

Should Federal Buildings Be More Secure?

Shootings last month in Canada's capital led to a precautionary increase in security at many U.S. government buildings. Some say more must be done to protect federal facilities, but others argue going too far could unfairly restrict public access to government. **Edited by Kelly Mae Ross**

MARK WILSON - GETTY IMAGES



By Rep. Mark Meadows
Republican from
North Carolina

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YES Recently, the nation was shocked to hear of multiple security failures by the United States Secret Service, which raised this question: If federal agents aren't able to protect the home and office of the president, can we trust that federal officials and buildings will be properly protected?

For many Americans, the Secret Service brings to mind images of agents bravely diving to cover President Ronald Reagan during the 1981 assassination attempt or of agents jumping to protect first lady Jackie Kennedy after John Kennedy was shot in 1963. Over the years, many Secret Service agents have willingly put their lives on the line to defend the president. But recent security failures have marred the agency's proud history.

In September, an intruder jumped the White House fence, made it across the lawn, through an unlocked door and deep into the East Room before being restrained. Multiple layers of security failed at what should be the nation's most secure residence. Ultimately, an off-duty agent was able to apprehend the intruder. A week or so later, news outlets reported that on a recent trip to Atlanta, an armed contractor with an arrest record was allowed to ride in an elevator with President Barack Obama. Even more shocking, the exposé [READ MORE »](#)



By Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton
Democrat from
Washington, D.C.

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NO The nation's federal buildings are some of its most secure, but our ability to protect them, particularly the White House, has been tested. Work to overhaul the Secret Service to ensure the White House and first family are secure is underway, but the White House should not be confused with the streets that border it or federal buildings that should be open to the public.

After a man jumped the White House fence and ran deep into the interior of the building, some suggested tourists should be screened before being allowed on the street in front of the building. Since fence jumpers usually come armed only with their legs and feet, screening would not keep them from jumping over the fence. Punishing the general public by restricting access to federal buildings confuses cause with effect and keeps security officials from looking first to readily available solutions. For example, a later fence jumper was stopped a few yards after hitting the ground by guard dogs that previously had been kept at a nearby off-site location. A higher wrought-iron fence, curved forward at the top, might prevent fence-jumping altogether.

At a House Committee on Oversight & Government Reform hearing on Secret Service security [READ MORE »](#)

TWO TAKES

YES

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revealed that in 2011 it took four days for the Secret Service to realize shots had been fired at the White House when the president's daughter was inside. These appalling failures ultimately lead to the resignation of Julia Pierson, director of the Secret Service.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with scandal-ridden federal agencies, a resignation at the top does not mean systematic reform will take place. The Secret Service has a culture of leadership that doesn't allow for constructive criticism by rank-and-file agents, creating an environment where men and women are willing to take a bullet for the president yet are afraid to disagree with their supervisors. Some will argue the recent security breaches are due to inadequate funding, but this is not the case. A review of 2014 budgeting showed that, despite sequestration, Congress actually allocated more money to the Secret Service than was requested by the agency to ensure it would be able to function properly.

The Washington approach to fixing a broken system is often to throw more money at it. This tactic did not prevent serious errors within the Secret Service.

The egregious and systemic failures we've seen are due to poor leadership, mismanagement and a lack of oversight from higher-ups.

The president is expected to be the most protected individual in the country. If the American people can't trust that he is secure in his own home, how can they be confident that other federal officials, who don't have their own security forces, are also safe? The American people need to know that their Supreme Court justices, members of Congress and Cabinet members are protected. As a congressman, I have seen firsthand how swiftly and thoroughly Capitol Police, who are tasked with protecting the legislative branch, are able to respond to potential threats. I am very confident in their ability to handle security issues that may arise. The American people deserve to have this same confidence that all federal offices are protected.

The security failings at the White House are beyond unacceptable. There is currently a deficit of trust in the Secret Service that will only be fixed by new leadership and top-down reform. ● [« BACK TO PAGE 19 »](#)

What Do You Think? Should security be further increased at federal buildings in Washington, D.C.? Email your thoughts to editor@usnews.com.

NO

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lapses, it became clear that problems, such as fence-jumping and uninvestigated bullets fired into the White House, were internal to the Secret Service. The first target for fixing security should not be the public. However, that's what happened right after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. The major crosstown street behind the White House was closed. We worked with the Clinton administration to widen that street, and it was reopened, only to be pre-emptively closed again after 9/11. Nevertheless, we were able to get Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House reopened to people – not cars – and it has been a gathering place for visitors exercising their First Amendment rights ever since. Closing the entire area outside the White House fence or screening people before they walk down Pennsylvania Avenue would be an admission that security officials have thrown up their hands and do not know how to keep the White House secure.

While the Secret Service struggles to secure just one building, the Federal Pro-

TECTIVE SERVICE, charged with securing federal buildings, grapples with inconsistent and often ineffective standards. The major decision-makers are not security officials but tenant agency personnel who serve on Facility Security Committees for each federal agency, although they have no security backgrounds. A 2010 Congressional Research Service report found that “few across-the-board standards have been established” for the committees, and that “lack of standards in FSC administrative operations could imperil security.” One federal agency does not permit taxpaying citizens to use the restrooms or to eat in the cafeteria and requires employees to escort even staff with congressional identification to scheduled meetings. At others, including the U.S. House and Senate, visitors are able to enter after passing through a magnetometer.

Whether at the high-profile White House or the average federal agency, quick-fix answers invariably target public access rather than drawing on careful risk analyses that address the core problems. The result is often solutions that do not meet the need. In a free and open society, security should mean implementing the least restrictive safeguards consistent with strong security. ● [« BACK TO PAGE 19 »](#)