

Proposals to further restrict access to White House follow security breach

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Last Friday evening's security breach at the White House and its aftermath have underscored two related aspects of the militarization of US society—mounting restrictions on public access to government buildings and the devastating psychological impact on soldiers and veterans of America's dirty wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At 7:20 PM on Friday, Omar Jose Gonzalez, 42, a heavily decorated Iraq War veteran, jumped the seven foot six inch iron fence surrounding the White House compound and made his way through the front door of the president's mansion, where he was tackled by Secret Service agents and arrested.

Gonzalez, a marksman who served two tours of duty in Iraq totaling 13 years, told a Secret Service officer that he was concerned "the atmosphere was collapsing and he needed to get the information to the president of the United States so that he could get the word out to the people," according to an affidavit filed in US District Court. For the past two years, following the collapse of his marriage, Gonzalez had been driving around the country and living out of his car.

With the exception of a small pocket knife, he was unarmed when he was seized in the White House entrance hall. President Obama and his family had just left the residence to spend the weekend at the president's Camp David retreat in the mountains of Maryland.

At a court hearing Monday, federal prosecutors said Gonzalez's car, parked several blocks from the White House, was found to be holding 800 rounds of ammunition, two hatchets and a machete. The former Army sergeant, whose last residence was Copperas Cove, near Fort Hood, Texas, faces up to ten years in prison on a charge of unlawfully entering a restricted building while carrying a dangerous weapon. He is

currently in jail pending a continuation of legal proceedings next month.

Prosecutors also revealed that Gonzalez had been arrested last July by Virginia State Police for reckless driving, eluding police and possessing a sawed-off shotgun. Police found 11 guns in his vehicle, including shotguns, handguns and sniper rifles, and a map of Washington DC with the White House encircled. Gonzalez was released on bond after his arrest.

In August, Secret Service officers saw Gonzalez loitering near the south fence of the White House, carrying a hatchet in the back waistband of his pants. They searched his car and let him go. Following that encounter, the Secret Service learned of Gonzalez's July 19 arrest in Virginia.

Relatives say Gonzalez suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and needs to be treated rather than dealt with as a criminal. His ex-wife, Samantha Bell, told the press that she and Gonzalez married in 2006 and lived together until she split up with him in 2012 because of his worsening mental condition. After his second tour in Iraq, Gonzalez began carrying a .45 on his hip at all times and kept three or four rifles and shotguns behind the doors of their home, Bell said.

Gonzalez is one of a growing number of soldiers and veterans who have been psychologically and emotionally crippled by their participation in wars in which they are involved in atrocities and war crimes. The impact is reflected in soaring rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, homicide and suicide among active-duty soldiers as well as veterans.

In 2012, Army Chief of Staff General Ray Odierno said suicides were the leading cause of death in the Army, ahead of combat fatalities. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, each day an estimated 18 military veterans take their own lives.

Following the incident Friday evening, Secret Service officials immediately blocked pedestrian access to Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House compound. Vehicular access in the vicinity of the White House to the major thoroughfare has been halted since the 1995 terror bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

A year ago, United States Capitol Police shot and killed a woman who had driven her car into a barrier at the White House and then driven toward the Capitol. The woman had her 18-month-old daughter in the back seat.

The ability of tourists, residents and those wishing to protest US government policies or make other political statements to stand in front of the White House compound on Pennsylvania Avenue has been considered an expression of freedom of speech as guaranteed by the US Constitution.

Federal authorities lifted the ban on pedestrian traffic in front of the White House on Sunday, but the Secret Service on Tuesday installed additional barriers parallel to the iron fence surrounding the compound, pending the results of an internal investigation into Friday's episode.

More sweeping restrictions on public access and the ability to assemble and protest are under consideration. The Secret Service is discussing permanently removing tourists and other visitors from the sidewalks that ring the perimeter of the White House compound.

It is also considering installing additional barriers on Pennsylvania Avenue on a permanent basis, screening the bags of tourists who enter part of a pedestrian walkway in front of the White House, and establishing checkpoints blocks from the White House where police will check the bags of pedestrians. All of these measures violate basic civil liberties spelled out in the Constitution's Bill of Rights.

The supposed threat of terror attacks on the US "homeland" by ISIS and the newly announced Khorasan group are being cited as justifications for further walling off the White House from the public and increasing the police presence in the area, indicating the way in which the new war in the Middle East will be used to escalate the attack on democratic rights at home. New York Republican Congressman Peter King, a member of the House Homeland Security Committee, said Congress would investigate the White

House intrusion and linked the incident to potential terror attacks by "extremist groups such as ISIS."

In an editorial Tuesday arguing against the imposition of such measures, the *Washington Post* wrote, "Washington cannot be allowed to become any more of an armed camp," in effect acknowledging that the nation's capital already is "an armed camp."



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