

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Five Questions the Secret Service Review Panel Must Answer

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A series of alarming security breaches have caused many to question the Secret Service's ability to protect the President.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of these events, an independent four-member review panel—two senior officials each from the Bush and Obama Administrations—will investigate the Secret Service's recent security breaches and advise the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) how to correct the Secret Service's problems.<sup>2</sup> DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson has asked the panel to also advise him on whether a larger investigation is warranted.<sup>3</sup>

### A Recent History of Failures

In the past several years, the number and seriousness of Secret Service security breaches have increased, drawing attention to an agency typically known for excellence.<sup>4</sup>

**November 2009.** Husband and wife Tareq and Michaela Salahi attended a State Dinner at the White House and met with President Obama—despite the fact they were not on the guest list.<sup>5</sup>

**November 2011.** A man with a semi-automatic rifle fired at the White House, with at least seven bullets hitting the building. While Secret Service agents initially rushed to respond with weapons drawn, they were told to stand down by their supervisors—who attributed the shooting sounds to vehicles back-

firing. Some agents dispute this account while others remain silent “for fear of being criticized.”<sup>6</sup> At the time, the President's daughter Sasha was at home, and his other daughter Malia was expected home soon. Despite the fact that the shooter's vehicle and gun were found within 10 minutes, an investigation was not initiated until a housekeeper noticed broken glass and bullet holes four days later.<sup>7</sup>

**April 2012.** Secret Service agents who were part of President Barack Obama's advance team to Cartagena, Columbia, engaged in sexual conduct with prostitutes.<sup>8</sup>

**May 2013.** A Secret Service supervisor removed ammunition from his gun and left a bullet in a woman's room at the Hay-Adams Hotel across the street from the White House and allegedly tried to force his way back in to the room to retrieve it. Further investigation reveals that this same supervisor and another Secret Service official sent sexual e-mails to a female subordinate, resulting in their suspension.<sup>9</sup>

**March 2014.** Three Secret Service agents in Amsterdam were disciplined after a night of heavy drinking that left one agent passed out in a hotel hallway just one day before President Obama arrived.<sup>10</sup>

**September 2014.** The Secret Service was unaware that an armed security contractor with a criminal record was on the same elevator as President Obama during a trip to Atlanta.<sup>11</sup> Several days later, a fence jumper managed to run into the inner rooms of the White House before being taken down by an off-duty agent. Reportedly, the alarm system was turned off because it bothered White House staffers.<sup>12</sup>

**October 2014.** New information surfaced about the 2012 prostitution scandal involving Secret Service agents in Columbia indicating that White House

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aides knew about the involvement with prostitutes but did not investigate, and possibly interfered with other investigations.<sup>13</sup>

## The Independent Review Panel Should Probe Five Questions:

### 1. Why is Secret Service morale suffering?

The 2013 *The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* survey demonstrated a significant decrease in overall job satisfaction among Secret Service employees.<sup>14</sup> Performance issues

are closely tied to morale, so uncovering the origin of employees' dissatisfaction should be a priority for the panel.

### 2. How has the transition from the Department of the Treasury to the Department of Homeland Security affected the Secret Service? A

retired Secret Service agent attributed recent failures to the politicization of the agency after it moved from the Treasury Department to the DHS.<sup>15</sup> It remains unclear how the transition to

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the DHS affected the Secret Service, but based on statements like that of this retired Secret Service agent and the reported silencing of security devices by White House staffers, the review panel should thoroughly examine the role that the DHS transition may have played in weakening the effectiveness of the Secret Service.<sup>16</sup>

**3. What role has the White House played in Secret Service failures and scandals?** *The Washington Post* exposed the possibility that White House personnel may have covered up key information about the prostitution scandal in 2012 and that White House staffers may have silenced intruder alarms.<sup>17</sup> Such actions raise serious concerns about the control of White House staffers over the Secret Service to the detriment of security.

**4. Who should the next Secret Service director be?** Some have argued that the next director of the Secret Service should be an outsider who is not politically dependent on either party in order to shift the Secret Service culture back to its security focus. This would be an unprecedented step for the Secret Service, and the panel should thoroughly understand the nature of the problem before it recommends a new Secret Service director.

**5. What can Congress, the DHS, and the President do to improve the Secret Service or its oversight?** Primary oversight of the Secret Service remains with the House and Senate Judiciary Committees rather than the Homeland Security committees—despite its move to DHS over a decade ago. Streamlining congressional oversight of the DHS is just one idea that the review panel should consider. Indeed, the panel must propose specific reforms that Congress or the DHS can implement.

### **Restoring the Secret Service**

The Secret Service's protection arm is responsible for security of top U.S. officials; the American people, as well as those being protected, expect the Secret Service to fulfill its duties with competence and professionalism. While the Secret Service has many brave and talented officers, multiple outrageous security breaches make clear that something is very wrong. The review panel should seek out the roots of these recent problems in order to ensure that the Secret Service is able to better fulfill its duties.

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