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Watchdog: Interior Dept. punishes whistleblowers, promotes wrongdoers

By [Joel Gehrke \(@Joelmentum\)](#) • 5/24/16 4:53 PM

Department of Interior officials tend to retaliate against whistleblowers and only give wrongdoers on a payroll a slap on the wrist, according to the independent watchdog tasked with overseeing the department.

"We often learn that management makes more effort to identify the source of a complaint than to explore whether the complaint has merit," Interior Department deputy inspector general Mary Kendall told a House Natural Resources subcommittee in prepared remarks on Tuesday. "In some instances, efforts have been made to restrict the ability of employees to contact us."

National Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis was a focal point of the criticism levied against department leaders, largely because he refused to seek ethics guidance on his plan to write a book and have it sold by a nonprofit at bookstores in the national parks. Jarvis was formally reprimanded, but kept his job.

"DOI does not do well in holding accountable those employees who violate laws, rules and regulations," Kendall wrote in her prepared statement. "We see too few examples of senior leaders making the difficult decision to impose meaningful corrective action and hold their employees accountable. Often, management avoids discipline altogether and attempts to address misconduct by transferring the employee to other duties or to simply counsel the employee."

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Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, described several instances in which Jarvis himself had promoted or transferred malefactors, but a representative from the Interior Department's solicitor's office insisted that due process rights required his team to be prudent about pursuing firings.

"Are you not bothered by this pattern of unethical behavior?" Labrador asked at the hearing.

"I believe the department has a culture of compliance," Edward Keable, deputy solicitor for general law, began to reply.

Labrador interrupted to emphasize his interest in this particular case. "Are you not bothered by this pattern of unethical behavior?" he asked again.

"I believe the department has a culture of compliance," Keable repeated.

Democrats argued that the hearing — dubbed a probe of "the culture of corruption at the Department of the Interior" — didn't involve any wrongdoing as egregious as some scandals that took place during the George W. Bush presidency.

"This hearing seems to be the latest in a growing list of attempts in this subcommittee to do little more

than attack the administration," Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-Mo., said at the outset of the panel. In an ensuing question, Clay established that the inspector general learned of Jarvis' actions from another senior official at the Interior Department.

Labrador was unconvinced by Clay's defense. "Many people say, 'Well, worse things happened under previous administrations,' and I think that's true. But what's really interesting is that a lot of those investigations happened in Republican administrations, and it was Republicans that were willing to actually investigate the unethical relationship," Labrador said.

"It's interesting to me that Democrats don't seem particularly interested in investigating unethical behavior on the part of their administration."