

US Secret Service director resigns amid mounting security scandals

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The director of the US Secret Service, Julia Pierson, resigned Wednesday, a day after a heated grilling by a congressional committee and amid bipartisan demands for her ouster over the agency's handling of a series of spectacular security failures surrounding the White House and the American president.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest told the press that Obama, who a day earlier had voiced his "confidence" in the Secret Service, had "concluded that new leadership of that agency was required." It was also announced that a "distinguished panel of experts" would be named to investigate the problems that have come to light following a September 19 incident in which an Iraq war veteran leaped the White House fence and made his way deep into the presidential mansion.

The threat posed by that incident only came to light through leaks from within the agency to the *Washington Post*, contradicting the Secret Service's initial account that the fence-jumper, Omar Gonzalez, had been unarmed and was apprehended just inside the door of the building's north portico.

It was subsequently revealed that Gonzalez, a 42-year-old Army veteran who served two tours in Iraq and reportedly suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, had in fact been carrying a knife and had sprinted all the way to the Blue Room, just off the stairway leading to the residential quarters of the president and his family. Only then was he tackled and handcuffed by an off-duty Secret Service agent.

The criticism of Pierson, resulting from both this incident and the agency's apparent cover-up of the severity of the security breach, was compounded by other revelations, also resulting from leaks within the Secret Service.

The latest, first reported by the *Washington*

Examiner, concerned an incident that occurred just three days before the fence jumping at the White House. It involved a private security contractor, carrying a loaded weapon, riding an elevator with President Obama during his visit to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to announce his administration's policy on the Ebola outbreak in Africa.

The contractor was reportedly questioned and his background checked only after he began behaving erratically in the elevator, refusing commands to stop recording the president with his cell phone camera. It was then that Secret Service agents discovered that the contractor was a felon, with three convictions for assault and battery.

Only after the agents complained of his conduct to the contractor's employer, who fired him on the spot, did they learn that he had a firearm, which the employer had asked him to turn over.

Asked during the congressional hearing Tuesday—before the elevator episode had been made public—whether she had briefed President Obama about any other security breaches this year outside of the fence-jumping incident, Pierson replied that she had not. The response suggested that the agency had failed to inform Obama that his life had been in serious danger during the Atlanta trip.

Also brought to light by the *Washington Post*, based on anonymous sources within the agency, was the failure of the Secret Service to respond appropriately to a 2011 incident in which an individual in a car had fired seven shots into the White House, causing \$100,000 in damage. As the *Post* disclosed in a September 28 story, it took four days for the agency to establish that the shots had been fired at the building, and then only after a housekeeper had discovered broken glass from a

shattered window.

While Pierson is undoubtedly covering up the latest security failures at the Secret Service, she herself was brought in just 18 months ago. The previous director, Mark Sullivan, was compelled to resign over a scandal in which over a dozen agents, including supervisors, became embroiled in a prostitution scandal in Cartagena, Colombia, where they were supposed to provide security for Obama during a Summit of the Americas.

According to the *Post*, the repeated incidents at the Secret Service have “infuriated the president and the first lady,” with Michelle Obama having “spoken publicly about fearing for her family’s safety.”

Some have traced the crisis in the Secret Service to the agency’s transfer from the Treasury Department, which had overseen it since its creation in 1865, to the new anti-terror, national security behemoth, the Department of Homeland Security, in 2003. The transfer coincided with a dramatic expansion in the agency’s headcount and the elevation of a large number of inexperienced people into supervisory positions.

This headcount was recently reduced as a result of budget cuts, with Pierson telling the congressional committee that it now has 550 less than its “optimal” number of uniformed agents.

Whatever the immediate problems produced by this rapid expansion and partial contraction, there is evidence of demoralization within the Secret Service. “The ‘Best Places to Work in the Federal Government’ report by the Partnership for Public Service depicts an agency that seems to have lost its way,” with its index score dropping 13 points in the last three years, the *Washington Post* reported last week.

Based on a survey conducted by the federal Office of Personnel Management, the report finds attitudes among Secret Service personnel worse than those at most government agencies.

These developments underscore that, for all the massive post-9/11 expansion of the US military and intelligence apparatus, the whole “war on terror” agenda has from the outset served merely as a pretext for war abroad and drastic attacks on democratic rights at home. In terms of the ostensible functions of state security, there has only been increasing deterioration and decay.

At the same time, the denunciations of incompetence at the Secret Service will inevitably be used, like all such incidents in Washington, to justify even more resources for security and further restrictions on democratic rights.



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