



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 18, 2014

Inspectors General Slam Obama Stonewalling in Letter to Congress

The Obama administration is engaged in unprecedented stonewalling of federal agency and department inspectors general, according to a [letter to lawmakers](#) from a strong majority of the supposedly independent government watchdogs. The officials, who are charged by Congress with routing out corruption, waste, fraud, and abuse within their respective agencies, warned that the consequences of the obstructionism could be dire. Critics and lawmakers seized on the letter as further evidence that the administration marketed as the “most transparent” in history has become exactly the opposite.



In all, 47 inspectors general from across the federal government — many of them appointed by Obama — wrote to Congress this month warning that their work and investigations were being unlawfully impeded. Among other concerns, the officials cited denial of access to documents, wild interpretations of statutes purporting to authorize the stonewalling, undermining the independence of the inspectors general, and similar tactics being used by top administration officials. Analysts said the scheming was merely an extension of Obama’s ongoing “war on transparency.”

“This is an administration that pledged to be the most transparent in history,” observed Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), the ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, in a statement about the letter. “Yet, these non-partisan, independent agency watchdogs say they are getting stonewalled. How are the watchdogs supposed to be able to do their jobs without agency cooperation? Inspectors General exist to improve agencies and get the most bang for every tax dollar. This letter underscores the need for congressional review and possibly legislative action.”

Especially problematic, the federal watchdogs said in their letter to congressional leaders, were the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice. Both of those federal entities, of course, have been at the center of seemingly never-ending scandals under the current administration, ranging from violating record-keeping laws and ripping off taxpayers to arming Mexican drug cartels and trying to cover it up by lying to Congress under oath. Another agency highlighted in the letter as troublesome was the so-called Peace Corps.

“The undersigned federal Inspectors General write regarding the serious limitations on access to records that have recently impeded the work of Inspectors General,” the 47 officials wrote in the August 5 letter to bipartisan leaders of major congressional committees. “Refusing, restricting, or delaying an Inspector General’s access to documents leads to incomplete, inaccurate, or significantly delayed findings or recommendations, which in turn may prevent the agency from promptly correcting serious problems and deprive Congress of timely information regarding the agency’s performance.”



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The inspectors general also said each of them “strongly supports” the principle that IGs must have “complete, unfiltered, and timely access to all information and materials available to the agency that relate to that Inspector General’s oversight activities, without unreasonable administrative burdens.” That principle, the importance of which “cannot be overstated,” was codified by Congress into federal law in 1978 with the Inspector General Act, they added. However, multiple top administration officials are actively undermining it.

One of the ways in which Obama’s agency bosses and department chiefs are preventing access by watchdog officials to crucial documents and information is through a bizarre interpretation of federal statutes. In essence, lawyers for the departments in question have seized on other statutes to claim that the records sought by the watchdogs are “privileged,” purportedly overriding the explicit authority granted to IGs in the 1978 law. The agencies echoed those claims in statements to the media. The IGs, though, were not buying it.

“These restrictive readings of the IG Act represent potentially serious challenges to the authority of every Inspector General and our ability to conduct our work thoroughly, independently, and in a timely manner,” they wrote in the letter, which was released publicly by lawmakers. “Even when we are ultimately able to resolve these issues with senior agency leadership, the process is often lengthy, delays our work, and diverts time and attention from substantive oversight activities. This plainly is not what Congress intended when it passed the IG Act.”

Obama’s Justice Department, led by Attorney General Eric Holder — currently in criminal contempt of Congress for the [ongoing coverup of the Fast and Furious gun-running scandal](#) — appears to be among the worst offenders. According to the letter to congressional oversight leaders, the Department of Justice withheld “essential records” in at least three separate investigations. In each case, the DOJ’s attorneys cited their own “cramped reading” of relevant law to justify the stonewalling — despite the fact that such records had been previously produced in prior probes without objection.

“While Department of Justice leadership ultimately granted permission for these particular records to be made available to the DOJ OIG, it did so based on a finding that the three reviews were of assistance to the Department of Justice’s leadership, not because of the DOJ OIG’s independent authority under the IG Act, thereby undermining the DOJ OIG’s independence,” the letter continued, adding that other agencies had been involved in similar stonewalling. “Issues such as these are likely to recur unless agencies recognize the authority of Inspectors General under [the law] to access all agency records.”

Lawmakers in both chambers of Congress have expressed outrage about the stonewalling. House Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), for example, said the developments are extremely troubling. “If there is anyone who should have transparency, it should be the watchdogs inside the government working for the president,” Issa told Fox News in an interview after receiving the complaints. “I’ve never seen a letter like this, and my folks have checked — there has never been a letter even with a dozen IGs complaining.”

It also seems to be part of an accelerating trend, the outspoken congressman continued. “This is the majority of all inspectors general saying, not just in the examples they gave, but government wide, they see a pattern that is making them unable to do their job,” Issa noted, adding that he plans to hold hearings about the obstructionism when Congress returns from recess next month. Other lawmakers have also indicated that lawmakers might have to get involved.

Some analysts have also suggested that the lawlessness goes beyond trying to cover up fraud and abuse



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from internal watchdogs. The former inspector general for “Americorp,” Gerald Walpin, for instance, was reportedly fired from his job after his office accused one of Obama’s political supporters of misusing a grant from the federal outfit. Speaking about the latest letter, Walpin said he was “not surprised that this administration employs any means to thwart IGs’ performance of their important job.” He also blasted as “ludicrous” the “privilege” legal theory cited by top federal bureaucrats to block IG access to documents.

Legal experts and former officials have also lashed out at the stonewalling. “Congress and the American people should be extremely concerned by the behavior of the administration and the serious charges made by almost four dozen IGs whose responsibilities range across the entire spectrum of the federal government,” explained Hans von Spakovsky, a former DOJ attorney and FEC commissioner who now serves as a senior legal fellow at the Heritage Foundation. “The only thing more dangerous than an administration that abuses its power is an administration that tries to hide what it is doing from taxpayers, voters, and our elected representatives in Congress.”

Just two dozen or so inspectors general did not sign on to the letter, including some who work for agencies in the legislative branch. That means an overwhelming majority of the watchdogs were concerned enough about the stonewalling to speak out and seek assistance from Congress. Numerous reports noted that the letter — and the broad coalition of federal IGs who signed it — are unprecedented in American history. That the federal government’s own watchdogs are sounding the alarm ought to be a serious wake-up call to the American people.

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