

Oral Testimony of Teresa Chambers

House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
***Protecting the Public from Waste, Fraud, and Abuse: H.R.1507,
the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2009***

May 14, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members – Thank you for this long-awaited opportunity.

My name is Teresa Chambers. I have spent 33 years in law enforcement; and I had been the Chief of the United States Park Police, responsible for protecting our nation's most notable parks, monuments, and parkways.

Being selected for this position following a nationwide search was a tremendous honor, affording me the opportunity to serve my country.

For the past five and a half years, however, I have been trapped in a bizarre and utterly broken system. Years of litigation have yet to resolve a very simple question – **Is telling the truth a firing offense in federal service?**

In November 2003, a *Washington Post* reporter contacted me for an official agency response regarding information the union had supplied him, including internal documents showing that there were not enough officers to cover assignments following the attacks of 9/11.

On December 2nd, the *Post* published the article. After reading it, I thought it would be well received because thorny issues had been handled deftly. This was not the case.

Three days later, without explanation and with three armed special agents at his side, then National Park Service Deputy Director Donald Murphy ordered me to surrender my gun, badge, and identification. I was placed on administrative leave and ordered not to speak any further with the media. Two of the agents escorted me back to my office to quickly collect personal effects. Then, I was walked out into the street.

Standing there at the curb in full uniform holding a cardboard box of things, I was stunned. Little did I know that a long, strange odyssey had just begun.

One week later, I was summoned to a meeting with Murphy and a senior Department of Interior attorney. They offered to forego any punishment and fully restore me as Chief if I would appear at a press conference to deny that there had been any sort of disagreement. A string was attached – a political appointee would vet all my communications with Congress and the media. I refused to participate in what would result in misleading Congress and the public.

Days later, I was charged administratively with improperly disclosing “law enforcement sensitive information” to *The Washington Post*. For good measure, Interior tacked on five administrative charges, none of which had been raised previously. The charges were not true, and I filed a detailed rebuttal.

Convinced that these charges would not withstand factual or legal scrutiny, I lodged a complaint with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel. The investigation dragged on for five months but came to no conclusion.

At one point, OSC hosted a dispute resolution meeting during which **a Bush appointee suggested that Interior would offer me \$300,000 to resign.** When I told them I was not interested in money, these “negotiations” quickly ended.

After more than seven months, I filed directly with the Merit Systems Protection Board; and, within a few hours of doing so, Interior announced its decision to fire me.

The MSPB process has been a long drawn-out nightmare. After the MSPB on a split-vote rejected my appeal, I went to the Federal Circuit. In a rarity, the Federal Circuit ruled for me and sent my case back to the MSPB – which this January ruled against me again.

Now my case is back before the Federal Circuit yet a second time.

My experience demonstrates that the **system is broken** and that Congress needs to adopt fundamental reform:

First, **the system must be fast and fair** – fast in that there must be expeditious means to resolve cases; fair, in that, if the case does not quickly resolve, it should be brought before a jury.

Giving employees access to jury trials is the single biggest reform Congress can enact. Before juries, agencies would quickly learn that reprisal campaigns will backfire.

Second, **rules must be clear.** Eliminate the legal thicket that shields retaliation. Above all, honesty in federal service should be expected and protected.

Third, **look at underlying problems.** The current system concentrates on the personnel action but completely ignores the underlying problem over which the civil servant risked his or her career. In 2003, I told Congress and top agency officials that the United States Park Police was dangerously understaffed. It is still understaffed – and even more so today.

The men and women patrolling the monuments, parks, and parkways are not getting the support they need to do a demanding but vital job; and, because of this, **both they and the public remain in danger.**

I am proud of my service with the United States Park Police, and I stand by the decisions I have made. My hope is that my experience will result in positive change for public servants who have the courage to speak the truth regardless of the consequences.

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