



## **Secret Service: Big Blunders and Budget Cuts**

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As Congress grilled Secret Service director Julia Pierson on Tuesday in the wake of spectacular fails of security both around and in the White House, the same question keeps coming up in different versions: WTF is up with the Secret Service?

What won't help the "elite" agency's cause is that public reflex, especially from African Americans, is wondering out loud: why the lax security now? Why are (reportedly) mentally deranged Iraqi war veterans able to slip within yards of the First Family's residence? Why did it take the agency four days to find out several bullets from an amateur sniper had hit the White House in 2011? And, how the hell did an armed security contractor with assault and battery charges on his record get an elevator ride with President Obama during his September 16th Atlanta visit?

And, for being so secretive, why are we finding out about so much shit?

Naturally, for Capitol Hill, the first answer will center on the budget. Pierson is quick to remind the committee that budget cuts from last year known as "sequestration" have hampered the agency's ability to protect. Del. Eleanor Norton helped her underscore that point during the hearing by asserting Congress "has to take some responsibility." Overall staff is down by 550. That's not good considering threats against President Obama are 400 percent more than what they were against George Bush (so much for that "post-racial" thing). Notice during the hearing noisy Republicans holding up ADT Security yard signs and somewhat less theatrical Democrats who – while outraged and now calling for Pierson's ouster – are probably searching for a way to let the budget point to sink in.

WashPo's Josh Hicks gives us two helpful graphs showing rates in Secret Service funding and personnel since 2010 while mulling the sequestration point. But, that's falling on many deaf ears at the moment. Race (unfortunately) factors heavily into the inquiry since, of course, it's the first First Black Family. Predictably, black folks are getting really, really defensive and suspicious about the whole affair because it didn't seem like we had any serious issues with White House breaches until we got a black president. And it all drops at a time of increased tension between African Americans and law enforcement: clearly, there's an upward trend of unarmed or harmless black men being killed without hesitation by local law enforcement these days. Yet, a trained military sniper gets to waltz through what was – until recently-the most protected house

ever built. True: one can argue this is an apples and oranges assumption considering the Secret Service is a federal agency.

Still, we've all been under the assumption since, well, birth, that not only is it the standard bearer of best practice law enforcement but that it is the most lethal and unrestrained when there is clear and present danger to the Commander-in-Chief and his family. Or, at least, that's what we're bred to believe. Perhaps Hollywood has done a better job waxing Secret Service credentials than the Secret Service has.

"Tremendous restraint is not what we're looking for," was a clearly perturbed Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz from Utah as he blasted Pierson for her earlier praise of officers for their "restraint" during the recent Omar Gonzalez breach.

"Don't praise them for tremendous restraint. That's not the goal. That's not what we're looking for," growled Chaffetz. "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."

House Republicans, however, will probably cry foul the loudest since fiscal and management pressures on the agency have been GOP-inspired since its 2003 move from Treasury to the Department of Homeland Security. Wasn't it just fine under Treasury anyway? Marc Ambinder in Politico argues that "After the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, the Secret Service found itself overburdened, under-resourced and undermanned. [M]ost of the money to fund [proposed] enhancements and to staff the White House security apparatus at an appropriate level did not survive the automatic budget cuts [a.k.a. "sequestration"] of 2013. The Uniformed Division is now short at least 100 sworn officers. Officers work overtime. Perhaps that much overtime stretches them thin and dulls response time."

The Washington Post's Carol Leonnig, who broke the explosive series of stories on White House security lapses, also notes that budget cuts have "burned out officers. It has required them to come in [during] their off-days routinely, and [according to people inside the agency] it has created a really low morale and probably has led to a couple posts not being monitored."

Still that didn't stop House Republicans from instigating a government shutdown in October 2013 (which we were told wouldn't impact critical services like the Secret Service) nor did it stop the Obama administration from proposing nearly 3 percent less in the DHS' FY 2014 budget. And, let's not forget how much of a management debacle DHS is at the moment with its high turnover and lack of direction. But even Leonnig points out that security experts "wonder if perhaps the [Secret Service] has become a little complacent, a little too reactive, rather than creative, in thinking about the new world of security." It's a compelling point. Simple things like front doors were left unlocked in the case of Gonzalez; and it seemed as if the "five layers of security" we've been told about either vanished or weren't there in the first place. The Cato Institute's Chris Edwards can't help but ask why the Secret Service is complaining about staffing

shortages when “its budget has doubled in real (inflation-adjusted) terms since 1998—from \$0.9 billion to more than \$1.8 billion”

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