

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE IMMIGRATION AGENCY; 4 Top Officials On Immigration Are Replaced

The New York Times

March 16, 2002 Saturday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 2; National Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 917 words

Byline: By ERIC SCHMITT

Dateline: WASHINGTON, March 15

Body

Reeling from the embarrassment of mailing visa extensions this week to two dead Sept. 11 hijackers, the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service announced a major management shakeup today.

Michael Pearson, the head of all field operations and widely recognized as the **agency's** third-ranking **official**, was relieved of his job and will be reassigned, a Justice Department **official** said. The **agency's** director of international affairs, Jeffrey L. Weiss, will also be reassigned.

In all, four senior **officials** responsible for **immigration** services, policies and enforcement were **replaced**, **officials** said.

"The breakdown in communication, highlighted by this week's events, at the I.N.S. is unacceptable and will not be allowed," James W. Ziglar, the commissioner of **immigration** and naturalization, said in a statement. "These changes begin the process of accountability as we move forward with restructuring the I.N.S."

The **agency's** notice approving the student visas for Mohamed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, received this week by a Florida flight school six months after the attacks, ignited an uproar from the White House to Capitol Hill and renewed calls to overhaul the **agency** or abolish it.

Justice Department **officials** said that the personnel changes made today were part of Mr. Ziglar's larger plan to separate the **agency's** service and enforcement functions, which often conflict with each other.

"These changes were part of a broader restructuring plan that were in the works," a Justice Department **official** said. "This week's debacle was the impetus to move up our timetable to remedy the immediate needs." The service is an **agency** of the Justice Department.

Attorney General John Ashcroft, who vowed on Wednesday to hold individuals accountable for the visa blunder, also sent a letter to Congress today asking lawmakers to give the **agency** authority to fire people for misconduct or incompetence.

The service had such authority from 1998 to 2001, but Congress did not renew it in this year's budget.

In a letter to Representative Frank R. Wolf, a Virginia Republican who heads the House Appropriations subcommittee overseeing **immigration** matters, Mr. Ashcroft said that "it is essential that I have the authority to quickly discipline or terminate individuals for acts of negligence, mismanagement or disregard for Department of Justice policies."

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A committee spokesman said the committee was sympathetic to Mr. Ashcroft's request but would review any proposal "to make sure they can't fire anyone willy-nilly."

The immigration agency, one of the fastest-growing federal agencies with 35,000 employees and a \$5.6 billion budget this year, has long suffered from antiquated computers and management turmoil. Immigrants and employers have complained of huge paperwork backlogs and surly service, problems that Mr. Ziglar has promised to fix.

But the visa extensions this week represented the last straw for many White House and Justice Department officials.

Mr. Atta and Mr. Shehhi trained at Huffman Aviation International in Venice, Fla., and are believed to have flown the two planes that destroyed the World Trade Center.

The immigration service said on Tuesday that the two men were initially notified last summer of the change in their visa status to student from visitor, but that the "secondary notification" to the school did not go out until after the paperwork had been done manually by a contractor.

On Capitol Hill today, lawmakers praised the shakeup, but insisted that the agency responsible for both patrolling thousands of miles of borders and monitoring millions of foreigners needed a total revamping.

"I loudly applaud Commissioner Ziglar on the strong first step he took today," said Representative Mark Foley, a Florida Republican whose district borders the Venice flight school. "But the job cannot stop here. There needs to be a complete, top-to-bottom scrubbing of an agency completely sullied."

The dismissals represent Mr. Ziglar's biggest management reshuffling since he left his job as sergeant-at-arms of the Senate seven months ago to assume the helm of the immigration service.

The most significant change involves Johnny Williams, the agency's Western regional director, replacing Mr. Pearson, a former Army officer who joined the immigration service in 1997. Overseeing more than 30,000 employees, Mr. Pearson was ultimately responsible for all activities in the field, including the mailings that certified the hijackers' visa status.

Mr. Pearson did not respond to messages left with his office or the agency's command center tonight.

Renee Harris, the border patrol's second-ranking official and highest-ranking woman, will succeed Mr. Weiss as acting director of international affairs, which oversees all refugee and asylum programs, as well as the agency's overseas offices.

Two other changes were intended to bolster the agency's services and enforcement duties, officials said. Janis Sposato, a career Justice Department official, was named a top official for immigration services.

Michael Cronin, a senior official overseeing the agency's programs, was named assistant commissioner for inspections.

Former immigration officials said that moving Mr. Cronin to oversee inspections would also let Stuart Anderson, the agency's top official for plans and policy, assert more influence over immigration programs.

Along with Mr. Ziglar, Mr. Anderson, an immigration specialist and former top Senate Republican aide, is one of the few political appointees at the agency.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE IMMIGRATION AGENCY; 4 Top Officials On Immigration Are Replaced

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (90%); CITIZENSHIP (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); HIJACKING (90%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (90%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); JUSTICE DEPARTMENTS (89%); CORPORATE RESTRUCTURING (78%); NATURALIZATION (78%); PUBLIC FINANCE (77%); FOREIGN STUDENTS (76%); ATTORNEYS GENERAL (76%); MISCONDUCT (75%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (74%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (72%); APPROVALS (72%); SCHOOL BUDGETS (72%); PERSONNEL CHANGES (71%); INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE (71%); APPROPRIATIONS (71%); US CONGRESS (66%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

Industry: BUDGETS (77%); SCHOOL BUDGETS (72%)

Person: BARNEY FRANK (55%); FRANK R WOLF (51%); ATTA, MOHAMMED; AL-SHEHHI, MARWAN; ZIGLAR, JAMES W (COMR); PEARSON, MICHAEL; WEISS, JEFFREY

Geographic: WASHINGTON (DC); NEW YORK CITY

Load-Date: March 16, 2002