

Bias in Immigration Agency Is Subject of House Hearing

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Body

Representative John Conyers Jr. gave the nation's immigration chief what he called a "public spanking" today during a hearing before the House Government Operations Committee that detailed accusations of widespread discrimination against black employees of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Doris M. Meissner, the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization, promised that she would work to correct employment problems at the agency. She pledged to hire and promote more minority members and to train the agency's executives, almost all of whom are white, to be more openminded.

But Mr. Conyers, Democrat of Michigan and outgoing chairman of the House committee, said he did not want to hear "any more promises and pledges" from an agency that he said operated in a "time warp," as if it had "just discovered that there are laws against racial discrimination."

"I'm going to need a lot more than your personal commitment to change," he told Ms. Meissner. "This matter is clearly not going to be resolved by sensitivity sessions for people who don't give a damn."

Black immigration officers say they are excluded socially and professionally by the "old boys" style network that controls the agency. The Border Patrol, the traditional stepping stone to advancement in the agency, is 1 percent black, and there are no blacks in senior executive positions.

In 1991, 19 black agents in Los Angeles, angered about repeatedly being denied promotions, filed a complaint against the immigration service. Last spring it grew into the largest discrimination case ever against a Government agency, a class action on behalf of 850 black officers.

At today's hearing, Ms. Meissner said the agency would make an offer "imminently" to settle the case. She said she was "very distressed" about the poor representation of blacks in the higher ranks of the agency, which she called "an unacceptable situation" that she inherited a year ago when she became commissioner.

But the black officers who testified said that their supervisors generally did not express the same concern. Instead, the officers said, they not only suffered discrimination but also retaliation for pursuing discrimination complaints against the agency.

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Clarence L. Smith, a black Panamanian-born deportation officer who works at an immigration jail in Alabama, testified about what happened to his career after he gave a statement to an investigator supporting another black officer's discrimination complaint. Suddenly, he said, after 13 years with the immigration agency, his English was found to be deficient, and his performance ratings plummeted.

John Thomas Wills, a special agent in Los Angeles, testified that his supervisor ordered him to accompany Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat of California, to an immigrant neighborhood where he was operating undercover as a drug dealer. When he protested that his cover would be blown and the Senator endangered, his supervisor cursed at him, returned to his office and strapped on his gun to continue the conversation. Mr. Wills said black agents in his office were constantly being undermined by white supervisors.

Maria Estela Padilla, who served as an Equal Employment Opportunity counselor for the immigration agency for two years, said the agency's managers "twisted and turned and made a joke out of" her efforts to battle discrimination.

"The I.N.S. is run by white males," Ms. Padilla said. "Because the I.N.S. has to scrutinize so closely those of other races, colors and nationalities, I believe that I.N.S. officials grow to believe they are superior. They make a mockery of civil rights."

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