



Budget cuts may be the cause of Secret Service debacle

October 04, 2014

Charles D. Ellison

As if Washington had landed in an alternate universe, a week of outrage, heated congressional hearings and the humiliating resignation of the Secret Service's first woman director ended up with President Obama discovering new friends on the other side of the partisan aisle.

A theatrical House Government Oversight committee hearing earlier last week displayed irate members of Congress from both parties. There was Massachusetts democrat Stephen Lynch chastising director Julia Pierson with one of the more notable lines of that morning: "I wish to God you were protecting the White House like you were protecting your reputation here today."

But, for a moment, it seemed as though few were as hot or intent on staging anger than House Republican members looking for the embattled Secret Service chief's head.

"Tremendous restraint is not what we're looking for," was a dismayed Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) slamming Pierson for earlier praise of officers for their "restraint" in an official agency statement on the recent breach by former U.S. Army sniper Omar Gonzalez.

"Don't praise them for tremendous restraint. That's not the goal. That's not what we're looking for," Chaffetz thundered. "I want it to be crystal clear, you make a run or a dash at the White House, we're going to take you down."

"This doesn't take 18 weeks of training. This is just walking around!" was the famously anti-Obama Republican Rep. Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, who's typically leading the charge against the administration on a range of popular GOP scandals such as Benghazi and the IRS. "Why wasn't it done?"

The show of concern from normally hostile House Republicans, however, has many skeptics — Democrats among them — wondering if it's not all political bluster designed to deflect focus on the Secret Service budget. From her responses at the hearing up to the time of her resignation,

Pierson struggled to find any opportunity she could to highlight agency resource challenges — and drop hints that maybe the same Republicans had something to do with that.

“We thank Congress for their support in a time of constrained resources,” Pierson subtly jabbed back at the committee members during her opening testimony.

While the wording in her remarks wasn't as histrionic as, say, Rep. John Mica (R-FL) angrily waving an ADT Security yard sign, the strategy wasn't lost on the ears of many acute observers. At some point, the question of the Secret Service's budget, particularly over the last several years since the election of President Obama, would be raised, along with the interest of democrats eager to pinpoint the recent security lapse episodes as the result of GOP shutdowns and sequestration schemes.

Congress “has to take some responsibility” said Rep. Eleanor Norton (D-D.C.), who appeared to nudge Pierson for answers on whether the infamous automatic “sequestration” budget cuts pushed into existence by House Republicans in 2013 had anything to do with Secret Service lapses. While officials at the time waved off any suggestion that either sequestration or the October 2013 government shutdown had hampered the effectiveness of the Secret Service and its ability to protect the first family, Pierson acknowledged that the agency is not at its “optimal level” due to budget constraints. Overall staff is down by 550.

Gowdy immediately went ballistic.

“I have some colleagues who are absolutely obsessed with sequestration.” said the South Carolina Republican. “But you're not going to sit here and tell us that sequestration is the reason why your agency did not find evidence of the [2011] shooting, are you?”

Pierson said she wouldn't, but the question is raising a thorn of difficult questions as Congress continues to relentlessly spar with the White House over the federal budget. While upgrades to Executive branch facilities, including the White House, were recommended in a highly classified 2010 analysis that was shared with Congress, sequestration cuts three years later took those off the table — in addition to funding for more than 100 sworn officers. Those enhancements were viewed as desperately needed as threat assessments show President Obama receiving 400 percent more threats than President Bush received throughout his two terms.

Instead, observers note, cuts have forced the agency to do more with less, going so far as to rely on local Washington, D.C. police for key protection functions such as guarding diplomats.

Still, budget pressures can't explain what some are calling major fails in common sense. Many African Americans, especially, are factoring in race and wondering out loud on social media streams, radio call-ins and online comment sections if lax Secret Service protection has anything to do with the color of the first family's skin? How does a mentally ill and armed Iraqi war sniper with a limp foot slip past security within yards of the presidential residence? Why did it take the agency four days to find out seven bullets from an amateur sniper had hit the White House in 2011? And, how does an armed security contractor with assault and battery charges on his record get an elevator ride with President Obama during his Sept. 16th Atlanta visit?

Yet, in the post-breach fallout, Congress will be looking more closely and openly into the budget question. As midterms near, the possibility of it being raised as a talking point against program-cutting Republicans is high. There was a noticeable drop in Secret Service funding since 2012, from more than \$1.9 billion then to a sudden dip to \$1.8 billion in 2013 when sequestration took effect. House GOP members have appeared both nervous and prepared when it comes up. Some are eager to counter that it was the Obama administration that proposed cuts to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the parent agency now overseeing the Secret Service, by nearly 3 percent in the fiscal year 2014. A May 2013 House Appropriations Committee recommended “offset[ing] shortfalls in the president’s budget request for DHS due to ... detrimental proposals to severely reduce the department’s vital operational components and front-line personnel.”

“Do you not think that that creates a cultural problem, seeking reductions and hav[ing] too few people?” asked Rep. Mark Meadows (R-NC) during the hearing.

“I do see the difficulty in trying to operate a critical federal agency in times of fiscal constraint,” Pierson flatly responded.

Experts, such as the Cato Institute’s Chris Edwards, argue that the agency shouldn’t complain about staffing shortages when its budget has increased exponentially since the late 20th century.

“How is that possible when the Secret Service budget has doubled in real [inflation-adjusted] terms since 1998 — from \$0.9 billion to more than \$1.8 billion?” asks Edwards.

However, the administration requested an increase to \$1.9 billion for 2014 in an attempt to restore the elite unit’s budget to pre-sequestration levels. Still, beyond funding, there is a larger problem of agency staff being trimmed dramatically from more than 7,000 full time employees in 2011 to now less than 6,600— with the administration requesting fewer personnel since 2013.

And critics charge that chickens have been coming home to roost for some time over the Secret Service ever since it was a Republican president, George Bush, who transferred the agency from its home at the U.S. Treasury Department and placed it under the massive bureaucracy of Homeland Security. For years, policy makers and experts have viewed DHS as a mismanaged institution that the Washington Post recently exposed as suffering from “low morale” and extremely high “staff turnover.”