

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement

Chairman Gerald E. Connolly

Subcommittee on Government Operations

“Restoring Independence: Rebuilding the Federal Offices of Inspectors General”

April 20, 2021

For more than 40 years, inspectors general (IGs) have provided independent and objective oversight of federal government operations. Offices of the inspectors general (OIGs) conduct audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations to strengthen program integrity, promote operational economy and efficiency, and root out fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement across government. IGs are accountable to the President, to their agencies, to this Congress, and – as stewards of taxpayer dollars – to the American people.

IGs provide a lot of bang for the buck. In fiscal year 2020 alone, the 75 federal OIGs collectively identified \$33.3 billion in potential savings from audit reports and \$19.7 billion in actual and anticipated recoveries from investigations. These potential savings from audits and investigations total \$53 billion – amounting to a return on investment of \$17 for every dollar spent on the OIGs. And IGs don’t just investigate fraud and recoup money. Their return on investment includes improved cybersecurity in Federal IT systems, ethics oversight of the workforce and contractors, and, more recently, work that oversees the health and safety of our nation.

IGs do not make many friends when they speak truth to power. In fact, sometimes, they make enemies.

During his last year in office, then-President Trump executed a rash of politically-motivated retaliatory personnel moves against four IGs. He moved to replace one acting IG whose office was engaged in a review of misconduct or mismanagement by Trump Administration officials. The President publicly blocked a third well-respected acting IG from serving as the head of the newly established pandemic oversight body. In a more sinister move, Trump fired Intelligence Community IG Michael Atkinson, who reported whistleblower allegations to Congress that ultimately led to Trump’s impeachment. He also fired State Department IG Steve Linick who was investigating allegations of misconduct by Secretary Pompeo.

The political motives behind these personnel changes were hardly veiled – Trump claimed only that he had “lost confidence” in the IGs to explain his actions. This flimsy excuse collapsed under minimal scrutiny. Trump’s intent was clear: intimidation. The firings signaled the President’s demand for loyalty to him over service to the American public. In so doing, the former President set a dangerous precedent that an IG can be removed simply for doing his or her job.

We cannot allow this to happen again. If a President needs to remove an IG, the President should provide the specific reasons why to Congress in writing. That is why I support Chairwoman Maloney’s re-introduction of the IG Independence Act that includes provisions to require for cause removal of IGs.

In some cases, issues of protecting an effective IG from removal was overshadowed by the absence of a permanent IG. During former President Trump’s tenure, 14 OIGs were without a confirmed individual. In fact, four of these agencies did not have a permanent IG for the entire duration of the Trump presidency. While previous Administrations also had IG vacancies, President Trump was calculated in using the vacancies as a way to install acting IGs with clear conflicts of interest. At both the State Department and the Department of

Transportation, for example, Trump installed acting IGs who also served within the Departments they were meant to oversee. Wearing dual hats such as these, as we will hear from Ms. Lerner and Ms. Buller, undermines IG independence. In the absence of an appointed IG, we must sustain the office's independence by scoping the selection of qualified acting officials to hold their place. My Vice Chair, Ms. Porter, is championing the Accountability for Acting Officials Act that seeks to do just that.

I've said before that IGs must be pure as the driven snow – that is because if IGs are to hold agencies accountable and encourage whistleblowers to come forward, they must be above reproach themselves. Just this week the Integrity Committee released a scathing investigation — not yet made public — that found one IG created a “culture of witness intimidation” at their agency. According to the investigation, the IG abused “authority by ridiculing, belittling, and bullying her staff.”

These findings come more than four years after the allegations reached the Integrity Committee, the branch of the Council of the Inspectors General charged with overseeing the overseers. This example is why I and former Ranking Member Mark Meadows introduced the Enhanced Whistleblower Engagement Act to ensure that OIG employees receive whistleblower training and direct the IG Council to identify best practices to promote timely and appropriate handling of alleged reprisals within an OIG. Moreover, given the outlandish and inappropriate steps this particular IG took to evade Integrity Committee oversight, you can trust that we will be following up with legislation to make crystal clear that IGs must make documents and personnel available to the Integrity Committee in a manner commensurate to the access they are provided to oversee their respective affiliated agencies.

The Integrity Committee itself, however, has sometimes fallen short. To ensure the accountability of our IG community we'll be re-introducing legislation today to codify and enhance administrative reporting reforms and to allow Congress greater insight into the Integrity Committee's operations. Those who watch the watchdogs must be held to the greatest account. Similar legislation passed this Committee without opposition last Congress. I trust it will move quickly to enactment in this one.

Independent oversight by the IGs is essential to maintaining accountability and transparency in government. That independence was, during the previous Administration, under constant attack. This hearing will examine some of the ways in which we can restore and bolster the framework of independence within the IG community, which benefits taxpayers and this nation each day.

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