



From Out of the Shadows, Whistle-Blowers Convene

By SCOTT SHANE Published: May 18, 2007

WASHINGTON, May 17 — The whistle-blower, a species in Washington's peculiar zoology as well established now as the talk-show pundit or the campaign consultant, is enjoying an unusual spell in the sunshine. It is Whistle-Blower Week, so declared by a coalition of advocacy groups, and there is unusual acclaim for those whose leaks make possible Congressional hearings and newspaper exposés.



Stephanie Kuykendal for The New York Times

Senator Charles E. Grassley at the whistle-blower meeting on Thursday.

There have been training sessions on "A B C's of a Successful Whistle-Blower Case" (please, boil your suitcase of documents down to a single page before you tell your story) and "Whistle-Blower Protections for National Security Employees" (let's just say, don't count on them). Lawyers explained the more than 40 federal laws under which whistle-blowers can bring legal cases. A film showing featured "The Insider," the 1999 tale of Jeffrey Wigand, the tobacco industry turncoat, who was there in person to offer remarks.

Some events have featured the rock stars of the government whistle-blowing world, including Bunnatine H. Greenhouse, an Army Corps of Engineers official who objected to no-bid Halliburton contracts, and Colleen Rowley, a former F.B.I. agent who tried to alert superiors to the threat of Al Qaeda before the Sept. 11 attacks. Their celebrity was a reminder of the central role such insiders have routinely played in shaping the news.

But lurking around the edges of the awards ceremonies and panel discussions, avidly taking notes, were people who did not want to give their names — just yet.

At one seminar, a veteran Congressional investigator, Emilia DiSanto of the Senate Finance Committee, gave out her fax number (202-228-2131) and invited information from people too fearful to reveal their identities. Already, Ms. DiSanto explained, she works with several people who prefer to be known only by their noms de whistle: "We have a Mr. Blue. We have Apples. We have P. J."

Under the oak trees in a park near the Capitol, Senator Charles E. Grassley, an Iowa Republican and a sort of patron saint of whistle-blowers, spoke on Thursday to more than 100 whistle-blowers, wannabes and representatives of what might be called the whistle-blowing lobby, the platoon of Washington advocacy groups with names like the Government Accountability Project and Taxpayers Against Fraud.

"You're very much part of the system of checks and balances," said Mr. Grassley, 73, who received an award and posed for snapshots with a long line of admirers.

"Whistle-blowers pay a high price," he said, adding, "There's a great deal of pressure in government to go along to get along."

In the crowd was Michael German, a 16-year agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation who resigned in June 2004, after two years of what he describes as retaliation for his complaints about the mishandling of a terrorism investigation. He enjoyed a degree of vindication after Mr. Grassley earlier this year obtained transcripts appearing to uphold Mr. German's account of the case.

Mr. German landed on his feet and is now policy counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union. But he had daunting advice for anyone considering exposing wrongdoing inside an agency.

"You have to be prepared to lose your job," Mr. German said. "As far as your career is concerned, the truth doesn't matter."

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But there can also be rewards. Under the False Claims Act, a whistle-blower who exposes fraud against the government can be awarded as much as 30 percent of the amount the government recovers.

“Some people walk away with \$10,000, some with \$50,000, some with \$750,000,” said Stephen M. Kohn, a lawyer who calls his law office here the National Whistle-Blower Center. “Many whistle-blowers do win their case. And if you win, you want to get something.”

Whistle-blowing, of course, attracts its share of eccentrics. One person listening to Mr. Grassley, David Slesinger of Rockville, Md., said he had been leafleting federal agencies, hunting for workers who want to expose wrongdoing. Any wrongdoing will do, Mr. Slesinger said, but his particular interest is what he believes to be a cover-up of government involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks.

His efforts have had little success, Mr. Slesinger said. But his leaflet offered a novel option for those who are too fearful even to act anonymously — whistle-blowing from beyond the grave.

“You can prove your heroism posthumously,” the leaflet said. “Just put proof in a sealed envelope that your attorney can give your loved ones.”

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