

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Secret Service Boss Lambasted By Lawmakers

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New York Times -- WASHINGTON — Lawmakers from both parties on Tuesday assailed Julia Pierson, the director of the Secret Service, about security breaches at the White House, including an intruder who earlier this month breached multiple security measures and evaded capture as he ran around the first floor of the mansion.

Ms. Pierson said in opening statements before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform that she takes full responsibility for the breaches and she pledged that “what happened is unacceptable and it will never happen again.” But her promise of a comprehensive review of the incidents appeared to do little to satisfy members of the committee.

Representative Stephen Lynch, Democrat from Massachusetts, lashed into Ms. Pierson, saying that he does not believe the Secret Service takes seriously their duty to protect the president. He said he has "very low confidence" in her leadership.

Omar J. Gonzalez, who jumped the White House fence this month, reportedly got as far as the entrance to the Green Room before being stopped.

In this undated photo, Omar Gonzalez, left, posed with Nancy Hoover, center, then his sister-in-law, and her husband. Mr. Gonzalez is accused of trying to enter the White House.

Omar J. Gonzalez, Accused of White House Intrusion, Is Recalled as Good but Troubled Neighbor
SEPT. 23, 2014

A member of the Secret Service Uniformed Division at the White House on Monday. A man scaled a fence and made his way through the front door on Friday.

"I wish to God that you protected the White House like you're protecting your reputation right now," Mr. Lynch said.

Several members severely criticized the agency for its response on Sept. 19, when Omar J. Gonzalez, 42, made his way deep inside the president's residence, armed with a serrated knife. Under intense and sometimes combative questioning, Ms. Pierson said, "I do not think the security plan was properly executed."

Lawmakers also accused Ms. Pierson and other officials at the Secret Service of misleading Congress and the public about how far inside the White House Mr. Gonzalez got before being captured. Representative Jason Chaffetz, Republican of Utah, demanded to know why Secret Service officials told reporters that Mr. Gonzalez was stopped just inside the front doors of the mansion.

Ms. Pierson said she had read the agency's press release before it went out on Sept. 20, but said she could not speak for conversations that she was not a part of.

In response to repeated questions about the recent intrusion, Ms. Pierson offered new details about the moments before Mr. Gonzalez was finally captured. She said he made his way through the unlocked front doors, "knocked back" an agent inside the building, and then fought with the agent as he continued through the Entrance Hall, turned left into the Cross Hall, got a few steps inside the East Room, and was finally tackled back in the Cross Hall, just outside the Green Room.

Under early, sharp questioning from Darrell Issa, the Republican chairman of the committee, Ms. Pierson said that an outer glass door at the North Portico remained unlocked after the intruder breached the fence and that an inner, wooden door was in the process of being hand-locked when the intruder came through the doors. The intruder knocked the officer back and proceeded down the hallway, she said.

Ms. Pierson said the Secret Service has since installed an automatic lock on the door, which drew a tongue-in-cheek response from Mr. Issa.

"We learn from our mistakes," he said.

Members of Congress from both parties said in their opening statements that they suspect there are more systemic problems at the agency Ms. Pierson has led since March 2013. They questioned her leadership and her ability to repair what they said is a damaged culture inside the service.

Mr. Chaffetz angrily questioned Ms. Pierson about why the Secret Service had put out a statement that said its officers had exhibited “tremendous” restraint of force when the intruder breached the fence. He said that he wanted it to be “crystal clear if you dash at the White House we are going to take you down.”

Mr. Chaffetz said that the Secret Service should take lethal action because even if intruders do not appear to be armed, they could be strapped with an explosive device or dirty bomb.

Ms. Pierson responded that officers can only use lethal force if a person poses an imminent danger to themselves or others. She said that based on what had occurred, she believed that the officers had used proper restraint.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, the Democratic delegate from the District of Columbia, called for a “top-to-bottom investigation” into the most recent incident at the White House, but she said the fate of Ms. Pierson’s tenure at the agency is just one issue.

“I do not regard this matter as a mere issue of personnel,” Ms. Holmes Norton said. “I think it goes far deeper than that.”

Representative Elijah Cummings, Democrat of Maryland, said the incident involving the intruder at the White House raises questions about the “competence and culture” of the Secret Service. He said Ms. Pierson must be more forthcoming about answering the questions.

“I hate to even imagine what could have happened if Gonzalez had been carrying a gun instead of a knife when he burst inside the White House,” Mr. Cummings said. “That possibility is extremely unsettling.”

In her opening statement, Ms. Pierson did not address any specifics about Mr. Gonzalez or any of the other security breaches in the last several years. She confirmed that there have been six people who have jumped the White House fence so far this year, and a total of 16 in the last five years.

Ms. Pierson said the Secret Service “has had its share of challenges in recent years – some during my tenure and some before – of which this is the most recent.” She added that she would increase efforts, “not only in response to this incident, but in general to bring the Secret Service to a level of performance that lives up to the vital mission we perform.”