

Background check failed on church gunman

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The gunman charged in the Charleston, South Carolina, church massacre should not have been allowed to purchase the weapon used in the attack, FBI Director James Comey said Friday as he outlined a series of “heart-breaking” missed opportunities and background check flaws that allowed the transaction to take place.

“We are all sick that this has happened,” Comey told reporters at an unusual, hastily scheduled meeting at FBI headquarters. “We wish we could turn back time, because from this vantage point, everything seems obvious. But we cannot.”

He said he had ordered a review into what happened and that FBI officials would meet Friday with victims’ relatives to explain the errors.

The cascading set of problems began with the drug-related arrest of Dylann Roof in South Carolina weeks before the shooting, touching off miscommunication between local and federal officials and revealing potential shortcomings in the government’s background check process.

At issue was a police report from Roof’s arrest in which authorities say he admitted to possessing illegal drugs. Under federal rules, that admission alone would have been enough to disqualify him from an April gun purchase even though he wasn’t convicted.

But, Comey said, the FBI background check examiner who evaluated Roof’s gun purchase order never saw the arrest report because the wrong arresting agency was listed on state criminal history records. Had the West Virginia-based examiner seen the police report, the purchase would have been



AP Photo/Chuck Burton, File

In this June 18, file photo, Charleston, S.C., shooting suspect Dylann Storm Roof, center, is escorted from the Sheby Police Department in Shelby, N.C.

denied, Comey said.

The purchase order was on hold for three days as the FBI examiner tried to figure out if it should be approved or rejected. Once that window closed without a clear answer, the gun dealer used its legal discretion to complete the transaction.

Comey said he learned about the problem on Thursday night and had directed an internal 30-day review into the situation and the FBI’s background check process more generally.

“It may be a series of highly improbable events coming together, but this was a gun that was used to murder nine good people. So it’s very important to me that we understand what we can learn from this,” Comey said.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, the Republican chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, condemned the errors.

“It’s disastrous that this bureaucratic mistake prevented existing laws from working and blocking an illegal gun sale,” Grassley said. “The facts undercut attempts to use the tragedy to enact unnecessary gun laws.”

Roof has been charged with murder in the June 17 slayings of nine people inside a historic black church in Charleston.

The problem unfolded like this:

Roof went to buy the .45-caliber handgun on April 11 from a licensed firearms dealer, Shooter’s Choice, in West Columbia, South Carolina.

The background check examiner assigned to Roof’s case identified through South Carolina records an earlier arrest on a drug charge. But the arresting agency that was listed, for reasons Comey said were unclear, was the Lexington County sheriff’s office. The actual arresting agency was the Columbia police department.

Had she reached that police force, she would have seen the arrest report in which Roof admitted having the drug Suboxone, which is used to treat opiate addiction, Comey said.

The FBI’s confusion was further compounded by local geography.

The background examiner knew Roof’s drug arrest took

place in Lexington County. But the spreadsheet she consulted that listed police agencies in the county did not include the Columbia police force. That department instead was listed as being in Richland County — where most of the city of Columbia is located.

The spreadsheet in retrospect should ideally have listed both counties as home to the city of Columbia, Comey said.

When she didn’t see Columbia on her list, she selected what she thought was the most reasonable alternative — West Columbia, where the gun shop was located — but the police department there also said it had no record of Roof’s arrest.

The Lexington County prosecutor’s office didn’t respond to her request for more information, and the sheriff’s office said it had no records on the case.

Before she could track down the police report, the three-day window lapsed and the transaction went through on April 16.

Comey’s announcement came within hours of the Confederate flag’s removal from the South Carolina Statehouse. Families of the victims attended the ceremony.

BRIEFLY

Under fire for data breach, Obama personnel chief steps down

WASHINGTON (AP) — The embattled head of the government’s personnel office abruptly stepped down Friday, bowing to mounting pressure following the unprecedented breach of private information her agency was entrusted to protect.

Katherine Archuleta had served as director of the federal Office of Personnel Management since November 2013. The former national political director for President Barack Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign, Archuleta came under scathing criticism amid revelations this year that hackers — widely believed to be China’s government — had infiltrated her agency’s databases as well as background-check records for millions who applied for U.S. security clearances.

On Thursday, Archuleta had rebuffed demands that she resign, declaring she was “committed to the work that I am doing.” But her continued tenure at the agency grew untenable as calls from lawmakers

— including members of Obama’s own party — mushroomed. On Friday morning, she came to the White House to personally submit her resignation to Obama.

He named Beth Cobert, currently deputy director for management at the White House’s Office of Management and Budget, to step in as acting director at OPM.

Iran talks at impasse amid bickering, extended again

VIENNA (AP) — The Iran nuclear talks shifted Friday to a blame game, as Iran’s foreign minister accused the United States of shifting its demands and dismissed a warning that the U.S. was ready to quit the negotiations.

Hours after his comments, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met again with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for another attempt at resolving the differences standing in the way a landmark deal that offers Iran sanctions relief in exchange for long-term, verifiable curbs on nuclear programs that Tehran could use to make weapons.

Confederate flag taken down in South Carolina after 54 years

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina pulled the Confederate flag from its place of honor at the Statehouse on Friday, marking a milestone in how America commemorates the war that tore the United States apart 150 years ago.

Many people believed the rebel banner would fly forever in the first state to leave the Union, despite bitter feelings that remained after the flag was demoted from atop the Capitol dome to a Confederate monument out front 15 years ago.

But the killings of nine black church members during a Bible study in Charleston last month suddenly changed the political truths and consequences surrounding Civil War symbols.

The battle flag unfurled to assert white power and protest the civil rights protest in the 1960s had been defended by white Republican leaders until last month as a symbol of Southern pride. After the church attack, even supporters felt compelled to acknowledge that the flag also represents racial hatred.

“No lie can live forever. That flag is a lie,” South Carolina NAACP President Lonnie Randolph said.

The flag came down Friday without incident, in a 6-minute ceremony, amid a crowd of up to 10,000 people chanting “USA, USA,” and “hey, hey, hey, goodbye.”

A multi-racial honor guard of South Carolina troopers wearing dress-gray uniforms and white gloves carefully folded and rolled it up. The flag was then taken to the state’s Confederate Relic Room to be put in a new multimillion-dollar display. Later Friday, the 30-foot pole it flew on was yanked out after several mighty tugs from a crane.

Overseeing it all was an imposing statue of Benjamin Tillman, the South Carolina governor who went to Washington as a U.S. senator and proudly described how he undermined post-Civil War Reconstruction by killing black people who tried to vote in the 1800s.

Gov. Nikki Haley, who has national ambitions of her own, felt compelled by



AP Photo/John Bazemore

An honor guard from the South Carolina Highway patrol lowers the Confederate battle flag as it is removed from the Capitol grounds Friday in Columbia, S.C.

last month’s killings to call for bringing down the flag, only months after calling her Democratic opponent’s demand to do the same thing a “stunt.” Other leading Republicans swiftly reversed their positions as well, and Thursday’s final votes in South Carolina’s Republican-led legislature were overwhelmingly in favor of removal.

As the flag came down, Haley joined family members of the victims and other dignitaries on the steps of the Statehouse, and while she didn’t speak, she nodded and smiled after someone in the crowd shouted: “Thank you governor.”

President Barack Obama tweeted minutes later, calling it “a sign of good will and healing and a meaningful step towards a better future.”

The leader of the South Carolina chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans refused to attend, instead recalling his seven ancestors who fought for the South in the Civil War. “I’m not going down there to watch them be dishonored and defamed,” Leland Summers said.

But if South Carolina couldn’t make a last stand for the Lost Cause, where else might it happen? From Alabama to Alaska, Confederate and segregationist monuments, statues, symbols and place names are being re-examined.

“They aren’t going to be happy until Mississippi is just like Michigan,” said Nelson Waller, who joined several dozen flag supporters in a rally at the Statehouse

earlier this week, but said he was too heartbroken to see it taken down.

Family members of the slain churchgoers were given prime spots to watch the flag’s removal, joined by a crowd of between 8,000 and 10,000 people.

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