

Testimony of Robin Smith, former DHS officer, for the Towns' Subcommittee, July 18, 2007

Chairman Towns and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to tell you about my experience as a Wackenhut security officer. But before I do, I'd like to tell you a little bit about my background.

Prior to my civilian service, I served for three years with the US Air Force. I'm proud to say that I achieved the rank of Airman First Class with a Sharpshooter badge. I was one of 125 women selected for an Air Force test program to receive combat training. As an Air Force Security Officer, I guarded aircraft that were on alert with nuclear weapons for the Strategic Air Command. I also did work in assembly, maintenance and repair of sophisticated electronics including positions requiring security clearance.

For me, my work in the private sector was an extension of my military service. I consider it not only a job, but also a privilege to serve my country and to keep it safe. I have always treated my job as a security officer with the utmost pride and importance, and I recognized that being stationed at the department that secures our nation made my work even more important.

Before working for Wackenhut, I worked with a private company called Omniplex and later as an airport screener for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

At Wackenhut Security Services Inc. (WSI), I was a security officer assigned to guard the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in Washington, D.C. from June 19, 2005 until April 2006 when the contract with Wackenhut was terminated.

While working for Wackenhut at the Department of Homeland Security, I was posted at Building 3, which is a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF), because a lot of classified documents are located there. Building 3 also houses a central video monitoring system, so my duties included monitoring the cameras located in the different buildings on the site as well as ensuring that all individuals entering the building were properly identified, cleared and documented.

Unfortunately, I felt that Wackenhut took their government contract and responsibility for our nation's safety too lightly and they provided a shoddy and low level of service to the DHS, which could have had dire consequences for our nation's capital. The problems I witnessed included poor access control, lack of training, careless weapons handling, open posts, failed security tests, security breaches, falsified documents, and irresponsible handling of a hazardous substance attack. I will recount a few incidents for you today.

Security clearances were not taken seriously by Wackenhut management. Controlling access is a basic part of security. It would be reasonable to assume that the security officers Wackenhut stationed in high security buildings would have the necessary security clearances. But, unfortunately, that was not the case. In fact, one of the sergeants whose duty was to investigate all alarms and secure buildings, including the compound where the Secretary of Homeland Security's office and his top aides were, did not even have all the required security clearances.

For example, up until or about November 9, 2005, Sergeant Moore would be responsible for investigating alarms that would go off in any building, and he responded specifically to alarms in high security buildings, but he did not have the proper security clearance for this job. Such security clearance is necessary to access certain sensitive corridors and rooms of high security clearance. In many instances, I saw Sergeant Moore conduct building investigations in top-secret buildings on the Department of Homeland Security jobsite with no security clearance whatsoever. I believe, at the time, Sergeant Moore was working with an interim secret clearance, which means that his background check had not yet been completed.

It's especially important for you to know that as security officers at the Department of Homeland Security, we never had any previous training nor did we receive any written protocol such as a standard operating procedure

when responding to a chemical attack. There was no proper training, whatsoever, when responding to attacks with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), or for the handling of suspicious packages, or response to bomb, chemical, or biological threats. Training was also lacking when it came to de-escalation and evacuation procedures.

As a Wackenhut officer, I also saw careless storage of weapons that could have had grave results. On more than five occasions, once at the beginning of the early morning shift and at numerous times during a late evening shift change, I saw the weapons armory wide open and unattended. Officers who come off post go to the armory to return their weapons and ammunition. The armory is located in the Program Manager's—Henry Thomas' office.

When a supervisor is not attending the armory, it results in high security risks. There have been times when I saw the Sergeants, who are supposed to be in control of the armory's safe-keeping, leaving the central weapons cache wide open to go to the bathroom or elsewhere. I also witnessed occasions in which an unattended weapon was left still lodged in the lead weapon barrel with its ammunition laying beside it, available for anyone to access. The requirement is that all officers must place their gun in a lead weapon barrel in order to prevent any accidental misfiring.

There were numerous times when the door to the office of Henry Thomas, the program manager of the Physical Security Division at the Department of Homeland Security, was left open, unlocked and unoccupied. If the door is open, anyone can access the weapons armory. There are many contractors working onsite at the Department of Homeland Security. Any disgruntled contract employee could easily walk right through Henry Thomas' open office door and access the entire armory of weapons and ammunition. Any terrorist or ill-intentioned individual could do the same.

It is not difficult to enter the Department of Homeland Security gates, especially when there is no guard or appropriate security measure guarding entry into the site. Many vehicle entrances to the Department of Homeland Security were lightly guarded or not even guarded at all. At some entrances, there are small barriers used to prevent vehicles from entering, but there is still enough space for a smaller vehicle such as a motorcycle to pass through an unguarded entrance. There were several occasions in which there were failures to stop test vehicles that were sent to checkpoints with improper identification.

On most occasions, there was only one security officer stationed outside Secretary Chertoff's office as opposed to the required posting of two officers.

There was one incident in which an employee entered the Department of Homeland Security buildings without her identification badge. This breach was only discovered because we happened to have a fire drill that day, which required all DHS employees to evacuate the site. Only when this employee attempted to re-enter the building after the drill was she stopped and sent home to retrieve appropriate identification. If this woman could get past two posted guards—one at the gate and the other at a SCIF building without a badge, any ill-intentioned individual could do the same.

Another problem was the high turnover among security officers, forcing officers to work extended shifts. Some officers were so tired that they would make up for their lost sleep while on the job. On many occasions, there were supervisors and officers caught sleeping on the job, but management never reprimanded them.

The falsification of documents and records was not uncommon among supervisory staff. I saw Sergeant Moore filling out his 139 Form, which is his timesheet, a month in advance in the office of Henry Thomas. Two lieutenants were also present in the office at the time Sergeant Moore was filling out his 139 Form. Captain Carraway was onsite at the time, but I do not recall if he was also in the office during this specific incident.

Noticing that nobody else in the office seemed concerned about the matter, I confronted Sergeant Moore about falsifying a federal document, and he just told me to mind my own business. I told him that as a sworn officer of the law, I was minding my own business. Unfortunately, that wasn't the first time that Sergeant Moore falsified his timesheets.

There was one occasion in which I personally witnessed the falsification of a report, which pertained to non-performance of security services in the face of a suspected access breach. An alarm in a high security building went off, where the offices of the Secretary of Homeland Security and his top staff were situated. There were Wackenhut supervisors and Lieutenants onsite at the time. The alarm sounded, but not one of them went to the building to investigate the situation.

Henry Thomas responded to the situation by holding Lieutenant Johnson solely responsible for the incident and demoting him to the rank of a regular officer. I was the only eyewitness present at the time the alarm sounded, but Henry Thomas never approached me for questioning. When I asked him why, he simply stated that a full investigation had taken place supporting the decision to ascribe blame to and demote Lieutenant Johnson. But I wondered, "How could a credible investigation have taken place when the only eye witness account was never sought?"

In addition, there was never any kind of further investigation of the building to determine if it had in fact been inappropriately entered or if any of the sensitive materials located in the building had been inappropriately accessed, taken or altered. I believe that a full and thorough investigation to identify the delinquent party or parties was unquestionably warranted.

Wackenhut Services, Inc. also failed to provide officers with the proper and necessary equipment to efficiently serve and protect the Department of Homeland Security and its employees. Some officers did not have radios to communicate with each other, and those who did have access to radios, had trouble hearing each other. Officers also lacked pepper spray and batons, leaving us with few options beyond lethal force with our handguns.

Management also decided to replace chemical-sniffing dogs with ineffective equipment that falsely indicated the presence of explosives.

One incident that truly stands out in my mind is the unpleasant mishandling of a potential chemical agent by the highest level ranking of Wackenhut security programming. This was at the height of the Anthrax scare in our nation's capitol. A suspicious letter was sent to the building that used to house Secretary Chertoff's office. A DHS employee opened the letter, which was found to contain an unidentifiable white powder. Some, if not most, of this white powder spilled onto the employee's body.

Two security officers received a report of this incident, and they notified their superiors, Lieutenant Waller and Lieutenant Carraway. When the two Lieutenants arrived at the scene, they were in a position to isolate the contaminated areas and to prevent other Department of Homeland Security employees from entering a potentially contaminated area. But they didn't do that.

Lieutenants Waller and Carraway told the employee who had opened the envelope to go and wash the white powder off of herself. She did so by walking across the hall, passing Secretary Chertoff's office and potentially contaminating a larger part of the building.

The white powder was unidentified and should have been considered to be potentially dangerous, but it was apparent that proper safety precautions were not taken into account. Everyone in the vicinity could have been contaminated if the white powder had been a chemical threat.

The two Lieutenants observed and handled the envelope from all angles. They didn't evacuate the section. The ventilation system was still on, which could easily have carried particles of the white powder to other sections of the building. The building was evacuated only when the Federal Protective Services arrived at the very late stages of the discovery.

I firmly believe that Wackenhut knew of these abuses and did nothing to rectify the situation.

Though Wackenhut no longer provides security at the Department of Homeland Security, I know that it is a foreign-owned, global security company, and is still contracting more federal security work than any other company, apparently without regard its poor performance record. Personally, I was appalled that Wackenhut was awarded a contract for border transportation by the Department of Homeland Security in the same year that they failed so miserably at that department's headquarters.

I hope that my testimony today will help paint a more complete picture of Wackenhut's performance, which I think deserves Congressional investigation. I thank you once again for the opportunity to meet with you today.