



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on May 25, 2012

## Senators Grill Secret Service Director Over Prostitution Scandal

Senate lawmakers are continuing investigations over the infamous [prostitution scandal](#) that implicated 12 Secret Service agents during a presidential assignment in Cartagena, Colombia. So far, eight Secret Service employees have lost their jobs, while the agency plans to permanently revoke the security clearance for one other employee. Senate lawmakers are continuing investigations over the infamous [prostitution scandal](#) that implicated 12 Secret Service agents during a presidential assignment in Cartagena, Colombia. So far, eight Secret Service employees have lost their jobs, while the agency plans to permanently revoke the security clearance for one other employee.



The debacle ignited after Secret Service agents were deployed in Cartagena, Colombia for an assignment to carry out security preparations ahead of a summit visit by President Obama. A dozen agents were recalled to the U.S. after allegations were made that at least one agent had some involvement with a prostitute in Cartagena, where prostitution is legal.

“One of the agents did not pay one of the prostitutes, and she complained to the police,” [said](#) Ronald Kessler, a former *Washington Post* reporter and author of a book on the Secret Service. “This is clearly the biggest scandal in secret service history.”

Soon after the narrative unfolded, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) indicated that the scandal was part of a disturbing “pattern of behavior,” and that the agency would have to enact serious measures to restore its reputation with lawmakers.

“What we see is that this story is larger than 11 individuals,” Issa said at the time. “It’s part of what has been, told to us, as a pattern of behavior that’s built up, so called ‘wheels up’ parties and the like, and clearly you have an elite unite that we count on to have the greatest of security not just for the president but for the Cabinet for other officials and we need to know that they’re living up to on a broad basis.”

“We clearly have lost confidence and we need to get that confidence back by knowing that the system will be changed,” he added.

On Wednesday, lawmakers on a Senate committee expressed concern to Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan about the April 13 controversy, suggesting that maybe the incident was not isolated, but that it involves a cultural issue that is permeating throughout the agency. According to Secret Service records, there have been 64 allegations or complaints of sexual misconduct issued against agency personnel in the past five years.

Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and



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Governmental Affairs, requested that others come forward with information so Congress could decide whether a culture of misconduct has overrun the Secret Service, despite Sullivan's allegations that the mid-April episode was an isolated occurrence.

"I'm confident this is not a cultural issue. This is not a systemic issue with us," Sullivan insisted, which was the first time he had publicly spoken about the scandal. "That type of behavior was just reckless."

Sullivan was sympathetic to the senators' concerns, and reinforced the notion that Obama's security at the summit was at no time compromised. However, the senators were skeptical of his contention that the agency enforces a strict "zero tolerance" policy on misconduct. Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), for example, [said](#) the agents' inappropriate actions in Colombia — which involved partying in nightclubs and registering the prostitutes as overnight guests — were "morally repugnant" and "suggests a broad problem, a culture."

"They made no attempt to conceal their identity or the women's," Collins stated. She added that the employees' behavior could have posed a serious threat to the President's safety, as their actions could have provided drug cartels, foreign intelligence service, or other dangerous criminals with contingencies for blackmail.

Citing other cases of similar misconduct, Liebermann and Collins argued that the scandal is part of a much "broader problem." Liebermann noted one case that involved an agent getting fired in a 2008 Washington prostitution incident, after purportedly soliciting sex from an undercover police officer disguised as a prostitute. Further, three agents were ousted from the agency after they were found drinking with women under the age of 21 during the 2002 Winter Olympics; other complaints involved agency staff submitting provocative emails.

So far, it is difficult to establish any definitive historical pattern of agency misconduct, the Connecticut Senator affirmed, but "it is hard for many people, including me, to believe that on one night in April 2012 in Cartagena, Colombia, 11 secret service agents — there to protect the president — suddenly and spontaneously did something they or other agents had never done before; that is to say, gone in groups of two, three or four to four different night clubs or strip joints and drank to excess and bring foreign national women back to their hotel rooms."

Sen. Collins concurred, adding, "The facts so far lead me to conclude that, while not at all representative of the majority of Secret Service personnel, this misconduct was almost certainly not an isolated incident."

Indeed, the Colombian prostitution scandal is expanding into a broader wrangle for the Secret Service, and Sullivan's future employment with the agency may be limited. As the *Washington Post's* Dana Milbank [averred](#), "The Secret Circus may soon be looking for a new ringmaster."

Photo: Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-Conn.) right, and Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) listen as U.S. Secret Service Director Mark Sullivan and the Department of Homeland Security's acting Inspector General Charles K. Edwards testify before committee, May 23, 2012: AP Images



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