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House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is George Deutsch. I am 25 years old, and I currently live in Nederland, Texas. Until February 2006, I was a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) at NASA.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee, and specifically Chairman Waxman, for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony today. I would also like to thank the Committee's staff for their graciousness and kindness. It is my sincere hope that my testimony will shed light on my role in NASA's Public Affairs office and on the larger questions the Committee has convened to examine.

I. My Path to NASA

I believe most people would agree that NASA is a place of wonder and excitement, a place where dreams become realities, and a place people love to work. I certainly feel this way. As a young man from a small Southeast Texas town near the Johnson Space Center, I saw the opportunity to join the NASA Family as a dream come true.

The path that led me to NASA began around June 2004. While still an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University (I have since graduated), I was contacted through the student newspaper I worked at by President George W. Bush's reelection campaign and was offered an internship. Though in my final course and final semester, I withdrew from school and accepted the once-in-a-lifetime position. Like many idealistic young college students interested in the way government works, I hoped to contribute to the political process.

Though characterized by long hours, hard work and no pay, the campaign internship was rewarding, allowing me to improve my writing skills and to gain some needed experience. My responsibilities grew over time, and by Election Day I had helped write articles and other materials on behalf of the campaign, a former state governor, a U.S. senator and several U.S. veterans, among others.

Following the campaign, I worked for the Presidential Inaugural Committee as an assistant in the Office of Communications. There, I gained experience in handling media queries and also helped in writing the Inaugural guide book and correspondence on behalf of the Inaugural co-chairs, in addition to other duties.

I then applied for a position as a presidential appointee and was offered jobs by NASA and the Department of Labor. To the best of my recollection, I disclosed on various occasions the fact that I had not completed my college degree.

II. My Work at NASA

I accepted an entry-level Public Affairs position at NASA. At the time, I was 23 years old. In early February 2005, I began my career as a writer/editor in NASA Internal News & Communications (referred to as NASA INC). My responsibilities included internal communications duties, from drafting agency-wide e-mails to statements on behalf of the NASA Administrator or Deputy Administrator. I began searching for a different job within the agency with greater responsibilities, and after several months, I became a Public Affairs Officer in the Science Mission Directorate (SMD).

Around August or September of 2005, I began to work as a PAO in SMD. I worked in a team with two other PAOs: career civil servants Erica Hupp and Dolores Beasley. Ms. Beasley was later replaced by another career civil servant, Dwayne Brown. Collectively, it was our duty to coordinate interviews, handle media queries, draft and edit press releases and otherwise facilitate communications between NASA, SMD and the general public. This was a responsibility the entire team felt privileged to have, and one we took very seriously. And though we would sometimes work on things individually, we tended to function as a group. The most senior member of the group – initially Dolores Beasley and then Dwayne Brown – functioned as the team leader. It was typical for the SMD PAOs to be somewhat familiar with the workload each was carrying and to coordinate with each other throughout the day.

In spite of what I'd achieved in my career at this point, I was still somewhat youthful and inexperienced – and far from perfect. I sent an e-mail to NASA Web designer Flint Wild on October 17, 2005, expressing my personal religious views, views I understood Mr. Wild to share. I think we will all agree that everyone is entitled to their own personal and religious views, but in hindsight, a NASA e-mail was certainly not the best place to share them. Regardless of my personal views, the crux of the e-mail was that I asked Mr. Wild to refer to the big bang theory as a theory in his posting to the NASA Web site, in accordance with "AP style as written in the latest Associated Press Stylebook 2005." I stated that no other changes should be made to the posting. I did not ask that Intelligent Design be inserted. I had sent the e-mail only to Mr. Wild.

At that time, NASA press releases and other written communications did not consistently follow rules of grammar and style. To correct this problem, the leadership of Public Affairs at NASA instructed PAOs to follow the Associated Press Stylebook in all press releases and other written communications.

Not long after joining SMD, I became aware of Dr. James Hansen, the Director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) and a distinguished and internationally renowned climate scientist. I learned that Dr. Hansen disagreed with what I understood to be NASA's standard practices for responding to media requests. Among those practices were that PAOs should listen to interviews as they're being conducted, that superiors can do interviews in someone's stead (known as the "right of first refusal"), and that NASA employees should report interview requests to the Public Affairs office. In fact, one of my duties was to send out a daily e-mail to senior NASA Public Affairs personnel known as "On The Record," in which I detailed the day's media requests. It was my understanding, based on my discussions with career Public Affairs personnel, that these practices had all existed in some form or fashion prior to my joining

NASA, and all were well known to NASA's Public Affairs staff, both at Headquarters and at the respective centers. I did not create these practices, but I understood that I and other NASA employees were expected to follow them, and for good reason.

The reason for such media relations guidelines, to my understanding, was to encourage agency coordination and accurate reporting. Sharing interview requests with NASA Headquarters, for example, creates a level of transparency between the NASA centers and Headquarters, and gives Headquarters officials a better grasp of what's going on at NASA's centers. PAOs may listen to or make audio recordings of interviews in order to protect the integrity of the conversation by making sure a speaker is not misquoted. Similarly, I believe the "right of first refusal" policy was not unique to NASA and is similar to the media policies of many large corporations and organizations. It simply leaves the media decision-making up to the most senior official, who is in the best position to speak on behalf of the agency. At NASA, these practices weren't unique to one individual or group, they were agency wide. In fact, most scientists I worked with who expressed any opinion on the policies found them to be helpful and comforting.

But Dr. Hansen did not share these views. He can certainly address these issues himself today, but as I understood it at the time, he found the policies cumbersome. This created a level of frustration among my higher-ups at NASA, who wanted to know about interviews before they happened instead of afterwards. They expected me and all other PAOs to share our interview requests in advance. They expressed their frustration to me and, collectively, we expressed our frustration to Dr. Hansen's personal press representative, Leslie Nolan-McCarthy.

In December 2005, National Public Radio (NPR) asked for an interview with Dr. Hansen. NASA Press Secretary Dean Acosta decided to offer NPR interviews with senior SMD personnel instead. These ultimately included Dr. Mary Cleave, Dr. Colleen Hartman and Dr. Jack Kaye. NPR declined to interview any of these three scientists. NPR later interviewed Dr. Hansen on different occasions.

On December 14, 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* and ABC News contacted NASA to inquire if the agency was going to release information addressing whether 2005 was the warmest year on record. They had apparently been informed by GISS that NASA would release this information on the following day. To address the inquiries concerning 2005, Headquarters granted the *Los Angles Times* an interview with Dr. Waleed Abdalati, a veteran NASA climate scientist. In that interview, Dr. Abdalati stated that he could <u>not</u> confirm that 2005 was the warmest year on record. Yet, on December 15, Dr. Hansen submitted a letter to the journal *Science* and conducted an interview with ABC's *Good Morning America* program concluding that 2005 tied 1998 as the warmest year on record. Senior NASA officials – specifically Strategic Communications Director Joe Davis and Press Secretary Dean Acosta – conveyed to me that they were unaware of the release of this information being coordinated with Headquarters or peer reviewed. That day, NASA Headquarters received a deluge of media inquiries on the matter, inquiries Headquarters was ill-equipped to handle because no one had been briefed on Dr. Hansen's findings. The same senior NASA officials were, to say the least, upset by this procedural breach, and Mr. Acosta asked me to document these events in an internal "PAO Point Paper," which was cosigned by career civil servant Dwayne Brown.

Subsequently, several media reports accused NASA political appointees and others of censoring Dr. Hansen. I can only speak for myself and my time at NASA. I never censored Dr. Hansen, and I do not believe others at NASA did either.

III. My Departure from NASA

In February 2006, I learned the *New York Times* was looking into whether the resume I submitted to NASA reflected that I had obtained a degree from Texas A&M University in 2003. I had created that resume sometime prior to 2003, and the resume inaccurately indicated a 2003 degree. At the time the resume was created, it would have been clear to the reader that I was referring to an anticipated degree. My mistake was that when it later came time to apply for political appointee positions, I failed to update the resume itself to convey that I was still one course shy of graduation. As I said earlier, to the best of my recollection, I told the hiring officials I spoke to in the Administration, including at NASA, that I did not have my degree, and it was never a problem. But I certainly recognize and take full responsibility for the fact that I should have updated the resume itself to better reflect this point. This was an honest mistake.

After I learned the *Times* was going to accuse me of submitting an inaccurate resume and trying to impose my religious views on the agency, I was told by my superiors at NASA that the story had become "about you," that it was "too much," and that everyone just wanted it to "go away." Rather than see the agency continue to be tarnished in the media, I resigned on February 7, 2006. In spite of the negative publicity I knew this would result in for me, I felt it was the best move for the agency and its employees, as the issue had become a distraction from all the wonderful work NASA was doing. I feel I made the right decision.

Later that same year, I finished my only remaining class and received my Bachelor of Arts degree from Texas A&M University. Since working at NASA, I have tried my hardest to continue to devote my life to public service, something I truly love and feel committed to. Still, it has been a difficult journey. Since 2006, I have done public relations work for a nonpartisan, nonprofit United Way agency in Texas dealing with mental health issues. I feel that the mental health needs of Americans are under-addressed and that those who suffer are too often stigmatized. Earlier this year, I was fortunate enough to help launch a call-in mental health radio program on a local Texas radio station. The hour-long show features Licensed Professional Counselors and other guests offering free mental health information to listeners.

While the situation that unfolded at NASA was unfortunate, I do not feel it makes me any less capable of helping others or making the world a better place to live.

During my time at NASA, Administrator Mike Griffin released a "Statement on Scientific Openness" in which he said, "It is not the job of Public Affairs Officers to alter, filter or adjust engineering or scientific material produced by NASA's technical staff. To ensure timely release of information, there must be cooperation and coordination between our scientific and engineering community and our Public Affairs Officers." These two sentences capture my feelings exactly.