
USA TODAY EDITORIAL COMMENDS COOPER IG BILL

Reward internal watchdogs with protections, not muzzles

Our view on good government: Reward internal watchdogs with protections, not muzzles

Inspectors general save tax dollars, expose abuses. Keep them brawny.

Editorial

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Calling someone "a skunk at a picnic" wouldn't ordinarily be taken as flattering. But flattery is what Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, intended when he used that term recently to describe federal inspectors general. And he was right.

When the IGs, as they are known, are at the top of their game, they are making life miserable for the heads of federal agencies - and making government work better.

Little known outside the nation's capital, inspectors general poke into bureaucrats' business at more than 60 agencies, working to uncover fraud, waste and other wrongdoing.

So it's small wonder that they're frequently under fire, as the CIA's inspector general is now, or that members of Congress who care about good government want to protect them. But their efforts are drawing a veto threat from the White House, where closer scrutiny of the administration's behavior rarely is seen as a good thing.

In recent years, aggressive IGs have helped save taxpayers billions of dollars and alerted them to everything from threats to civil liberties to air safety risks:

* In March, the Justice Department's IG revealed that the FBI improperly used a law passed after 9/11, intended to catch terrorists, to collect information on innocent U.S. citizens. Absent those revelations, the abuses might have gone on unchecked.

* Over the past five years, successive Transportation Department IGs have revealed potential risks posed by the airline industry's increased outsourcing of maintenance work and the failure of federal inspectors to keep up with the change. They have also documented the industry's inability to live up to customer service pledges.

While the president nominates inspectors general at 30 of the largest agencies, others are appointed by agency chiefs. It's easy to see how conflicts can develop.

Clark Kent Ervin, former inspector general at the Homeland Security Department, for example, frequently pointed out the agency's failure to shore up all sorts of holes in the nation's security net. In 2004, his temporary appointment was allowed to expire and he was not confirmed by the Senate.

Just last week, several lawmakers chastised CIA Director Michael Hayden for launching an internal inquiry of the spy agency's inspector general, John Helgerson. Helgerson has issued reports embarrassing to the CIA and is investigating the agency's controversial interrogation and detention programs.

Helgerson declined to comment, and the CIA insisted its "straightforward, focused management review" isn't designed to chill his independence.

Perhaps. Such situations can be murky and the pressures subtle, but even perceived attempts to stifle IGs can undercut their authority and effectiveness.

That's why a measure to insulate IGs from politics - approved by the House 404-11 this month - makes so much sense. It would give them seven-year terms. It says they can only be fired for specific causes, such as malfeasance, and requires that Congress be informed of the reasons for an IG's removal. It gives them more control over their budgets, so agency chiefs can't starve them into inaction. Despite administration objections that the measure intrudes on presidential power, the Senate should follow the House's lead.

Anything that keeps these watchdogs independent and unmuzzled is good for government and good for taxpayers.

Inspectors general, by the numbers

1976:

Congress creates the first inspector general (IG), at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

1978:

Congress expands the IG law and adds 12 offices.

64:

Number of inspectors general today.

\$1.9 billion:

Budget for 64 offices (fiscal 2006).

\$6.8 billion:

Recoveries made after IG investigations (2006).

8,410:

Successful prosecutions growing from IG probes (2006).

201,000:

Complaints to IG hotline (2006).

Sources: Congressional Research Service; President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency; Government Accountability Office.