

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement

#### Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member

#### Hearing on “Empowering the Inspectors General”

#### February 1, 2017

I thank all of the Inspectors General (IGs) for their tireless efforts in making government more effective and efficient and for saving the American taxpayers billions of dollars. You do an extraordinary job, and we in Congress rely on you for exactly these reasons.

The title of today’s hearing is “Empowering the Inspectors General.” Our Committee has acted in a bipartisan manner under both Democratic and Republican leadership to promote the critical work of IGs. For example, on December 16, 2016, President Obama signed into law the bipartisan Inspector General Empowerment Act of 2016.

However, one thing that disempowers the Inspectors General is when they are threatened with retaliation for reporting waste, fraud, and abuse, or even worse, threatened with termination. When that happens, it is up to this Committee to step in, investigate, and protect the IGs.

Yesterday, I sent a letter, along with Vice Ranking Member Connolly, to White House Counsel Don McGahn. We raised concerns about disturbing reports that Trump officials threatened to remove numerous Inspectors General after the inauguration.

This all started on Friday, January 13. Trump team officials assigned to various federal agencies called to inform their respective IGs that their positions were only “temporary.” They also reportedly informed several IGs that they should begin looking for other employment.

The Inspectors General—concerned about these ominous calls—immediately began contacting the leaders of their organizing body, the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

As we understand it, after urgent calls over the weekend, some IGs were informed that higher-level officials on the Trump team decided to reverse this misguided action. The IGs were told that these calls were erroneous. They were told they never should have been made. If this indeed occurred, that would be a small relief.

But here is why I remain concerned. We have now obtained what we believe is the email that the Trump team sent out to their political officials assigned to the federal agencies. This email was sent after normal business hours on the evening of Friday, January 13. It directed Trump staffers to make the calls “TONIGHT”—in all capital letters and later in bold. They were instructed to tell the IGs that they were staying over into the Trump Administration only “on a temporary basis.” The email also references vetting the IGs, but does not explain on what basis.

This email demonstrates that these calls were not isolated incidents. This was a coordinated campaign to target Inspectors General that someone in the Trump team planned, approved, organized, and executed across multiple agencies. The problem is that we still do not know who.

Whoever approved these calls had absolutely horrendous judgment and should not be allowed anywhere near the reins of power. We also still do not know who ultimately reversed this terrible approach, and we still have no official communication confirming that this reversal in fact applies to all of the IGs.

So yesterday, we wrote to the White House Counsel asking him these questions. Most importantly, we asked for official confirmation that President Trump has no plans to fire any IGs now that he has been sworn in.

I ask unanimous consent that our letter be made part of the official record, and I also ask that Committee staff conduct a transcribed interview of the Trump official who sent this email so that we can investigate this matter.

We have several of the IGs here today, so we can get their accounts of what happened. At the broadest level, we want to make sure that every single Inspector General has been told in no uncertain terms that their jobs are safe.

Unfortunately, these actions are part of a troubling pattern of misguided and politically-motivated attacks on government watchdogs, ethics experts, law enforcement officials, and career government employees.

In December, the Trump team sent a questionnaire to the Energy Department requesting a list of all individuals who took part in international climate talks over the past five years.

In January, White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus issued a veiled threat to the Director of the Office of Government Ethics that he “ought to be careful” in his criticism of President Trump’s refusal to divest himself of his corporate ownership interests. The Director told Members of this Committee that this threat was “chilling.”

Just last week, Trump Administration officials violated multiple federal laws by imposing gag orders on the communications of federal employees including, in some instances, communications with Congress.

Within the past few days, the White House press secretary stated the Trump Administration’s official position that any State Department employees who disagree with the President’s decisions should leave the government rather than voice their dissent.

And on Monday, after the Acting Attorney General concluded that the President’s Executive Order banning Muslims from entering the country may not be legal, the President fired her for saying so.

What we are witnessing is not normal. This has only been a few weeks. These actions cannot be tolerated by those of us who have as our core mission rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse. Federal employees fear what is happening and what may come next.

We will rely on our Inspectors General more than ever in the coming years. And I hope all of my Republican and Democratic colleagues will join together in a bipartisan manner to support our Inspectors General in their mission.

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