

Statement of Congressman Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
White House Perimeter Breach: New Concerns about the Secret Service
September 30, 2014

The last several years have been rough for the United States Secret Service. Headlines ranging from the embarrassing to the outright chilling have heightened concerns exponentially with respect to how well the Secret Service is executing its sacred mission to protect the President of the United States and the First Family. The recent massive White House security breach is just the latest in a series of damaging revelations that on a bipartisan basis have dramatically undermined confidence in the Secret Service's ability to carry out its protection mission.

As a child of the 60's, I am of a generation that can vividly recall exactly where and when they learned of the shocking news that President John F. Kennedy had been shot and killed in Dallas. The image of Secret Service special agent Clinton Hill leaping over the back of the car transporting President Kennedy and at great risk to his own life, shielding the First Lady with his own body will forever be seared in my memory. The Kennedy assassination traumatized an entire Nation. As we approach the 51st Anniversary of that horrible day in Dallas, it is incumbent upon all of us to do everything in our power to ensure such a tragedy never happens again.

My hope is that today's hearing will mark the beginning of a serious, bipartisan effort that comprehensively examines every facet of how the Secret Service carries out its dual protection and investigation missions; in addition to providing much-needed clarity on exactly how the most recent security failure was able to take place. Make no mistake, the September 19 White House perimeter breach was neither a fluke event nor an isolated incident. Rather, it was a comprehensive, cascading failure that featured breakdowns in physical security, critical tactical errors, flawed investigative efforts, and haphazard post-incident communication.

A troubling picture has been painted for the American people of near total failure by all entities with responsibility for safeguarding the White House. Director Pierson must address many questions this morning. Now is not the time for obfuscation, excuses, or silence. Internal leaks from within the Secret Service necessitate clear and transparent communication beyond "we do not comment on security operations." Further, reactive, one-size-fits-all responses, such as further blocking the public's access to the White House by cutting off streets and erecting additional barriers, will not suffice. In the post-September 11 world, our Nation needs better security, not more security theater.

The first step towards fixing a problem is admitting you have one. The Secret Service must not spare itself in conducting rigorous and honest self-examination to fully understand the fundamental causal factors underlying recent failures, from allowing unauthorized individuals into a State Dinner, to failing to recognize gunshots at the White House in a timely manner, to the embarrassing indiscretions by Secret Service personnel overseas.

A full, transparent accounting of how one of the world's premier law enforcement agencies fell into systemic disarray is required to accurately identify the long-term reforms that will be necessary to transform the agency back into an elite enterprise that truly honors the brave service of the thousands of dedicated men and women who serve our Nation as Secret Service special agents, uniformed officers, and support staff. Finally, it must be noted that today's hearing is only the first step in what will be long-term initiative.

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Beyond immediate corrective actions, such as locking entrances to the White House and ensuring communications equipment properly functions, Congress must work with the current Administration to authorize and implement transformative reforms. Every option must be analyzed and considered, from mundane improvements to policy and procedure, to more fundamental modifications of the agency's statutory mission, structure, and personnel practices.

For example, this Committee is aware that in the prior decade, the Secret Service experienced a troubling number of resignations that resulted in a Uniformed Division largely comprised of Officers with 3 years of service or less. As Congress noted in the committee report accompanying the "United States Secret Service Uniformed Division Modernization Act of 2010" (Public Law 111-282), legislation was necessary to give, "the Uniformed Division the ability to compete better in recruiting and retaining officers with other federal, state and local law enforcement organizations operating in the area, including the Capitol Police, the Pentagon Force Protection Agency, and FBI Police Officers, among others."

As we approach the four year anniversary of enactment of Public-Law 111-282, it is appropriate that Congress evaluate the extent to which this bipartisan legislation achieved its goals, and if necessary, examine further enhancements that may be necessary to ensure the Secret Service can recruit and retain elite Uniformed Division Officers.

Despite the daunting challenge before us, I am confident that if we work in a pragmatic and bipartisan fashion, the Secret Service will emerge from this troubling period as a stronger, more disciplined, and more effective law enforcement agency. Indeed, there is past precedent for this. It was a 1930 White House intrusion that originally spurred the transfer of the White House Police Force to be placed under the direct supervision of the Chief of the Secret Service to ensure the agency had exclusive and complete control over Presidential protection operations. The most recent White House intrusion must serve a similar purpose and force Congress to fundamentally reexamine every facet of how our Nation protects its President.

Moving forward, we must examine far-reaching questions, such as whether it is time to separate the Secret Service from its legacy mission of investigating sophisticated financial crimes, which may be better suited within the United States Departments of the Treasury or Justice. Public reports indicate that threats against President Obama are significantly higher compared to former Presidents. Is it realistic or fair to expect the Secret Service – a relatively small agency of 6,705 full time employees, approximately half of which are Special Agents, in addition to about 1,300 Uniformed Division Officers – to effectively protect the President, Vice President, First Families, visiting heads of state, and National Special Security Events; while simultaneously safeguarding our country's financial infrastructure and payment systems? The Secret Service's recent failures indicate the answer may be no.

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