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A Web of Truth

Whistle-Blower or Troublemaker, Bunny Greenhouse Isn't Backing Down

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Bunny Greenhouse was once the perfect bureaucrat, an insider, the top procurement official at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Then the 61-year-old Greenhouse lost her \$137,000-a-year post after questioning the plump contracts awarded to Halliburton in the run-up to the war in Iraq. It has made her easy to love for some, easy to loathe for others, but it has not made her easy to know.

In late August, she was demoted, her pay cut and her authority stripped. Her former bosses say it's because of a years-long bout of poor work habits; she and her lawyer say it's payback for her revelations about a politically connected company.

Now Bunnatine Hayes Greenhouse is becoming one of the most unusual things known in the upper echelons of government and industry -- a top-shelf bureaucrat who is telling all she knows. For honesty's sake, she says.

"It's not a process for the weak-hearted," says Jeffrey Wigand, the former tobacco company executive whose high-profile whistle-blowing inspired the film "The Insider."

Greenhouse, whose case has also become a media event, unloaded more of her burn-the-house-down allegations on PBS's "Now" last week because, let her tell you, Bunny Greenhouse didn't grow up on the black side of the segregated tracks in Rayville, La., to run from a fight -- even if that includes the vice president of the United States.

"[Expletive] yourself!" former Halliburton chief executive and current veep Dick Cheney snapped at a senator last year in an exchange related to Greenhouse's allegations.

"If prison inmates don't like the warden who keeps them from breaking out," Greenhouse says of her stewardship of Corps contracting, "do you replace the warden because the inmates don't like him?"

Ah. Metaphors equating the Corps of Engineers with prison inmates. Expletives. Vice president. Throw in a subtext of race, gender and war profits. You see the problem here.

* * *

In the dazzling eye of memory, she can see the wiry object twisting there, perhaps in the lazy hours of a Sunday afternoon, when she pulled it out to admire it once again.

It was a bit of metal twisted in the shape of an eye, a gift from her big sister. It was kept, in a childhood pun, in a can: an *Eye-Can*. A reminder of can-do determination.

Lost in the middle of cotton country in the Louisiana delta at the mid-century, Bunnatine Hayes and her siblings clung to such self-confidence like a life raft. Their parents, Chris and Savannah Hayes, were

uneducated and numbingly poor, stuck in a world run by richer, more powerful whites. They raised their children with a ferocious, almost frightening drive.

Bunny's older sister grew up to be one of the first black professors at Louisiana State University, holding a doctorate in linguistics and literature of Chaucer. An older brother got his doctorate and taught at Southern University in Baton Rouge. Her kid brother, Elvin -- Elvin Hayes -- grew up to score 27,000 points in the National Basketball Association, lead the Washington Bullets to their 1978 title and be named, at the end of the century, as one of the best 50 athletes to ever play the game.

"My father always taught me to be strong and have dignity, to not have to bow down or have anyone run over you," he once told a Dallas newspaper, summing up the family creed.

So it stands to reason that Bunny was not only valedictorian of her high school class, not only a *magna cum laude* graduate of Southern in three years (with a degree in math), but she also went on to get three master's degrees over the years -- in business management from the University of Central Texas, in engineering management from George Washington University and in national resources strategy from the National Defense University at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.

She married an Army man, Al Greenhouse. She taught math and, during the lightning-rod year of local integration, came back to teach at her hometown high school. She was the first black teacher the white students had ever seen.

"At the time, I didn't quite know what to make of a black person who didn't have a hoe in their hand," remembers Miriam Lane Davey, a white student of Greenhouse's that year, 1968. "She had been somewhere else, she was cosmopolitan, she was sophisticated. It really changed my viewpoint. . . . Later on, when I saw Claire Huxtable [the wife on "The Cosby Show"], I thought she was just like Mrs. Greenhouse."

Greenhouse, like her famous kid brother, didn't have problems with self-confidence as an adult and, like her kid brother, didn't have a problem with letting others know that. When a reporter asks for her rsum, she hands over a 32-page document.

"The Hayeses were *different*," she says now, proud. "They were raised different."

It's not clear who she means different *from*, but it is clear that she means they were exceptional, and Greenhouse would hew to little touches of refinement over the years. She is broad-shouldered, elegant, devoutly Christian. She often refers to herself in the third person. She enunciates "math" as *mathematics*; "again" as *agayn*.

She followed Al in his career as an Army procurement official, and after 16 years as a teacher, entered government service. She started as a mere GS-5, near the bottom of the scale, specialized in the minutiae of contracting. She worked insane hours, attended endless job-improvement seminars, raised three children and climbed the government ladder, working at the Pentagon and for the Army.

In 1997, it all came together -- Lt. Gen. Joe Ballard hired her as one of the top civilians in the Corps of Engineers. Her position was the principal assistant responsible for contracting, or the PARC. She oversaw the management of billions of dollars. The job elevated her into the Senior Executive Service, the very top level of the federal government's 1.8-million-employee pyramid.

Ballard hired her, he has said, because she was "one of the most professional people I've ever met." As the first black director of the Corps, he also wanted her to break up the "good old boys'" network of informal contracting arrangements at the Corps, he said, to professionalize the agency.

Greenhouse was an instant success. She handled the budgets, conducted workshops, gave speeches, produced a newsletter, developed proposals for ways to save tens of millions of dollars, work records

show.

"There wasn't another SES who could touch me sideways," she says.

Three years running, she was rated near or at the highest level possible in job reviews. Sample job review comments from those years: "Effective, enthusiastic, energetic, tenacious, selfless . . . ensured the epitome of fairness in Corps contracting . . . has ensured professionalism in the acquisition workforce second to none . . . made the tough decisions that reflect the highest degree of entrepreneurial and critical thought."

That should be the end of the story, shouldn't it? Isn't that the way these up-from-poverty things go?

* * *

In reality, there were fault lines developing in her job that would, during the Iraq war, blow up into national news.

Ballard once witnessed a senior Corps attorney yelling at Greenhouse in a staff meeting with such vitriol that Ballard had to clear the room to lecture the man about civility, he wrote in a 2003 affidavit. He wrote in the same document that he had been told that staff officers routinely made racist comments about Greenhouse and that they were greatly resistant to the idea of more minorities working there. After he retired in 2000, he was told that the senior attorney in question had told a director of human resources that the attorney had pledged to fire her, and he used a vulgarity in describing the woman who prided herself on being refined.

It's impossible to survey the full story of what happened in subsequent years, because most records have not been made public, and the Corps declines all comment on personnel issues. But it is clear, looking at documents requested from and made available by Greenhouse's lawyer, veteran whistle-blower attorney Michael Kohn, that her career hit an ugly wall shortly after Ballard left. Whether she failed at the larger aspects of her post or was undermined and removed under false pretenses is up for speculation.

Her new bosses said in an internal hearing that she was "hardheaded." She says she was told that "nobody likes you." She was assigned a deputy who, her superior later acknowledged, had problems dealing with "a female boss." The man eventually left after bitter confrontations with Greenhouse, but the episode led her to file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleging race and gender discrimination (a complaint that has never been investigated, Kohn says).

Her annual job reviews went from the best possible to the worst possible. Review panels twice instructed Corps officials to upgrade them, after concluding they were unwarranted. Sample remarks: "Needs to work harder to gain the respect of subordinates in her office. . . . Interaction with headquarters staff and field commanders is poor. . . . Attempts at counseling have been unproductive."

Ballard reviewed those appraisals in retirement. He called them "absurd" in his affidavit. He wrote that the problem was that Greenhouse was insisting that the letter of the law be followed and that when she refused to back down, she was pushed aside. (He did not return five phone calls requesting comment for this article.)

Before the war in Iraq even started, Greenhouse and her superiors were quarreling almost daily.

With the war looming, the agency wanted to award a no-bid "emergency" contract to Kellogg, Brown and Root (a Halliburton subsidiary) that was originally scheduled to last for two years -- and up to five years -- to provide a range of services in Iraq.

A potential five-year emergency? Worth billions? On a no-bid contract?

Greenhouse thought that was absurd. There were other companies who could do the work, she said, and they should be allowed to bid on it. She wrote that the original "emergency" contract should be limited to one year, with no options after that. She says when she got the final contract back, it was unchanged. So she wrote her reservations on it in ink.

Her notations became public through a media outlet's Freedom of Information Act request to see government war contracts. Given Halliburton's political connections, the issue eventually blew up into international news last fall, just before the elections. Greenhouse and Kohn gave interviews to national media. The FBI opened an investigation -- still ongoing -- into alleged price-gouging, overbilling and awarding of sole-source contracts to a politically connected company. Many of those questions still linger, and by no means do they all stem from Greenhouse, but from a range of sources. Greenhouse herself made several allegations of wrongdoing, but one of the most sensational charges, initially seeming to back up her concerns, was a Pentagon audit that found that KBR apparently overbilled the government \$61 million for fuel in Iraq.

The audit was quelled, however, when the Corps granted KBR a waiver from explaining the apparent discrepancy. The agency said KBR's pricing had been dictated by an Iraqi subcontractor.

As the chief contracting officer, Greenhouse was furious. She said her superiors made an end-run around her. They waited until she was out of the office, she said, then hurriedly approved the paperwork in a single day. She was never told about it until it hit the headlines.

Halliburton spokeswoman Melissa Norcross wrote in an e-mail response to several questions that Greenhouse's claims of overcharges "are misinformed" and that the company "undertook substantial efforts -- including two competitive procurement processes -- to ensure that it was paying the lowest possible price."

Norcross also noted that a Government Accountability Office report said the initial contract dealing with Iraq was "properly awarded."

The atmosphere in the office was getting worse than unpleasant -- the Corps was already trying to demote her -- but Greenhouse was just getting a full head of steam.

This past summer, when she prepared to testify before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee -- the only congressional body that has expressed interest in her charges (though the committee has no oversight power) -- Greenhouse's superiors told her it would not be in her "best interests" to do so.

She thought about that over the weekend. She thought about the lessons her parents imparted to her, a half-century ago, in another time, another place.

Then she testified: "I can unequivocally state that the abuse related to contracts awarded to KBR represents the most blatant and improper contract abuse I have witnessed during the course of my professional career."

It was stunning in its confrontational nature, its moral conviction, its assurance -- and, one might observe, in its full-blown career suicide.

The Corps kicked her out of her job weeks later.

In Greenhouse's dismissal letter, Lt. Gen. Carl A. Strock said her removal was "based on her performance and not in retaliation for any disclosures of alleged improprieties she may have made." She was moved to a lesser post in the civil works division. She says she was "totally" removed from contracting and was banished from the Senior Executive Service. She also says her yearly salary has been cut by \$2,000.

"They stuck me in a little cubicle down the hall, took my building pass," she said. "It's all about humiliation."

Her dismissal made national news, played out in editorials and news stories as a whistle-blower done wrong.

"She was aware she was taking considerable risk," says Marty Linsky, author and professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, who taught Greenhouse in a leadership seminar a few years ago. "She cared a lot about the values she believed in and was prepared to take risks that a lot of people would not have."

The merits of her allegations about contracting, about her treatment in the Corps, remain unclear.

A Corps spokesman declined to address the specifics. Instead, the Corps issued a written statement that says the agency followed the law in its dealings with Halliburton. As for Greenhouse's EEOC complaint, the statement said the agency "takes seriously" its employees' right of privacy, and thus could not comment.

Any further investigation appears to be minimal.

This, from another DPC hearing last month, after Greenhouse was demoted:

Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.): "Ms. Greenhouse, has the Inspector General's Office made any attempt to interview you?"

Greenhouse: "None whatsoever."

Dorgan: "None?"

Greenhouse: "None whatsoever."

Dorgan: "That's unbelievable to me."

* * *

It is 11:20 on a recent weeknight in Greenhouse's million-dollar home in Reston, a picture-perfect manse in a picture-perfect development.

In the formal dining room, elegant napkin holders, a shade between bone and gold, match placemats that match chair cushions that match picture frames that match just-so floor-length drapes. Moonlight floats across the manicured lawn outside.

It would be domestic perfection if not for the masses of white paper heaped on the dining room table, great reams of files held in place with black binder clips. Crumbs from a takeout chicken sandwich are on a plate. A couple of glasses of melted ice and Dr Pepper are leaving a ring on a stray document.

Greenhouse is still dressed in her office suit, going through files that she says will prove that she's right. The kids are grown and gone; Al is away on business most of the time. Cheryl, her daughter, says the family has tried to get her to find another job, but she has refused. She says her mom is very, very disappointed.

Alone in the house, Greenhouse sits at the table and considers the fight of her life, and perhaps if she's lost it, or whether she should elevate it to federal court.

"I learned very early that everything you did in life you did with every fiber of your being," she says,

her voice a mix of pride and fury. "Why would I sit here now and let them tell me that I'm something I'm not? Why would I do that? I'm Bunny Greenhouse first, then I'm in a government position. I will not compromise who I am."

In that sentence, in the expansive, quiet house, you hear the echoes of her parents talking to her and her siblings in that sleepy, cotton-picking delta town, a place where the world told you that you were second-rate, second-class, an afterthought of humanity. You wonder how this is all going to end up, here in another place and another time; you wonder if the lessons of youth can always hold sway over the lessons of the world.

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