

chatterbox**Gagging the Fuzz, Part 4**

Teresa Chambers isn't the only Park Service employee forbidden to talk about budget cuts.

By Timothy Noah

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Richard S. Foster, the chief Medicare actuary, was [told he'd be fired](#) if he allowed his estimate of the Medicare drug bill's costs to become public. This is, justifiably, a big story. Teresa Chambers, the Park Police chief, [answered a few questions](#) from the *Washington Post* about the effects of budget constraints on police patrols and, as a result, [was fired](#). This is, bafflingly, a small story.

Chambers' failure to make the big time is probably attributable to the misapprehension that her firing is a local story. The police patrols in question are in Washington, D.C. Still, Chambers was fired by the Bush administration for [essentially the same reason](#) Foster was threatened with firing. Because the dismissal procedure takes some time and allows various [appeals](#)—Chambers was escorted out of her office on Dec. 5—National Park Service Director Fran Mainella today told a House subcommittee that Chambers has "[not been fired](#)." What she means is that Chambers [isn't going quietly](#) and has a fighting chance of being reinstated (over Mainella's likely objection) by the [Merit Systems Protection Board](#).

Whether the Bush White House had a hand in Chambers' firing is anybody's guess. It speaks volumes, however, that the White House never ordered the Park Service to reinstate Chambers after her firing generated a few very embarrassing headlines.

If the Park Service isn't taking orders from the White House, perhaps that's because it already internalized the Bush ethic, as articulated by Chatterbox, that [information is treason](#). Chambers' firing was no mere isolated instance of the Park Service attempting to assert pathological control over the release of perfectly ordinary information. We know this because of two unintentionally hilarious memos [made public](#) on March 17 by the Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees. The memos are the fruit of a Feb. 17 teleconference in which Randy Jones, deputy director of the National Park Service, instructed deputy regional directors on how to implement budget cuts at the national parks. The cuts were coming at an awkward time, because the Park Service was simultaneously launching, in collaboration with the Travel Industry Association of America, a "[See America's National Parks](#)" campaign aimed at boosting attendance.

In the two memos, regional directors tell park superintendents in the Midwest region and the Northeast region that they will have to reduce services and hours. The director for the Midwest region [instructs his park superintendents](#) to "develop organizational structures which project spending fixed costs at a *maximum* of 85 percent of base budgets." Translation: Cut park budgets by at least 15 percent. The director for the Northeast region [offers a few suggestions](#), several involving park closings (on federal holidays, on Sundays or Mondays, or during the months of January, February, and November), and one calling for the elimination of beach life guard service.

Although much of the budget shortfall for parks can be blamed on new homeland-defense duties, deterioration of the national parks is an old story, attributable in large part to "park barrel" politics. Over the years, Congress kept adding more parks to the system, which necessitated reducing the funds available to maintain the existing ones. Some of the new parks lived up to their billing as natural or historical treasures. But others were back-door economic development projects for areas in decline. As a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* in 1995, Chatterbox wrote about one particularly glaring example of the latter: [Keweenaw National Park](#) in Calumet, Mich., an abandoned mining town whose enticements included slag piles ... crumbling commercial buildings ... a *Superfund site* ... and, oh yes, a retail complex, whose construction on park grounds seemed to be the main purpose of the exercise. A better-known example is the [Steamtown](#)

[National Historic Site](#), a glorified railroad museum in Scranton, Pa.

A sensible policy for the Park Service would be to target necessary cuts at the parks with the lowest attendance. But the [memo to the Northeast region](#) states the Park Service's intention to do precisely the opposite, "so that it won't cause public or political controversy." In pursuing this goal, the park superintendents are instructed *never to use the word "cut" publicly* to describe the budget, er, reductions:

Randy felt that the issuance of a press release was the most problematic. He suggested that if you feel you must inform the public through a press release on this years [sic] hours or days of operation for example, that you state what the park's plans are and not to directly indicate that "this is a cut" in comparison to last year's operation. If you are personally pressed by the media in an interview, we all agreed to use the terminology of "service level adjustment."

This isn't just Orwellian. It's stupid, too, because the laws of physics dictate that memos like this will always get leaked to the press. A silver lining to the Bush administration's secrecy policy, at least as it's carried out at the Park Service, is that it's laughably inept.

Teresa Chambers Archive:

Feb. 19, 2004: "[Gagging the Fuzz, Part 3](#)"

Jan. 12, 2004: "[Gagging the Fuzz, Part 2](#)"

Dec. 30, 2003: "[Gagging the Fuzz](#)"

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