



Who Will Clean Up the Kitchen?

By Annie Jacobsen

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There's an old Hindu saying: *It's never the elephant in the forest that takes a man down, it's the ants in the kitchen.* This was my first thought when, on January 5, 2006, the Director of the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS), Thomas Quinn, announced his resignation. Just a few weeks prior, in Quinn's end-of-the-year "Director's Corner" message to federal air marshals, he wrote, "This coming year is certain to bring new challenges and expectations." Quinn also expressed confidence in meeting these ideals -- hardly indicators that he was verge of retiring from his career civil servant position. The ants must have moved fast.

Director Quinn has been no stranger to bad press during his time at the helm of the agency, but this past November-January was a particularly rough season. To an agency that counts on remaining unseen, unheard and undercover, the public spotlight is not a welcome beacon. In November 2005, writing for *WomensWallStreet.com*, I revealed that Quinn maintained two corporations -- both in forfeited franchise tax status -- which could put him at odds with government conduct codes. (Quinn originally denied having these corporations but, according to FAMS spokesman Dave Adams, after reading my article, "his [Quinn's] memory was jarred.") In December 2005, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported on numbers that the FAMS had been working hard to conceal: possibly fewer than 3,000 air marshals cover some 25,000 daily flights. And *Vanity Fair*, in its February 2006 issue, published an unflattering portrait of the director, including the fact that "the man in charge of one of America's key countermeasures to attacks carried out largely by Saudi nationals worked for the Saudi Arabian royalty" before he became director. Rebellion in the ranks was taking hold, and information was making its way into the public eye.

But it wasn't just the rank-and-file air marshals breaking silence, reporting to the press, and shining the light on FAMS mismanagement that started at the top and trickled down. In November 2005, a Government Accounting Office (GAO) report was released, revealing "limited progress" in the future planning and present controls of the agency. Also highlighted in this report to Congress were two ongoing problems -- problems that FAMS management has insisted were never problems in the first place. The GAO reported that the FAMS fell short of its duty to increase the number of other federal agents who could effectively assist air marshals during heightened threat situations. The GAO also revealed that incident-reporting (air marshals' ability to report suspicious activity in the field) remained a problem, laying the blame on management.

Early in January, Quinn announced his plan to retire effective February 3, 2006. According to FAMS spokesman Dave Adams, "He's going to enjoy his retirement and be with his grandchildren. He's going to enjoy his favorite hobby, which is motorcycle riding." So who will fill the director's shoes? The answer could mean the difference between national security and national insecurity.

It's Time for Change

Since I began this series over a year and a half ago, I have corresponded with nearly 200 federal air marshals. Of that number, the vast majority believe that the discord in the agency is wholly divided between rank-and-file air marshals -- the ones flying missions on our commercial planes -- and upper management -- the men who make policy and run the offices but do not fly regular missions. And the source of contention is simple: the air marshals who fly want to be undercover. It is every undercover agent's nightmare to be "outed," whether by the flying public or the bad guys. And for obvious reasons, being outed is a particularly horrific reality in a hijacking situation. The majority of air marshals I have spoken to, and as also mentioned in *Vanity Fair*, believe that changing the four agency practices below would enhance their anonymity and, in turn, our national security.

1. **FAMs must check in at ticket counters and show ID:** FAMs must flash their 3"x5" federal badges when checking in for flights -- in full view of the public.
2. **FAMs cannot bypass checkpoints:** To enter the secure area, FAMs must walk through exit ways, going against the heavy flow of human traffic and making it very obvious who they are. They then must wait at the end of the exit lane for airport police to verify the authenticity of their badges and wave them through -- in full view of the public.
3. **FAMs must check in at the gate and show ID:** FAMs must flash their 3"x5" federal badges at the boarding gates - - also in full view of the public.
4. **One member of the FAMS team must pre-board the aircraft:** One FAM must pre-board the plane -- before the handicapped, the elderly or those with small children -- in full view of the public.

During his four-year tenure Director Quinn refused to change these policies despite the fact that the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA) -- an organization with 24,000 members that according to the FLEOA represents approximately 85 percent of air marshals -- has repeatedly asked for these changes.

Conventional practice shows that change in a big bureaucracy takes forever -- but it doesn't have to take long, provided someone in the position of power wants change. One example that quick change is possible involves a discussion during a meeting with Homeland Security Chief Michael Chertoff and representatives from the FLEOA. The men were discussing the FAMS' strict dress-code policies -- why some were pointless while others were downright dangerous -- when Jon Adler, National First Vice President of the FLEOA, cut to the chase. He noted that, based on the physical appearance of several men in the room, including the Homeland Security Chief himself, those men would not qualify to be a federal air marshal in the eyes of Thomas Quinn. Confused, Chertoff asked for an explanation. Adler pointed to a particular feature on the Harvard-educated, former judge's persona and explained that Thomas Quinn had declared that particular grooming feature to be unprofessional. Chertoff thought for a moment and then stated how ridiculous that policy was. Within a week, the policy changed.

So What's Next?

The appointment of a new director of the FAMS brings with it the possibility of positive change. In the months that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, approximately 5,000 federal law enforcement agents became federal air marshals; four years later, arguably less than half of them remain. The reputation of the FAMS has been tarnished, but with the right person -- the most qualified person -- in place, the FAMS can be restored to its original luster. The FAMS needs a new director who can put aside outdated policies and practices about how to run an undercover agency, and instead will enact guidelines that guarantee, to the best extent possible, the anonymity of air marshals. The new director must be someone who can develop a strategy that sets achievable goals and can communicate with the rank-and-file marshals to hear their concerns, especially about a means for

reporting incidents, and address them accordingly. With so much internal strife and with aviation security at stake, replacing Thomas Quinn with someone just like him would keep the FAMS on the same outmoded and dangerous course it has followed for four years.

The air marshals remain "encouraged" that the Bush administration will name "a new director who will bring stability and unity back into an organization that has been consistently wrought with internal dissension and low morale," says Adler of the FLEOA.

Most would agree that the federal agency that took the most hits in the press in 2005 was FEMA. One might argue that the FAMS took a dubious second place. "No other agency has reported this type of disruption in the past 20 years," one air marshal told me. And another marshal promised this: "Give us a director who is willing to lead with good policy and you won't have a single federal agent contacting you with another story."

The air marshals need a director who will come home and clean up the kitchen. Give them that and the ants will move on.

Clarification

From a previous article, *Hey Ol' Buddy, Want a Job?*, the position of Director of the Federal Air Marshal Service is a career civil service appointment rather than a Presidential appointment. According to FAMS spokesman Dave Adams, Thomas Quinn was a Secret Service agent assigned to protect President Reagan rather than former Vice President Bush. To clarify, Director Quinn owes outstanding fees and taxes on two of his corporations; these are outstanding fees and *franchise* taxes.

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