

Purge of government watchdogs escalates drive for authoritarian rule

Trump fires State Department inspector general

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Late Friday night, President Donald Trump informed Congress that he was firing the top watchdog within the State Department, Inspector General Steve Linick. The dismissal is the latest move in a purge of inspectors general aimed at eliminating any internal monitoring of the administration and establishing an authoritarian, personalist government.

Over the past six weeks, Trump has removed the inspectors general of the Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense and the Department of Health and Human Services, in addition to Friday's action. Three of the four moves have been announced late on Friday night, when news coverage is generally more sparse and Congress is not in session.

In a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Trump offered no explanation for the sudden firing, other than to say he no longer had "the fullest confidence" in Linick, a veteran of the George W. Bush administration who was appointed to the State Department post by Barack Obama in 2013. Trump said the dismissal would take effect in 30 days.

A White House official told the press that Trump had fired Linick on the recommendation of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Media reports quoted an unnamed Democratic aide as saying that Linick was investigating Pompeo's alleged misuse of a political appointee to perform personal tasks for himself and his wife.

Pelosi denounced the move in a statement issued Friday night. House Foreign Affairs Chair Eliot Engel and Robert Menendez, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced an investigation Saturday into Linick's removal. They wrote letters to the White House, State Department and Office of the Inspector General to preserve all records related to Linick's dismissal and turn the information over by May

22. They said the firing "may be an illegal act of retaliation" because the inspector general was investigating Pompeo.

Under Obama, Linick published a highly critical report about Hillary Clinton's use while secretary of state of a private email server. Last October, during the House impeachment hearings, Linick met with congressional aides of both parties and provided them with documents that had been given to the State Department by Trump's private lawyer Rudolph Giuliani. The documents concerned the role of Hunter Biden, the son of former Vice President and presumptive Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, in serving on the board of the Ukrainian natural gas company Burisma Holdings, as well as negative information about Marie Yovanovitch, who had been removed by Trump as US ambassador to Ukraine the previous April.

While the information likely bolstered the Republicans' defense of Trump against the Democratic impeachment drive, Linick's intervention into the hearings breached Pompeo's order that State Department officials boycott the investigation.

Last year, Linick published two reports that were highly critical of how Trump political appointees, including a top aide to Pompeo, had treated career staffers at the State Department.

The White House announced that it would appoint Stephen Akard, director of the Office of Foreign Missions, a division of the State Department, as acting head of the Office of Inspector General in place of Linick. Ackard is a former adviser to Vice President Mike Pence when Pence was governor of Indiana. He was also general counsel, chief of staff and vice president of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, which promotes tax and other incentives for businesses to locate in Indiana.

On Friday night, April 3, Trump dismissed Intelligence Community Inspector General Michael Atkinson in retaliation for his role in the Democratic impeachment drive. In September 2019, Atkinson bucked efforts by the Trump administration to conceal from Congress the whistleblower complaint filed by a CIA operative in the White House. The complaint concerned Trump's attempt to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to announce an investigation into the Bidens in connection with Hunter Biden's paid position on the board of Burisma, while Trump was withholding military aid from the regime in Kiev.

Atkinson turned the complaint over to Congress, sparking the investigation by the Democratic-controlled House and eventual impeachment of Trump for weakening the right-wing, anti-Russian government in Kiev in the midst of a "hot war" with Moscow. Trump was acquitted by the Republican-controlled Senate in February.

After removing Atkinson, Trump defended the firing, saying that he "took a fake report and gave it to Congress."

Within a week of Atkinson's firing, on Tuesday, April 7, Trump removed Acting Defense Department Inspector General Glenn Fine, preventing him from becoming the head of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, established as part of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act to oversee the president's management of the massive corporate bailout.

On Friday night, May 1, Trump removed Christi Grimm, the top watchdog at the Health and Human Services Department. This came a month after Trump criticized Grimm for a report in March detailing "severe shortages" of coronavirus testing kits and personal protective equipment for doctors and medical staff. At an April 6 press conference, Trump had dismissed Grimm's report as "wrong" and attacked her as an Obama holdover.



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