



PROTECT the PUBLIC'S TRUST

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

October 3, 2024

TO: Honorable Mark Lee Greenblatt
Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior
Office of Inspector General
1849 C Street NW – Mail Stop 4428
Washington, D.C. 20240

Re: National Park Service and U.S. Park Police Failure to Protect Federal Resources

Dear Inspector General Greenblatt,

The central mission of the National Park Service (“NPS”) is to preserve the natural *and cultural* resources it manages. Unfortunately, NPS and the Department of the Interior more broadly have repeatedly failed in this core mission, allowing several protests to become violent and damage property, including key symbols of our cultural heritage.

Three examples stand out. In October 2021, the Department of the Interior’s own headquarters was invaded and temporarily occupied by protest groups. In June 2024, the White House and other federal properties in D.C. were beset by pro-Palestinian protestors who vandalized monuments, defaced public property, and beat police officers. And in July 2024, pro-Palestinian protestors overtook Columbus Plaza, where they vandalized monuments, burned federal property, attacked police, and chased down a bystander.

In each case, but particularly with the June and July 2024 protests, NPS’s failures to enforce the law and maintain order allowed symbols of our nation’s history and culture to be defaced and destroyed; symbols that it is a part of NPS’s core mission to steward and protect.

These failures appear to be enabled by a reckless failure to properly enforce demonstration permit conditions and provide the United States Park Police (“USPP”) with the resources they need to effectively do their jobs.

Protect the Public’s Trust (“PPT”) is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to promoting ethics in government and restoring the public’s trust in government officials.

We call upon you to immediately investigate these failures, including determining whether political considerations played an improper role in leaving cultural resources vulnerable to damage and destruction.



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I. Factual Background

NPS is responsible for permitting demonstrations on NPS properties within the National Capital Region, including many parks within the District of Columbia.¹ A permit is necessary for all demonstrations unless they are beneath a certain size, scope, and disruption to the public.² The USPP are the enforcement arm of NPS and are responsible for ensuring that demonstrations permitted by NPS abide by the permit's conditions and the law. USPP's mission is particularly important because it goes beyond the standard duty of maintaining law and order at events; it is the officers of USPP who protect and preserve innumerable monuments, art installations, and symbols of American culture and history. When protests and events are held within the National Capital Region, it is the USPP who ensure that no harm comes to the many great works of our cultural inheritance managed by the NPS.

A. **October 2021: the Invasion and Occupation of the Department of the Interior's Headquarters**

At the beginning of Secretary Haaland's tenure in October 2021, a coalition of climate activist groups invaded the Main Interior Building in the District of Columbia to stage an occupation of the building.³ The invasion was an extension of a week of larger climate protests across D.C.⁴ Records acquired by PPT of the Department's communications with the protest groups show that the Department knew at least six days in advance that the protestors planned to engage in disruptive "civil disobedience."⁵ Yet the Department still assigned too few officers and resources to the Main Interior Building to resist the protestors' violent push inside.⁶

During the attack on the building, Native American activists took over the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and posted about it on social media to demand President Biden abolish the Bureau and surrender 110 million acres of U.S. territory to various Native American tribes.⁷ These protestors coordinated their invasion of the Department with climate protestors who assembled outside the Chamber of Commerce and assaulted the building with smoke flares and devices spraying fake oil.⁸

¹ 36 C.F.R. § 7.96(g).

² *Id.*

³ Alex J. Rouhandeh, *Protesters Take Over Inside of Interior Department in Demonstration Against Fossil Fuels*, Newsweek (Oct. 14, 2021), <https://www.newsweek.com/protesters-take-over-inside-interior-department-demonstration-against-fossil-fuels-1639138>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Tristan Justice, *Records Show Interior Dept. Officials Knew Climate Protestors Might Turn Violent But Didn't Stop Them*, The Federalist (Jan. 30, 2023), <https://thefederalist.com/2023/01/30/records-show-interior-dept-officials-knew-climate-protesters-might-turn-violent-but-didnt-stop-them/>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Newsweek, *supra* fn.3.

⁸ *Id.*



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The invading protestors were violent and attacked police, sending one officer to the hospital.⁹ As the protestors mobbed the few officers guarding the entrance to the building, they chanted “Go inside! Go inside!” Though the protestors illegally occupied a federal building to disrupt its function, demanded the federal government give up its sovereign territory, and hospitalized a police officer, the Department did not take significant action against the protesting groups.¹⁰

One of the groups that helped plan the week-long series of protests that culminated in the violence at the Department’s headquarters was the Greater Chaco Coalition, which includes the Pueblo Action Alliance (PAA).¹¹ Disturbingly, Secretary Haaland’s daughter, Somah Haaland, is an employee of the Pueblo Action Alliance.¹² Secretary Haaland has a history of apparent ethical violations in favor of her daughter’s activism, which we have previously brought to your attention for investigation.¹³ These alleged violations include using her office to benefit the Pueblo Action Alliance specifically.¹⁴ Secretary Haaland’s unabashed support for these causes has led activist groups to see her as one of their own.¹⁵

B. June 2024: Pro-Palestinian Protests Outside the White House

On the weekend of June 8, 2024, thousands of people descended on Washington, D.C., surrounding the White House and its neighboring parks, to protest President Biden’s support for Israel in its war against the terror group Hamas.

The protestors proclaimed hatred of the United States and Israel and their support for the Palestinians and the terrorist group Hamas, attacked police, including USPP officers, and vandalized many beloved statues of Revolutionary War heroes and early presidents, including those commemorating Comte de Rochambeau, Marquis de Lafayette, and President Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Square.¹⁶

USPP officers were under-equipped and under-manned to protect the statues. Protestors defaced the statues with spray paint and painted red handprints on them; they covered them with signs and graffiti saying “free Gaza,” “Boycott Israel [sic] Products,” “Zionism kills,” “f—k pigs,”

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Thomas Catenacci, *Interior secretary daughter’s group tied to protest at Interior headquarters that turned violent*, Fox News (Feb. 3, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/interior-secretarys-daughter-member-group-participated-violent-protest-interior-headquarters>.

¹² Thomas Catenacci, *supra* fn.9.

¹³ See Protect the Public’s Trust, *supra* fn.10.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See Casey Cep, *Deb Haaland Confronts the History of the Federal Agency She Leads*, New Yorker (Apr. 29, 2024), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/05/06/deb-haaland-confronts-the-history-of-the-federal-agency-she-leads> (Secretary Haaland is known as “auntie Deb” by environmental and Native American activists, who see her as one of them and an inside voice in government).

¹⁶ Adam Kredo, *White House Protesters Vandalized Property and Clashed with Law Enforcement, But Police Say No Arrests Were Made*, The Washington Free Beacon (Jun. 9, 2024), <https://freebeacon.com/crime/white-house-protesters-vandalized-property-and-clashed-with-law-enforcement-but-police-say-no-arrests-were-made/>.



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“kill pigs,” “Israel go to hell, Hamas is justified,” “F—k Israel, Stand with Hamas,” “Kill another Zionist now,” “Muslims for Hamas,” “Death to Israel,” and “Death to Amerikkka.”¹⁷ A group of the protestors wore the same green headbands used by Hamas, confirming that they were Hamas headbands when asked.¹⁸ When NPS officers attempted to arrest a protestor who climbed on one of the statues, a mob of protestors attacked the officers, allowing the protestor to escape.¹⁹ Many of these protestors’ actions took place on federal property under the Department’s jurisdiction, yet no arrests were reported.²⁰



A spokeswoman for NPS confirmed the protestors damaged cultural resources NPS was supposed to protect: “Notable damage includes graffiti, damage to some structures and damage to park infrastructure in Lafayette Park.”²¹ The Department’s failure to defend public order and

¹⁷ @aletweetsnews, X (Jun. 8, 2024, 5:18 PM), <https://x.com/aletweetsnews/status/1799551675113382262>.

¹⁸ Megan Lebowitz, *Thousands gather outside White House to protest war in Gaza*, NBC News (Jun. 8, 2024), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/thousands-gather-white-house-protest-war-gaza-rcna156186>.

¹⁹ Lebowitz, *supra* fn. 19.

²⁰ Kredo, *supra* fn. 16.

²¹ Michael Brice-Saddler, *Statues near White House vandalized during Gaza cease-fire protest*, The Washington Post (Jun. 9, 2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/06/09/gaza-protest-white-house-vandalism-graffiti/>.



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the monuments from these protests, and its failure to arrest and punish any protestors, drew intense congressional criticism. Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming, the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, addressed Secretary Haaland's apparent refusal to enforce the law against the pro-Palestinian protestors in a public letter.²² Senator Barrasso noted that several of the Department's law enforcement officers were assaulted by the protestors, but there were no reported arrests "following protesters' clear acts of violence and vandalism," which "leav[es] many questions unanswered about the adequacy of the response to this incident" and "whether political sympathy with the agitators influenced [the] department's response to these acts of violence and vandalism."²³

Senator Barrasso's suggestion that Secretary Haaland has undue sympathy for the pro-Palestinian protestors is not just idle speculation. Like with the groups that invaded the Department's headquarters, Secretary Haaland is connected to the pro-Palestinian cause through her daughter's activism: Somah Haaland is employed by Pueblo Action Alliance, an activist group that *praised* Hamas's massacre and rapes of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, as part of "the global indigenous struggle" and referred to Hamas's fighters as "martyrs of the struggle."²⁴ Secretary Haaland herself has accused Israel of war crimes and the murder of innocents while conspicuously refusing to condemn, or even address, Hamas's terror attacks.²⁵

C. July 2024: Pro-Palestinian Protests and Flag Burning Outside Union Station

On July 14, 2024, the ANSWER Coalition—which helped organize the June 2024 protests described above—helped organize another violent protest. This protest again saw a thousands-strong mob of pro-Palestinian protestors attack the Department's officers and vandalize monuments and property the Department was supposed to protect, this time in Columbus Plaza outside of Union Station.

The Department appears to have been derelict in its handling of the July 24th protest from the start. First, despite the violence at the June protests, NPS and the Department appear to have ignored explicit requests by USPP's leadership for additional officers and resources for the July 24 event.²⁶ Instead, the Department assigned only 29 officers to maintain law and order at a

²² Letter from Senator John Barrasso to Deb Haaland, Secretary, Department of the Interior (June 13, 2024) (available here: <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/51835E9F-189F-41D3-B46F-9179FD68CFA9>).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Meghan Blonder, 'Martyrs of the Struggle': Green Group That Employs Interior Sec's Daughter Lauds Hamas Terrorists, *The Washington Free Beacon* (Nov. 7, 2023), <https://freebeacon.com/biden-administration/martyrs-of-the-struggle-green-group-that-employs-interior-secs-daughter-lauds-hamas-terrorists/>.

²⁵ @DebHaalandNM, X (May 15, 2018, 8:14 PM), <https://x.com/DebHaalandNM/status/996544458224058369>.

²⁶ Thomas Catenacci, *Biden-Harris Admin Denied Resources to Police During Pro-Hamas Protest Where Agitators Burned American Flag, Committee Chairman Says*, *The Washington Free Beacon* (Jul. 25, 2024), <https://freebeacon.com/biden-administration/biden-harris-admin-under-fire-for-denying-police-resources-during-pro-hamas-protest-where-agitators-threw-feces-at-feds-burned-american-flag/>.



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protest expected to draw over 5,000 attendees organized by a group that previously participated in violent demonstrations.²⁷

Second, the ANSWER Coalition failed to provide all the information required in the permit application, yet the Department granted it a permit anyway.²⁸ These omissions are particularly concerning given ANSWER Coalition's role in the violent June 8 protests.

In granting a permit to the ANSWER Coalition, the Department imposed multiple conditions. The ANSWER Coalition was required to:²⁹

- Assume responsibility for any injury or damage to federal property;
- Comply with the law and ensure protestors did as well;
- Provide security to maintain public order and safety;
- Avoid interfering with pedestrian traffic and public movement;
- Avoid engaging in discriminatory conduct violative of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act
- Avoid climbing, removing, or injuring any architectural features in the Plaza and prohibit the same among protestors.

The protestors appeared to violate each of these requirements.

Yet, on the day of the protest, thousands of protestors descended upon Columbus Plaza. They immediately set to work destroying and defacing the cultural symbols in the plaza that NPS was meant to protect. They tore down the American flag flying in the plaza and burned it: illegally starting a fire and destroying government property. They defaced the plaza's Columbus statue and the Freedom bell with graffiti like " Hamas is coming," "Long Live The Resistance" (accompanied by the red triangle symbols used by Hamas to mark its victims in footage of its terror attacks),³⁰ "Abolish Israel," "All Zionists are bastards," "F--k Capitalists," "F--k America, KKK," and "Welcome to the Intifada."³¹

²⁷ Public Gathering Permit to ANSWER Coalition for Jul. 24, 2024, protest, National Park Service (Jul. 23, 2024) (redacted copy available here: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ANSWER%E2%80%94COALITION%E2%80%94PROTEST%E2%80%94PERMIT%E2%80%94NPS%E2%80%942024.pdf>).

²⁸ Gabe Kaminsky, *Biden NPS cited anti-Israel group with lack of disclosure before violent protest, permit shows*, Washington Examiner (Jul. 26, 2024), https://www.coloradopolitics.com/biden-nps-cited-anti-israel-group-with-lack-of-disclosure-before-violent-protest-permit-shows/article_e2348a72-99b2-5c8b-9b30-04d78edbb336.html.

²⁹ *Id.* at 1.

³⁰ Brie Stimson, *Pro-Hamas agitators burn American flag, raise Palestinian flag, tag 'Hamas is coming' on statue*, Fox News (Jul. 24, 2024), <https://www.foxnews.com/live-news/washington-dc-palestinian-protest-israel>; Jasmine Baehr, *At least 23 pro-Hamas agitators arrested by three law enforcement agencies Wednesday*, Fox News (Jul. 24, 2024), <https://www.foxnews.com/live-news/washington-dc-palestinian-protest-israel>.

³¹ Ronny Reyes, *Liberty Bell replica defaced with pro-Hamas symbols, 'F--k Israel' during DC protest over Netanyahu's speech*, New York Post (Jul. 25, 2024), <https://nypost.com/2024/07/25/us-news/liberty-bell-replica-defaced-with-pro-hamas-symbols-by-anti-israel-protesters/>.



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While protestors were gathered cheering around the burning American flag they had ripped from the flagpole, a local attorney who worked nearby and was passing through the plaza tried to save the flag.³² After he grabbed the flag from the fire, several protestors turned, screamed “get him,” and sprinted to hunt him down.³³ Only by the good fortune of a protestor tripping over a skateboard did the attorney make his way safely out of the crowd.³⁴



³² Clip: Unnamed patriot rescues burning American flag from pro-Hamas agitators as crowd shouts 'get him!', Fox News (Jul. 24, 2024), <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6359151182112>.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*



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The 29 USPP officers assigned to the protest tried valiantly to maintain order and protect the monuments, but, lacking requested support from the Department, they were far too few against a mob of thousands.³⁵ When the officers tried to stop the protestors from vandalizing the statues and Freedom Bell, burning the flag, and setting fires around the plaza, the protestors attacked them, knocked them down and dragged them across the concrete.³⁶

It took until 3:37 PM for NPS to finally announce it was revoking the ANSWER Coalition's permit; this was an essentially meaningless gesture as the permit was already set to expire at 4 PM.³⁷ Regardless, the protest did not end at 3:37 PM, nor at 4 PM. The too few officers on-site were unable to bring the protest to an end and had to wait for it to burn out on its own. Due to their manpower shortage, USPP officers were only able to make 10 arrests despite the rampant criminality, four of which were for assaulting a police officer, all while under siege from the thousands in the mob.³⁸

Vice President Harris condemned the protests for “despicable acts by unpatriotic protestors and dangerous hate-fueled rhetoric,” for “associating with the brutal terrorist organization Hamas” through “abhorrent” pro-Hamas graffiti and rhetoric, and for “the burning of the American flag,” which “should never be desecrated in that way.”³⁹

Senator John Barrasso again wrote to Secretary Haaland, demanding answers for how the Department of the Interior allowed the chaos and lawlessness on July 24th to happen.⁴⁰ Senator Barrasso emphasized that July 24th was only the “latest episode in a string of violent uprisings on federal property in our nation’s capital” and that it was “especially concerning given [his] repeated attempts to seek support for the USPP” from the Department of the Interior, which Secretary Haaland had “completely ignored.”⁴¹ Senator Barrasso strongly criticized Secretary Haaland for her refusal to condemn, or take meaningful actions to stop, these repeated violent attacks on public property and the Department’s own officers:

[I]n my letter dated June 13, 2024[], I emphasized the critical need for your unequivocal condemnation and decisive action following violent incidents near the White House. As we know, these events involved pro-terror, anti-Israel agitators,

³⁵ @1791FOP, X (Jul. 24, 2024, 5:47 PM), <https://x.com/1791FOP/status/1816228841943179328>.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Gabe Kaminsky, *Biden NPS cited anti-Israel group with lack of disclosure before violent protest, permit shows*, Washington Examiner (Jul. 26, 2024), https://www.coloradopolitics.com/biden-nps-cited-anti-israel-group-with-lack-of-disclosure-before-violent-protest-permit-shows/article_e2348a72-99b2-5c8b-9b30-04d78edbb336.html.

³⁸ Fraternal Order of Police, *supra* fn.16; Ashraf Khalil and Lanna Durkin Richer, *Thousands fill Washington’s streets to protest Israel’s war in Gaza during Netanyahu visit*, Associated Press (Jul. 24, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/israel-netanyahu-gaza-war-congress-joint-session-9a7885972989b2397b49e5b971ffe0e0>.

³⁹ *Statement by Vice President Kamala Harris*, The White House (Jul. 25, 2024) (available here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/25/statement-by-vice-president-kamala-harris-3/>).

⁴⁰ Letter from Senator John Barrasso to Debra Haaland, Secretary, Department of the Interior (Aug. 9, 2024) (available here: https://washingtonreporter.news/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/FILE_3518.pdf).

⁴¹ *Id.*



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and the letter stressed the importance of ensuring the safety and security of federal personnel and properties.

Your lack of meaningful action or public condemnation only serves to embolden these agitators. Your failure to act decisively jeopardizes the safety of federal personnel and diminishes public trust in DOI's ability to uphold the rule of law.

Senator Barrasso demanded Secretary Haaland explain how these violent attacks have continued to happen under her watch and why she has failed to stop them, including 1) how she justified the lack of adequate security for preventing the violence at the protests, 2) what steps she was taking to guarantee the safety of USPP officers, 3) how she planned to strengthen security on federal property regarding future protests, and 4) whether she would commit to revising the Department's protocols to better respond to violent protests in the future.⁴² To date, Secretary Haaland has not responded to Senator Barrasso's letter.

II. The Department of the Interior's Ethics Rules

All officials within the Department, including Secretary Haaland, are bound by a stringent set of ethics policies that require they perform their duties honestly and impartially, avoiding the appearance of impropriety, and without putting personal or partisan interests ahead of the American people's.

Executive Order 12674 established a set of "Principles of Ethical Conduct for Government Officers and Employees."⁴³ The order established a baseline set of principles which all federal employees, including the Department of the Interior's decision-makers and Secretary Haaland, must adhere to, including the following:⁴⁴

- Public service is a public trust, requiring employees to place loyalty to the Constitution, the laws, and ethical principles above private gain.
- Employees shall put forth honest effort in the performance of their duties.
- Employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.
- Employees shall protect and conserve Federal property and shall not use it for other than authorized activities.
- Employees shall endeavor to avoid any actions creating the appearance that they are violating the law or the ethical standards set forth in this part. Whether particular circumstances create an appearance that the law or these standards have been violated shall be determined from the perspective of a reasonable person with knowledge of the relevant facts.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Exec. Order No. 12674, 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101(b).

⁴⁴ *Id.*



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These principles are codified in federal regulations at 5 CFR § 2635.101(b).

III. NPS and the Department of the Interior Must Be Investigated for Potential Ethics Breaches

If, as it appears, the Department's leaders have selectively refused to enforce the law for the benefit of favored groups and causes, they have violated fundamental principles of their ethical duties. Picking and choosing to whom the law applies for political or personal reasons violates the principles of honesty, impartiality, and avoiding impropriety which apply equally to all federal employees. While a single instance of failure in the face of a violent protest does not demonstrate malfeasance, there appears to be a pattern under Secretary Haaland's leadership where particular groups and causes run wild, attack police, and deface the monuments and public property the Department has a duty to protect—to the shock and horror of leaders on both sides of the aisle.

Secretary Haaland's refusal to answer questions about how and why the Department conspicuously keeps failing in its duty to quell these bouts of anarchic violence and protect our cultural resources strongly suggests that this failure could well be the result of a decision not to enforce the law, not merely the inability to do so. Coupled with Secretary Haaland's past use of her office to the apparent benefit of her daughter's activism, her present refusal to provide answers indicates Secretary Haaland may not believe the rules apply to her.

IV. Conclusion

For these reasons, it is imperative that your office investigate Secretary Haaland and the Department for what appears to be their consistent refusal to enforce the law. The American public deserves to know if the Department's repeated failure to stand up to these eruptions of violence and defend some of our most cherished cultural resources is due to corruption or incompetence so they can hold their government accountable accordingly.

This investigation should include probing whether Secretary Haaland and any other decision-makers at the Department of the Interior violated their ethical duties through selective enforcement of the law against violent protests. We thank you in advance for looking into this matter.

Sincerely,

Michael Chamberlain
Director
Protect the Public's Trust