

# Bush White House suppresses information, whistle blowing

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Three events last week in Washington shed light on the Bush administration's implacable hostility to objective scrutiny, scientific study and simple honesty. In three widely differing areas—race relations, contraceptive policy and military contracting—top officials have intervened to suppress information or remove those who refuse to prostrate themselves before the ideology of the Republican right.

On Wednesday, August 24, the *New York Times* revealed that the White House was replacing the director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), Laurence A. Greenfeld. He had objected to instructions from a Justice Department supervisor, a Bush political appointee, to downplay a report documenting racial disparities in the police treatment of drivers stopped for traffic violations.

Though Bush has given lip service to opposing racial profiling, the treatment of Greenfeld demonstrates the real position of the administration: let sleeping dogs lie.

The BJS study found that while motorists were stopped by police seemingly without regard to race—9 percent of whites, blacks and Hispanics alike reported such encounters—there were significant differences in police conduct after the initial stop. Of those stopped, police searched only 3.5 percent of white drivers and their vehicles, but 10.2 percent of blacks and 11.4 percent of Hispanics. They arrested 2 percent of white drivers stopped, but 5.8 percent of blacks and 5.2 percent of Hispanics. They handcuffed 2 percent of white drivers stopped, compared to 6.4 percent of blacks and 5.6 percent of Hispanics.

The study, based on a survey of 80,000 drivers, was completed in April, and the BJS drafted a press release that highlighted both its major findings: the equality in initial stops, and the inequality in subsequent police actions. The report drew no conclusions about the

reason for this disparity, but the figures clearly suggest racial bias is a factor.

When Tracy Henke, an acting assistant attorney general and Bush appointee, reviewed the press release, she crossed out the references to racial disparities in police conduct after the initial stops, writing in the margin, "Do we need this?" She ordered Greenfeld to change the press release, and when he refused, the Department of Justice withheld the press release and allowed the study to become public without any notification of the press, effectively suppressing it.

Greenfeld was then called into the office of Robert D. McCallum, Jr., then the third-ranking official in the Justice Department, and finally summoned to the White House, where Bush aides told him he should resign, although he was only six months short of becoming eligible to retire at full pension. Greenfeld balked, exercising his right under civil service rules to transfer to a lower-ranking position outside the BJS where he will be able to finish out his career as a federal employee.

Late Friday, August 26, the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Lester Crawford, held a press conference to announce that the FDA would not make a final decision on approving or disapproving the over-the-counter distribution of the Plan B contraceptive, better known as the "morning-after pill."

The FDA has stalled on approval of Plan B without a prescription for more than two years, a delay caused by the irreconcilable conflict between scientific reviews of the drug—which show it to be safe and effective—and religious bigotry. The Christian right denounces the morning-after pill as an encouragement to premarital sex and even as a form of abortion.

Crawford's own appointment as FDA commissioner was held up for months because two women

Democratic senators, Hillary Clinton and Patty Murray, insisted that he commit himself to ending the delay in action on Plan B. The senators lifted their “hold” on the nomination only after Crawford’s boss, Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, pledged FDA action, up or down, by September 1. Instead, Crawford announced a new 60-day comment period to be followed by a review period of indefinite length.

FDA reviewers have concluded that Plan B, which must be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, would significantly reduce both unwanted pregnancies and abortions. The drug is essentially a concentrated form of contraceptive, and has been available by prescription since 1999. In 2003, an FDA advisory panel voted 23-4 to support the application from Barr Laboratories to make it available over the counter.

Under pressure from fundamentalist groups, the FDA rejected Barr’s application in May 2004, offering the pretext that there was not enough information to show the drug safe for girls younger than 16. Barr was told to reapply seeking permission to sell over the counter to women 18 and older, but this application has now been delayed indefinitely. Dr. Alastair Wood, who was on the advisory panel that approved the original application, told the press that the FDA “had allowed politics to trump science.”

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay wrote to Bush to lobby against over-the-counter sales of Plan B, and two nominally pro-choice Republican governors, George Pataki of New York and Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, have vetoed bills to provide over-the-counter access in their states.

On Saturday, August 26, the top contract reviewing official of the Army Corps of Engineers, Bunnatine H. Greenhouse, was removed from her position as a member of the senior executive service, the top government civil service group, because of her repeated criticism of no-bid contracts awarded to Halliburton, the giant oil-field services company run by Vice President Dick Cheney from 1995 to 2000.

Greenhouse has long been a thorn in the side of the Bush White House, issuing sharply worded exposures of corporate profiteering in Iraq, not only by Halliburton but also by insurance companies that have charged exorbitant rates for workmen’s compensation coverage in the war zone.

Lt. Gen .Carl A. Strock, commander of the Corps,

claimed that the decision to remove Greenhouse “is based on her performance and not in retaliation for any disclosures of alleged improprieties she may have made.” Greenhouse’s attorney appealed the decision in a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, saying the circumstances of the removal “are the hallmark of illegal retaliation.”

Greenhouse has been the chief procurement official at the Corps of Engineers since 1997. She was one of a handful of black women in top management positions in the federal government.

She initially complained about the volume of no-bid work assigned to Halliburton’s KBR construction subsidiary, as well as the duration of the contracts—five years, much longer than usual for supposedly “emergency” work. Halliburton has been compelled to make repayment of several hundred million dollars in overcharges, a small fraction of its over \$7 billion in contracts.

Last fall, she began speaking publicly to the media about the Halliburton contracts and was immediately threatened with demotion. She refused to keep quiet and appeared publicly before an unofficial hearing on contracting in Iraq organized by congressional Democrats (the Republican-controlled Congress has refused to examine the issue).

At the June event, she testified, “I can unequivocally state that the abuse related to contracts awarded to KBR represents the most blatant and improper abuse I have witnessed” in 20 years of government service. She noted that every aspect of the Halliburton contracts “remained under the control of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. This troubled me and was wrong.”



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