



Will day of justice finally arrive for Park Police whistleblower Teresa Chambers?

By [Joe Davidson](#)

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Like a dogged cop in pursuit of an elusive suspect, Teresa C. Chambers is still seeking justice.

The former U.S. Park Police chief might be a bit closer to it after Wednesday's [ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Circuit](#) that threw out one of the charges that led to her [firing in 2003](#).

More than six years later, Chambers feels she is closing in on a final ruling that will vindicate her relentless effort to clear her name and allow her to return to work.

"My goal has always been to go back to my job as chief of the Park Police, and that is what I still seek," said Chambers, currently police chief in Riverdale Park, Md.

But more than her individual goal, the Chambers case is significant because of what it says about how the federal government, under both the Obama and Bush administrations, treats employees who speak truth to power. What Chambers has suffered reveals the unsightly way Uncle Sam deals with whistleblowers, even those whose disclosures seem mild.

[Chambers was gagged, suspended, then fired](#) after my Washington Post colleague David A. Fahrenthold wrote an article on Dec. 2, 2003, with the headline "Park Police Duties Exceed Staffing."

It was a good piece, but not a big expos. The story reported that Chambers said traffic accidents had increased on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, where two, instead of the recommended four, officers often were on patrol, that she didn't have enough cops to protect all the national park land in the District and that unarmed guards would help protect monuments.

These innocuous remarks got Chambers in big trouble. Though they don't seem too different from budget and staffing statements that public officials often make, she was compelled to defend her comments as information protected by the federal Whistleblower Protection Act. The court agreed, which means she should not have been fired on the basis of those comments.

For Chambers, it's been a long, expensive and tiresome trip through administrative and judicial procedures. It shouldn't take so long for justice to be served. And this trip is not done yet. She was fired by the Interior Department on the basis of six charges, two of which were previously dismissed by an administrative judge. The court's decision to throw out another charge leaves three standing.

A department spokeswoman kept silent about the case Thursday, saying, "We do not comment on personnel issues."

But even if the three remain, they may not be strong enough to warrant dismissal.

The court found that her statements, which now are covered by the Whistleblower Protection Act, were "a contributing factor in the agency's decision to take adverse action against Chambers."

So, the court decision continued, the question now is "whether removal remains a reasonable penalty." The court sent the case back to the Merit Systems Protection Board to consider that question.

On that point, the court's decision included an excerpt from testimony of the "deciding official" in the Chambers case, whom she identified as Paul Hoffman, a former deputy assistant secretary in the Interior Department.

In that testimony, the witness said three charges, including one the court dismissed, "all together aggregated to the point that I felt it [sic] was justified in removal." The three charges included the one the court rejected. With that one gone, it may be hard for the Interior Department to continue to defend its firing of Chambers.

Why would the Obama administration want to follow the Bush administration's lead on that?

After all, this is an administration with officials, including President Obama, who have trumpeted the important role whistleblowers play in keeping government honest. With this case in particular, when Rahm Emanuel, the president's chief of staff, was a congressman from Chicago, he cited Chambers and others as "examples of individuals losing their jobs for telling the truth."

"We are at loss to explain why the Obama administration is continuing this case," said Jeff Ruch, executive director of the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which is representing Chambers.

Can the Obama Interior Department demonstrate that the Bush administration would have been justified in firing Chambers on the basis of the three remaining charges?

Says Ruch: "We think they are going to be hard-pressed to do that."