
NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIAL PRAISES COOPER WATCHDOG REFORM BILL

Says Congress should act soon to promote responsible government

Unmuzzling the Federal Watchdogs

Editorial

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In a bipartisan rebuff of White House hubris, the House has overwhelmingly endorsed an overhaul of the inspector general process to insulate it from the waste, fraud and political meddling that are a hallmark of the Bush administration.

The vital measure would strengthen the independence of inspectors general so they can blow the whistle on internal agency abuses without fear of retribution. It sets seven-year terms and narrows the grounds for removing an inspector general to specified causes, not political vagaries. It also strengthens the budget resources of investigators, and creates an oversight council that would encourage professionalism but also investigate allegations about abusive inspectors.

The need for bolstering some 50 federal inspectors general has become a grim subtheme of the Bush administration's arrogant massing of executive power. Most recently, State Department employees accused the White House-appointed inspector general, Howard Krongard, of blocking rather than abetting their efforts to uncover fraud and abuse in the contract billions being showered on Iraq and Afghanistan. Mr. Krongard denies serving as the administration's lap dog against embarrassment. Critics accuse him of delaying investigations, censoring reports on security weaknesses in Baghdad and tipping off a fellow political appointee of a pending inquiry.

Other allegations of compromised investigations have been raised about inspectors general at the Commerce Department, NASA, the Smithsonian Institution and the Legal Services Corporation.

Clearly, the inspector general process, created in 1978 to protect the taxpayers' interests, needs bolstering against the political meddling of this and future administrations. The House voted 404 to 11 for reforms, despite the White House's threat of a veto. The Senate should show comparable determination to see fraud and abuse weeded out by in-agency investigators.

The inspector general problem is one more barn door to be closed on an irresponsible administration. The sooner Congress acts, the better for responsible government.