



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on April 17, 2012

GSA Staffer Pleads the Fifth on Waste, Hand-Wringing Ensues

Jeff Neely (left), the Western States Public Buildings Service Regional Commissioner for GSA, repeatedly [told](#) Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) "I respectfully decline to answer any questions here today based on my Fifth Amendment constitutional privileges."



Neely's fear of facing criminal charges is not entirely theoretical. Congressman Jeff Denham (R-Calif.) [pledged](#) during hearings April 17 that "Where crimes have been committed, people will go to jail." Moreover, a report released April 2 by the GSA Office of Inspector General (OIG) on the 2010 Western Regions Conference found five blatant violations of law in addition to a litany of incidents of technically legal but poor stewardship of taxpayer dollars. "The OIG found that many of the expenditures on this conference were excessive and wasteful and that in many instances GSA followed neither federal procurement laws nor its own policy on conference spending." The OIG estimated the price of the conference at \$822,751, which featured extravagant catering and a satirical "American Idle" music video contest poking fun at wasting taxpayer dollars ([won by a Hawaiian office staffer](#)).

The release of the OIG report has already forced the resignation of GSA Administrator Martha Johnson, who [resigned](#) the day the report was released, the firing of two other officials, and the placement of a handful of others on administrative leave.

Issa [concluded](#) that:

Wasteful spending is a problem that transcends multiple Administrations and multiple Congresses but it's incumbent on the present Administration and the current Congress to mandate a culture that prevents this type of waste and mismanagement, no matter what happened before them.

Why did it take eleven months for the Obama Administration to take meaningful action? The Inspector General briefed the Administration with details about the specific action of those responsible for gross waste, yet documents show that some political appointees believed even this



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year that the report could be kept private and the outrageous details dealt with quietly.

Some of those same senior political officials approved a [bonus](#) for Jeff Neely, the regional public building commissioner who was chief organizer of the 2010 Vegas conference. Indeed, the hand-wringing by GSA officials had already begun before Issa gaveled the hearing open April 16. GSA Acting Director Dan Tanghlini issued a [web-based video statement](#) April 10 claiming that “What took place was totally unacceptable. There were violations of travel rules, acquisition rules, and good conduct. Just as importantly, those responsible violated rules of common sense, the spirit of public service, and the trust that America’s taxpayers have placed in all of us.” GSA creates and manages the rules of travel and conferences and, Tanghlini said, “cut to the heart of what we do and what we are.”

Indeed, it does. The [GSA](#) was created to bring standardization and efficiency in government contracts across the federal government. The GSA is the federal government’s supplier of phones, office paperwork, the automobile pool of 210,000 vehicles, and other supplies used by most federal agencies. With a staff of 12,000 and a budget of more than \$25 billion, the independent agency oversees several times that figure in federal contracts, and oversees about \$500 billion in federal buildings and real estate.

Though created for greater government efficiency, the GSA is no stranger to controversy and has a pattern of demonstrating that “government efficiency” is an oxymoron. For example, GSA Chief of Staff David Safavian was [convicted](#) of four felony charges in 2006 in connection with the Jack Abramoff bribery scandal.

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