

Penn Out As Clinton Senior Strategist

By Beth Fouhy
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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.— Hillary Rodham Clinton is turning to her communications chief and pollster to plan her presidential election strategy after giving the boot to a polarizing top aide because of his work on behalf of a trade agreement Clinton opposes.

Mark Penn, a lightning rod for controversy throughout Clinton's presidential campaign, left the campaign Sunday after it was disclosed he had met with representatives of the Colombian government to help promote the trade agreement.

Communications director Howard Wolfson and pollster Geoff Garin will direct the campaign's message and strategic efforts for the campaign going forward, said campaign manager Maggie Williams. She said Penn will continue "to provide polling and advice to the campaign."

Penn's departure comes as Clinton, considered the front-runner for the Democratic nomination last year, trails Barack Obama in delegates and the popular vote with a must-win primary in Pennsylvania April 22 and nine other contests remaining. Clinton almost certainly will end the primary season narrowly behind Obama in the popular vote and pledged delegates unless the nullified primaries in Florida and Michigan are counted — a scenario that seems remote. Her challenge will be to persuade some 800 superdelegates to back her despite the numbers.

Democratic strategist Chris Kofinis, who had been a spokesman in John Edwards' campaign, said Penn's departure was needed.

"The worst kept secret in the whole Democratic race was that Penn's campaign strategy was not working and that the Clinton campaign has unfortunately paid the price," Kofinis said. "The truth is this the best move the Clinton campaign could have made and something that I imagine most Clinton supporters wished had happened months ago."

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that Penn, who serves as chief executive of public relations giant Burson-Marsteller, met with Colombian officials March 31 to help craft strategy to move the Colombian free trade agreement through Congress. Clinton opposes such a deal, and Penn later issued a statement apologizing for the meeting, calling it an "error in judgment."

But the apology evidently wasn't sufficient. Aides said both Hillary and Bill Clinton were angry upon hearing of the meeting and that Penn was quickly pushed to leave.

Penn was known to get into angry shouting matches with other members of Clinton's team, including longtime adviser Harold Ickes and media strategist Mandy Grunwald, who often disagreed with his strategic advice and resented his unchecked authority to design the candidate's message.

Penn pushed Clinton to adopt a meat-and-potatoes, issue-based campaign that stressed her "strength and experience" but managed to overlook voters' desire for fundamental political change, which rival Obama was able to capture.

According to Justice Department filings, Colombia agreed last year to pay Burson-Marsteller \$300,000 to help "educate members of the U.S. Congress and other audiences" about the trade deal and secure continued U.S. funding for the \$5 billion anti-narcotics program Plan Colombia.

The Colombian government announced Saturday it had fired Burson-Marsteller after Penn apologized for meeting with its representatives, saying his statement conveyed a "lack of respect" for the country.