



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
“Secret Service on the Line: Restoring Trust and Confidence”
Washington, DC
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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good Morning. Over its nearly 150 year history, the Secret Service has built an extraordinary reputation for selfless and skilled devotion to the important and dangerous work its agents do – protecting the President and other high officials of our government.

That reputation was sadly stained last month when 11 Secret Service employees engaged in a night of heavy drinking in Cartagena, Colombia, which ended with them taking foreign women back to their hotel rooms.

We have called this hearing as part of our Committee’s responsibility to oversee the functions of the federal government, particularly those within the Department of Homeland Security, including the United States Secret Service.

There are three things we hope to accomplish at this hearing, and in our Committee’s broader investigation.

First, we want to get the facts about what precisely happened in Cartagena and where the Secret Service’s investigation of Cartagena stands today.

As has widely been reported, the misconduct involved 11 agents and officers who arrived in Cartagena the morning of Wednesday, April 11, and were off-duty the rest of that day.

The men went out – in groups of two, three, and four – to four different nightclubs that evening. After considerable drinking, they returned to their rooms at the El Caribe Hotel with women they had met at the clubs – some of whom were prostitutes – and registered the women as overnight guests per hotel rules. The Secret Service subsequently learned that another individual engaged in similar conduct in Cartagena the night of Monday, April 9. All of the agents and officers held security clearances and two were in supervisory positions.

If one of the agents had not argued with one of the women about how much he owed her, the world would never have known this sordid story.

But the world does now know this sordid story and that is why the Secret Service, the Inspector General, and we must learn the truth – as best we can – not to diminish the US Secret Service, but to restore its credibility which the continuity of our government so clearly depends upon.

Second, as part of that search for truth and lessons to be learned, we need to know if there were warning signs that misconduct had become a pattern among travelling Secret Service agents in the years before Cartagena that should have been seen and stopped. It is hard for many people, including me, to believe that on one night in April 2012, in Cartagena, Colombia, 11 Secret Service agents – there to protect the President – suddenly and spontaneously did something they or other agents had never done before – that is to say, gone in groups of two, three, or four to four different nightclubs or strip joints and drink to excess and bring foreign national women back to their hotel rooms.

That lingering disbelief led our Committee to send a series of questions to the Secret Service to determine if there was any evidence in their records of patterns of previous misconduct. We have begun to review the Agency's answers and found individual cases of misconduct over the last 5 years that are troubling, but do not yet contain sufficient evidence of a pattern of misconduct or a culture of misconduct.

But disciplinary records only take us so far. They only include cases where misconduct was observed, charged, and adjudicated.

We can only know what the records of the Secret Service reveal, and what whistleblowers, and others who come forward tell us. Thus far, we have received as whistleblower calls, but they have not provided evidence of a pattern of misconduct by Secret Service agents similar to Cartagena.

We have not concluded our oversight of this matter, nor has the DHS Inspector General. And therefore, I would ask anyone who has information about the conduct of the Secret Service agents over the years that they believe is relevant to our investigation to contact our staff at the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee here at the U.S. Capitol.

Today's Washington Post reports based on multiple anonymous sources that "sexual encounters during official travel had been condoned under an unwritten code that allows what happens on the road to stay on the road." They also contend that this tolerance is part of the "Secret Circus" – a mocking nickname the employees use when large numbers of agents and officers arrive in a city.

One of the implicated men has told associates that a senior security supervisor had advised agents to follow loose guidelines when spending time with women they met on the road: one night stands were permitted as long as the relationship ended when the agent left the country.

In addition, our initial review of the agency's disciplinary records over the last 5 years reveals 64 instances in which allegations or complaints concerning sexual misconduct were made against employees of the Secret Service. Most of these involved sending sexually explicit emails or sexually explicit material on a government computer although three involved charges of an inappropriate relationship with a foreign national, and one was a complaint of nonconsensual sexual intercourse. Thirty other cases involved alcohol, almost all relating to driving while under the influence. I hasten to say that these complaints involve a very small percentage of the thousands of people who have worked at the US Secret Service during the last five years. Nonetheless, it is important for us to know how those complaints were handled and whether, looking back, they should have been warnings of worse to come.

Third, I want to know what reforms the Secret Service is implementing to make sure what happened in Cartagena never happens again.

I know Secret Service Director Sullivan has already made some changes, such as increasing the no-alcohol before reporting for duty from six to 10 hours, and banning foreign nationals from hotel rooms, except for official counterparts.

But I also want to hear what the Secret Service is doing to encourage people to report egregious behavior when they see it – to ensure that no code of silence exists among Secret Service agents and officers.

In recent days, the Secret Service provided protection for world leaders at both the G8 and NATO summits. The Presidential campaigns are in full swing, and the Secret Service needs to protect the candidates and secure the two national conventions. And the President and Vice President need protection every day.

That's why the Cartagena scandal has to be dealt with head on and quickly. The credibility of the Secret Service is too important and its mission too critical to our country to leave any questions about Cartagena and what preceded it unanswered.

I want to thank Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan for his cooperation in our investigation. I know he has worked hard and fast since he learned of this crisis to investigate it and restore the credibility of the Secret Service.

Director Sullivan, I look forward to your testimony, as I do to yours Inspector General Edwards.