

Somebody's Watching Me

Chief Serpas wonders if his own officers are following him. Why is he so unpopular?

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By Matt Pulle

It's a scene straight out of a bad police movie: A new, reform-minded chief moves to town, breaks up a good-ol'- boy network and finds himself at war with the rank and file he's supposed to lead. Of course, this is not a new release coming to a theater near you: it's the real life story of Metro Police Chief Ronal Serpas.

Earlier this month, one week before the Metro police union gave Chief Serpas a resounding vote of no-confidence, Metro's top cop talked about whether one or more of his officers were spying on him. Speaking at a neighborhood meeting in East Nashville earlier this month, Serpas said that he was actually "under surveillance right now," according to a person present at the meeting. Serpas then explained that a few disgruntled members of the force were following him and filming him, explaining "I guess they're hoping to catch me eating small kittens or something."

A few people at that same meeting say they think the chief was joking, but they admit they're not sure. You can't always read the chief's Cajun folk talk. Regardless, if you're going to tell a joke like that, you should make sure people understand that you're kidding.

In a carefully worded statement faxed to the *Scene*, Serpas acknowledges discussing the surveillance, but he goes on to say that he doesn't take it seriously. "Some weeks ago, I heard a rumor that some disgruntled person might be inclined to follow me. I find that notion rather ridiculous and referred to it in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way when speaking to an East Nashville community group earlier this month," the statement reads. "I'm not new to this business and was not overly surprised to hear the rumor.... Disgruntled persons are not going to knock us off track."

Maybe, maybe not. Regardless of whether Metro's finest are hoping to catch Serpas with a live boy or a dead girl, the city's top cop faces no shortage of angry officers. Earlier this month, the Fraternal Order of Police delivered a survey to City Hall showing that 70 percent of those surveyed gave Serpas a vote of below average. Fifty-four percent voted no confidence, and only 20 percent thought he was doing a good job.

The union has since refused to say how many police officers participated in the vote, and Fraternal Order of Police Vice President Danny Hale became irritated when asked about it. It's a good bet that the FOP's survey overstated how the vast majority of officers feel about the chief. Still, the distrust is out there, and it began nearly as soon as Serpas became the top cop last January.

In April, Serpas announced that he was "rolling back" his assistant chiefs to the rank of police captain. He explained that he wanted to decentralize the cop shop, but his decision reversed some promotions that had been made shortly before he took the job. That immediately angered many

officers who felt the chief had no right to demote assistant chiefs without any kind of cause. In any case, three of the chiefs—Richard Briggance, Judy Bawcum and Valerie Meese—resigned rather than be demoted. But another former homicide captain, Mickey Miller, took on the chief and brought his case before the civil service commission. He lost and has since filed a lawsuit against the department.

Miller's lawyer, David Raybin, says that what the chief has done is create so-called fantasy ranks that are directly under his control. Miller, for example, now works as a commander in the West Precinct and now earns roughly what he did as captain. So what's the problem? Raybin says that the rank of commander has no civil service protections and isn't a permanent rank, giving the chief the right to fire Miller for any reason he wants or "for no reason whatsoever." And even though that may be how Michael Eisner runs Disney, the Metro charter doesn't give the chief that kind of power.

"If he can do that to Mickey Miller, then the next people he can target are the captains and the lieutenants and down the line," Raybin says. "Fundamentally, the officers don't feel secure."

If all of this sounds familiar, it's because Metro schools director Pedro Garcia suffered a similar episode when he first came to Nashville in 2001. He hardly had his foot off the airport tarmac when he reassigned principals, shook up the central office and changed the curriculum, quickly irritating the local teachers' union, which felt he didn't care about what they had to say. And they were right. But they didn't put him under surveillance.

Actually, FOP's Hale denies that any police officers are trying to catch the chief in a compromising position. Of course, if they do, the chief could just demote them.