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Swiping the Stars and Stripes

Wednesday, January 14, 2004; Page C03

After an inspector general's investigation found "persistent and severe" security lapses at the Washington Monument last Sept. 11 -- U.S. Park Police not noticing a bag that could have contained a bomb, and an officer apparently snoozing in his car -- Park Police Chief **Teresa C. Chambers** ordered a probe of her own. She wanted to know how bad it really was.

Her undercover team hatched a scheme worthy of the most cunning, freedom-hating terrorists. Their mission: to see if it was possible to steal one of the 50 American flags that fly near the monument.

It was.

The precise time of the theft one evening in October could not be determined, but the monument is supposed to be guarded around the clock.

"Once the person took the flag down, the chief was notified, and I believe the flag was returned in the morning," **Jim Austin**, a Park Police union official, told us yesterday.

Put on leave last month after publicly raising concerns about money and staffing, Chambers is under a gag order from her bosses and could not comment. But park officials say she redeployed her officers to improve monument security after the flag caper confirmed lapses pointed out in the blistering report from **Earl E. Devaney**, the Interior Department's inspector general.

"Obviously, the security concerns were dealt with," said Sgt. **Scott Fear**, a Park Police spokesman.

Chambers's supporters also say the unidentified officer photographed in his unmarked car may not have been on duty. Besides: "This officer certainly denies being asleep," Austin said.

Devaney told us he stands by his report, adding, "It's fair to say they corrected these deficiencies."