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Senate panel hits FBI blunders

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Illustration: Photo, FBI Agents Frank L. Perry (center, with his glasses in his lap) and Patrick J. Kierna (left) listened as Senate Judiciary Committee members criticized the agency's top executives for mismanagement yesterday., By Rod A. Lamkey Jr./The Washington Times

FBI officials got a bipartisan flogging yesterday by a Senate committee over what Democrats and Republicans described as "serious management" problems at the bureau, including the unexplained loss of hundreds of weapons and laptop computers.

In its second oversight hearing this month into a growing list of **FBI** blunders, the Senate Judiciary Committee demanded accountability by the **FBI**'s top **executives**, even entertaining the suggestion that an outside watchdog panel be named to investigate the **FBI**.

"There has been incident after incident after incident and you have to say to yourself, `What's going on at the **FBI**,'" said Sen. Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, who proposed an "outside comprehensive review of the **FBI**" by a blue-ribbon committee.

"It is an issue of public trust and the **FBI** is taking a beating," he said. "Polls show Americans have more confidence in local law enforcement than in the **FBI**."

The committee, under the chairmanship of Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, Vermont Democrat, wants to know, among other things, why the **FBI** failed to turn over thousands of documents in the Timothy McVeigh investigation, how veteran **FBI** counterintelligence agent Robert P. Hanssen successfully spied for the Russians for 15 years, and why the probe of Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee was mishandled.

Those concerns, expressed by Democrats and Republicans, expanded Tuesday when the **FBI** said that 459 weapons - including handguns, shotguns and semiautomatic rifles - and 184 laptop computers, including at least one with classified information, had been stolen or lost over the past decade.

"What bothers me greatly as chairman of this committee is that some of the computers were supposed to be containing classified information and you

would think after the total fiasco of the **FBI**'s handling of the Hanssen matter, they would learn from this matter," said Mr. Leahy.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican who has long been critical of what he has called "**FBI** arrogance," described the loss of the weapons and computers as "another indication of the need for fundamental reform."

"To have laptops missing that could have national security information on them would be atrocious," Mr. Grassley said. "For the **FBI** to have lost firearms and failed to account for them is inexcusable. We need to know if proper procedures for sensitive inventory have been enforced by the **FBI**."

Mr. Grassley said the **FBI**'s management system is "broken," adding that he looked forward to pending confirmation hearings for **FBI** Director-designate Robert S. Mueller III so he could "further assess his ability to make the vital and necessary changes at the **FBI**."

Attorney General John Ashcroft has ordered a Justice Department inquiry into the missing weapons and computers.

Describing the situation as "serious" during a news conference yesterday, he asked Inspector General Glenn A. Fine to inventory the Justice Department's stock of firearms, laptops and other items with the potential of compromising public safety, national security or current investigations.

"In order for law enforcement organizations to be effective, they must have the public's confidence in their ability to perform not only the most complex duties, but also the most basic responsibilities," Mr. Ashcroft said in a statement.

Most of the committee's rhetoric yesterday was aimed at **FBI** Assistant Director Bob E. Dies and Kenneth H. Senser, a CIA **executive** assigned to the **FBI** in 1999 as an acting director to assess security programs and countermeasures.

Mr. Dies, a former IBM **executive** hired a year ago to fix the **FBI** computer system, said that while the bureau has made efforts to correct problems, "no meaningful improvements" have been made to the system in six years.

He said agents and support personnel are forced to use outdated and ineffective equipment, asked to "do their jobs without the tools other companies use or that you may use at home on your system." He said agents are unable to electronically store investigative information in primary investigative databases, including photos, graphical and tabular data.

Mr. Dies said more than half of the **FBI**'s desktop-computers, about 13,000, are 4 to 8 years old and are unable to run basic software; agents accessing FBI data cannot use basic "ease of use" features, such as using a mouse to move around a screen; and the majority of the bureau's smaller offices are connected to the **FBI**'s internal network at speeds less than what many

individual Internet users have at their homes.

Mr. Senser testified that "most if not all" federal agency computer systems are ahead of the **FBI**, and that he was "bringing in people to oversee security measures and changes," many of them from the CIA.

He said that during an assessment of the **FBI** computer system, he found that security initiatives were "often poorly coordinated, inefficient and not as effective as possible."