

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

WHISTLE-BLOWER ACCEPTS FALLOUT OF OPPOSING CONTRACT

When I set off on my trip across the United States 4½ weeks ago, I hoped to find people willing to stand up for their convictions, whatever those convictions may be, and to figure out what gave them their courage.

My search led me to the imposing home of Bunnatine "Bunny" Greenhouse, who dared to challenge the \$7 billion Iraq oil-repair contract awarded in 2003 to Kellogg Brown and Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton.

Greenhouse, a tall, confident woman, paid dearly for speaking her mind.

Weeks after she testified to Congress that the no-bid KBR contract represented "the most blatant and improper contract abuse" she had seen in her career, she was demoted from her job as the top civilian procurement officer with the Army Corps of Engineers. These days, she reports to people who once worked for her. She is no longer allowed to monitor the war-related contracts the government continues to issue.

At Greenhouse's home in Reston, Va., sunshine pours in through the huge windows, illuminating photo albums filled with pictures of her children and grandchildren, her collection of ceramic bunnies, the immaculate white carpeting and beige furniture. It is a well-organized home, presided over by a well-organized woman with an unwavering sense of right and wrong.

"I didn't set out to be a whistle-blower; I set out to do my job," said Greenhouse, who speaks with the confidence of someone who has earned three master's degrees, including one in engineering, and has managed hundreds of people in her long career.

She said she was simply acting as "a steward for the public trust" when she scrutinized the KBR contract and all the other contracts she has signed off on over the years. At the time of her demotion, the commander of the corps said she was removed "based on her performance and not in retaliation for any disclosures of alleged improprieties that she may have made."

Greenhouse said she approached her job with three goals.

☐ To make sure soldiers got the supplies they needed "so they could be on the battlefield and fight and win."

☐ To make sure all contractors were treated equally and that they understood the rules.

☐ To make sure the public's money was well spent. (She was supervising contracts worth \$23 billion when she was demoted.)

"When I was hired in 1997, I took an oath saying I would ensure that the conduct in our agency would be beyond reproach, at the highest level of integrity, impartial, with preferential treatment toward none," Greenhouse said, her voice rising with anger as she talked about the demise of her career.

"I took that seriously. I took that as my gospel. I was going to live by that." Two things bothered Greenhouse about the no-bid contract KBR received to restore Iraq's oil operations.

KBR officials had helped the Army Corps of Engineers draft the oil field restoration plan, she said – so they had an unfair advantage when it came time for government officials to determine which company was most qualified to handle the job.

She also believed the contract should have been limited to one year and then opened to competing bids. Over her objections, KBR got a two-year contract plus the option of a three-year extension.

Greenhouse, who will turn 63 next month, said she never considered softening her stance on the contract.

"My parents made us accountable to ourselves," she said, leaning forward in her chair. "They gave us values I won't

compromise.

"God does not choose the ones who are equipped. He equips the ones he challenges. Because I have that confidence and that belief, I don't face things like they're the end of the world."

Greenhouse grew up on the poor side of Rayville, La. Although her father had only a first-grade education and her mother a sixth-grade education, they pushed their six children to succeed. Her older sister became one of the first African-American professors at Louisiana State University. An older brother taught at Southern University in Baton Rouge. Her brother Elvin Hayes is a member of the NBA Hall of Fame who played with the Washington Bullets.

"We were brought up to give every fiber to doing the best you can do and then don't look back," Greenhouse said.

Before she was demoted, Greenhouse said she was given an opportunity to retire with all the benefits of her higher-level job. Her husband, Al, a retired Army colonel, thought she should accept the offer so she could avoid the pain he knew would come her way. Their three children agreed with him.

Instead, Greenhouse continues going to work each day. In fact, her eyes light up when she talks about a project she was allowed to carry over from her old job. It's a system she devised to reduce the cost of workers' compensation insurance for private contractors working in Iraq. Last year the program saved taxpayers \$45 million, she said. This year she expects it to save even more.

"It's a thrill to get up in the morning and go to work and have this responsible thing to do," she said. "Those of us who are privileged to work in government are the only voice the public has."

Greenhouse also may have the satisfaction of knowing her personal saga helped change the government's contracting procedures. Partly as a result of her testimony before Congress, the House passed a bill in March to limit the length of no-bid contracts and to require agencies that issue such contracts to publicly justify their use.

The bill is expected to be approved by the Senate and signed by the president, Greenhouse told me with a big smile.

by Susan White
The San Diego Union-Tribune