

chatterbox

Gagging the Fuzz

The Park Police chief is being fired for telling the truth about her budget.

By Timothy Noah

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If you've ever wondered why so much that you read in the newspaper is attributed to anonymous government sources, consider the sad story of Teresa C. Chambers, the first woman ever appointed to run the U.S. Park Police.

When Chambers was given the job in 2001, a [press release](#) issued by the National Park Service praised her to the skies. "I am very excited that Chief Chambers has accepted this historic challenge," said Park Service Director Fran Mainella. "She is a highly qualified professional law enforcement officer." Chambers had a quarter-century's experience in police work in Prince George's County, Md., and in Durham, N.C., where she was chief of police immediately prior to her Park Police appointment. During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Park Police Chief Chambers kept a cool head when a nut drove a tractor onto the Mall and said he was going to set off a bomb made of ammonium nitrate; the man (who turned out to be bluffing) was taken into custody without a shot being fired. (The last time something like this had happened, a man threatening to blow up the Washington Monument had been shot and killed by a police sniper. See "[The Ballad of Tractor Man](#).") As recently as Dec. 4, President Bush [told Chambers](#) (at a ceremony to light the White House Christmas tree) that she was doing a great job.

That was then. Today, Chambers is on "administrative leave" from the Park Police, and the agency has begun proceedings to [fire her](#). Her offense was to answer questions posed to her by the *Washington Post* about the Park Police's lack of sufficient resources to patrol adequately national parkland in and around Washington, D.C.

The interview appeared Dec. 2 in the *Post's* metro section under the apparently treasonous headline, "[Park Police Duties Exceed Staffing](#)." (Chatterbox commends *Post* writer David A. Fahrenthold, who has taken the lead on its vigorous coverage of the Chambers Affair.) The state secrets Chambers blurted out were that traffic accidents had increased along the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, which now had two Park Police officers patrolling it instead of the previous four; that homeless people and drug dealers were moving into smaller parks in residential areas; that two particularly rough areas now had two regular cruisers, rather than the needed four; that Park Police newly assigned by Congress to guard Washington's monuments were working 12-hour shifts and were being granted an insufficient number of bathroom breaks; and that she hoped to get an additional \$19 million in next year's budget.

In Washington, the accepted method for passing along information about how the government fails to meet real-world needs is to leak it. Surely, though, the Park Police *chief* would have had little reason to worry that she lacked sufficient stature to voice a few truths that were mildly inconvenient to her superiors and to appropriators in Congress. Indeed, when Chambers' predecessor during the Clinton administration, Robert E. Langston, [said much the same thing](#)—understaffing at the Park Police, and within the National Park Service generally, is an old story—nobody even noticed, much less suggested that he was out of line.

Perhaps you're wondering what Chambers is getting fired *for*. Chatterbox phoned the National Park Service press office to ask, but spokeswoman Elaine Sevy told Chatterbox that she didn't know, and that if she did know, she couldn't tell me, because it's a confidential matter. Only Chambers is permitted to know why she's getting fired. But *she* can't tell Chatterbox, either, because she's been prohibited by the department (which continues to pay her salary) from talking to the press.

The National Park Service's deputy director, Don Murphy, [told the *Post*](#) on Dec. 4 that Chambers' comments broke federal rules against commenting publicly about ongoing budget discussions and against lobbying. (How answering a reporter's questions could be construed as "lobbying" Murphy did not say.) These rules would be a serious impediment to accountable government if they existed, but in all likelihood they do not. The *Post's* "Federal Diary" columnist, Stephen Barr, [asked the Park Service](#) to produce the rules and was refused. Chambers' husband Jeff says that in the legal documents Chambers has received from the Park Service about her pending dismissal, "there were no cites" of any such rules. "They can't find any cites," he told Chatterbox.

Chatterbox thinks Chambers' firing is not only a grave injustice against Chambers, but an attempt to intimidate government officials into maintaining silence about information of public importance. It won't work of course, because government officials can—and often do—speak to reporters on an anonymous basis. But if Chatterbox hears a Bush administration official speak one more time about the cowardice and unreliability of government leakers, he's going to scream. Chambers is being punished for being honest, and that really stinks. If you think so, too, click [here](#).

*Timothy Noah writes "Chatterbox" for **Slate**.*

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