, thinks there's no set model for a social secretary. "Every social secretary is unique in what she brings," Baldrige says. "She is cool, savvy, sophisticated. She's right for this administration."

For John Rogers, the worst part is seeing his former wife presented as someone more interested in glamour than in doing her job.

"Desiree is someone who from the very beginning, when she came to Chicago after business school, has worked in some very unglamorous jobs," he said, speaking of her experience working "in the bowels of AT&T" or working at a gas and utilities company. "She was the person rolling up her sleeves and working side by side with everyone."

"This idea that she's floating above the fray is just the opposite of her life's work."

He added that she had been both toughened and humbled by a breast cancer diagnosis in 2003, about which she has spoken publicly.

In the end, though, all the criticism may be moot, says historian Anthony.

"There are only two people whose opinion ever matters when it comes to a social secretary," says Anthony. "The president, and his wife. Everybody else's opinion is totally irrelevant."