

**Testimony of John Roth
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**Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Accountability,
Committee on Homeland Security, United States House of
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the issue of preventing waste, fraud and abuse at the Department of Homeland Security. As background, I was the Inspector General for Homeland Security from 2013 to 2017. Before that, I was a federal prosecutor for over 25 years in the Department of Justice in a variety of leadership and policy-making roles in both Republican and Democratic administrations. After retiring from government service, I worked in the financial services industry, leading the compliance and ethics functions for a high-tech startup as well as a Fortune 200 public company. As such, I have firsthand experience in conducting oversight in both the public and private sectors.

My testimony today will focus on the crucial role that independent Inspectors General play in fighting waste, fraud and abuse, the necessity for a sustained and thoughtful effort to identify and root out waste, and the false economy in large scale, indiscriminate personnel reductions.

The Role of Inspectors General

Inspectors General were created to provide independent oversight of federal agencies. Since the passage of the Inspector General Act of 1978, IGs have played a vital role in improving government operations, saving taxpayers billions of dollars, and ensuring that agencies operate within the law.

IGs conduct audits, investigations, and evaluations that identify inefficiencies, mismanagement, and corruption. For example, during my tenure at the Department of Homeland Security, my office issued numerous reports that identified critical weaknesses in border security, transportation security, cybersecurity, and disaster response efforts. These reports provided Congress and the public with objective assessments and actionable recommendations to improve government performance. I know from personal experience that the entire IG community is committed to these goals.

IG offices are unique in that they save more than they spend, and by a large margin. According to reports from the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE), IG offices collectively identify tens of billions of dollars in savings each year—many times their own operating costs. For example, in the 2023 fiscal year, IGs across the federal government identified over \$93 billion in potential savings. These potential savings represent an approximate \$26 return on every dollar invested in the OIGs. These savings

come from identifying improper payments, uncovering procurement fraud, preventing unnecessary expenditures, and improving program efficiency.

This is possible only because IGs and their staffs have training and experience in audits, inspections, and investigations, and are bound by their professional standards: to be independent of the programs and operations they review, to make conclusions and recommendations only when well founded and supported by the evidence, and to approach their job with professional skepticism inherent in a professional auditor.

The role is best described in the Comptroller General’s Government Auditing Standards—otherwise known as “the Yellow Book”—which are the rules for government auditing organizations published by the Government Accountability Office. The description of the independence necessary for an auditor hits the nail on the head “Independence of mind [is the] state of mind that permits the conduct of an engagement without being affected by influences that compromise professional judgment, thereby allowing an individual to act with integrity and exercise objectivity and professional skepticism.”¹ As head of the organization, an IG must be able to “conduct engagements and report findings, opinions, and conclusions objectively and without fear of reprisal.”²

In a nutshell, that is an IG’s job: a professional skeptic. They act as agents of positive change within their Departments they serve by having the freedom to be independent and objective and to speak truth to power. They ask the difficult questions, challenge their organizations to be better, to be more efficient, to ensure rigor in Departmental operations, and to look for and eliminate waste.

IGs have traditionally been appointed based on merit, rather than political affiliation, and are expected to conduct their duties with impartiality. Additionally, IGs do not have operational roles within the agencies they oversee. This distinction is critical because it means IGs are not evaluating their own policies or decisions—which could otherwise create a conflict of interest. Instead, they serve as independent auditors and investigators, assessing agency performance from an objective standpoint.³

¹ GAO-24-106786, *Government Auditing Standards*, section 3.21.

² Section 3.56.

³ Similar principles govern the private sector. Every large public company has an internal audit function. Those auditors are protected from undue influence by reporting directly to the Board of Directors rather than management. Hiring, firing, and compensation are handled by the Board. This insulates the auditors from undue influence and gives their board and the investing public confidence that the audits are carried out in an objective manner.

Furthermore, IGs are bound by strict professional and ethical standards. The Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) sets guidelines to ensure that IGs operate with integrity and impartiality. If an IG were to act in a biased or conflicted manner, or produce reports unsupported by the facts, there are mechanisms in place—including oversight by Congress and CIGIE’s Integrity Committee—to investigate and address such behavior.

However, for IGs to be effective, they must operate without fear of retaliation or political pressure. Independence is not just an abstract principle—it is the foundation of their ability to conduct meaningful and credible investigations and audits. If agency leaders or political appointees can interfere with IG investigations or retaliate against IGs for unfavorable findings, then oversight is compromised. Moreover, not only must IGs be independent in fact, but they must also be perceived of as such. Congress and the American public must fundamentally trust that government employees and programs will be reviewed and held accountable by an independent fact finder.

The independence of IGs is only as strong as the willingness of the executive branch and Congress to uphold it. Recent events have called this independence into question. The removal of multiple IGs has sent a chilling message to the oversight community: produce findings that are uncomfortable or politically inconvenient, and you risk losing your job. This undermines not only the individual IGs but the entire system of government accountability. Any power to remove IGs must be exercised responsibly and judiciously. Government auditing standards specifically recognize that replacing an auditor because of a disagreement with the contents of a report or the auditors conclusions constitutes a threat to the independence of the organization.⁴

The current wholesale removals of IGs is unprecedented. IGs typically serve across multiple administrations regardless of political affiliation, reflecting their nonpartisan role. When IGs are dismissed without a clear and legitimate rationale, it damages public trust and weakens the oversight process.

First, such removals discourage IGs from conducting thorough and independent investigations. IGs are in the bad news business, and delivering bad news can ruffle political feathers. If an IG knows that uncovering waste, fraud and abuse could cost them their job, there is an implicit pressure to avoid the kinds of audits, inspections and investigations necessary for effective government. This can lead to self-censorship and a failure to hold government agencies accountable. Even worse, it destroys public and Congressional confidence in the integrity, accuracy, and independence of any findings an IG does make. New appointees for these positions, regardless of their qualifications or background, will be under a cloud of suspicion as to their independence.

⁴ *Government Auditing Standards*, Section 3.42.

Second, these removals can disrupt ongoing investigations. Many IG offices work on long-term audits and investigations that require continuity. The IG firings have resulted in the community losing a cadre of experienced, qualified, and independent professional leadership that will be difficult to replace. These sudden firings can stall or even terminate critical oversight work, allowing waste, fraud and abuse to go unchecked. Thanks to legislation enacted in 2022, the seconds in command now lead the affected offices. This legislation was put in place specifically to protect IGs from opportunistic replacement. However, there is no substitute for permanent, accountable leadership.

Third, politically motivated removals make it more difficult to attract qualified candidates to IG positions. Talented professionals will be reluctant to accept a role that is subject to political whims, and one in which their professionalism is under a cloud. Over time, this weakens the overall effectiveness of the IG community and diminishes the quality of oversight in federal agencies.

Of course, there can be instances where the President can and should remove an Inspector General. An IG could be affected by a conflict of interest, or fail to ensure sufficient independence, or could conduct themselves unprofessionally or in violation of law or regulation. However, as the law provides, they should be removed only after the President supplies a substantive rationale, including detailed and case-specific reasons. And it should never be as a result of a mere disagreement with a IG report or recommendation.

Congress has previously protected the Inspector General community from undue political influence. For example, in January of 2017, transition officials in the incoming Trump administration told the incumbent Inspectors General, including me, that they would be replaced as a matter of course. The Trump administration ultimately reversed course after a demonstration of strong support of the IGs by Congress, including particularly from the Republican members of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.⁵

Inspectors General are a cornerstone of government transparency and accountability. Their work helps to see to it that agencies operate efficiently, ethically, and in the best interests of the American people. However, without independence, IGs cannot fulfill their mission. The recent firings of IGs set a dangerous precedent that, if left unchecked, will erode public trust and weaken government oversight.

DHS as an organization has struggled with performance since its inception. When I arrived I found significant shortfalls across all areas of DHS operations. The shortfalls were long-standing and systemic, and were the result of a lack of management fundamentals such as data collection, cost analysis, and

⁵ *Empowering the Inspectors General*, Hearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Serial 115-11, February 1, 2017.

performance measurement.⁶ As it relates to the Southwest Border, DHS acquisition management failures stretch back to the 2006 “SBI Net” project, a project to secure the Southwest Border with a combination of technology, infrastructure, and personnel, which was ultimately cancelled in 2011 after costing the taxpayers nearly \$1 billion for only 53 miles of coverage. Multiple reports from the IG found that DHS did not follow acquisition best practices, including developing operational requirements and ensuring an experienced and trained acquisition workforce.⁷ During my tenure, our office found waste in a number of programs, including programs involving the acquisition of helicopters, unmanned drones, IT and accounting systems, workforce housing, hiring, and contract management.⁸

This appears to remain true today. The current Office of Inspector General reports reflect that the major management and performance challenges cut across multiple DHS missions areas, affecting the Department’s ability to conduct its mission.⁹ The GAO placed DHS on their high risk list shortly after the Department was created, and since then, DHS has struggled to make progress. Recently, however, GAO has cited “substantial progress” in areas of concern, and noted that the improvements implemented by the Department accrued a \$2 billion financial benefit.¹⁰ The progress that has been made was possible only through consistent, sustained effort over a course of years.

Eliminating government waste is a long-term effort requiring knowledge, expertise, and accountability

⁶ OIG-17-08, *Major Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Homeland Security*, November 7, 2016.

⁷ OIG-17-70-SR, *Special Report: Lessons Learned from Prior Reports on CBP’s SBI and Acquisitions Related to Securing our Border*, June 12, 2017.

⁸ See, e.g., OIG-13-89, *DHS’ H-60 Helicopter Programs*, May 23, 2013; OIG-15-17, *US CBP Unmanned Aircraft System Program Does not Achieve Intended Results of Recognize All Costs of Operations*, December 24, 2014; OIG-14-131, *CBP Did Not Effectively Plan and Manage Employee Housing in Ajo, Arizona*, September 3, 2014; OIG-14-47, *US CBP Advanced Training Center Acquisition*, February 28, 2014; OIG-15-53, *CBP’s Oversight of its Non-intrusive Inspection Equipment Maintenance Contracts Need Improvement*, March 25, 2015; OIG-16-34, *CBP’s Special Operations Group Program Cost and Effectiveness are Unknown*, January 29, 2016; OIG-17-114, *CBP’s IT Systems and Infrastructure Did Not Fully Support Border Security Operations*, September 28, 2017; OIG-17-99-MA, *CBP Spends Millions Conducting Polygraph Examinations on Unsuitable Applicants*, August 4, 2017.

⁹ See, e.g., OIG-23-05, *Major Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Homeland Security*, November 3, 2023; OIG-25-04, *Major Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Homeland Security*, November 8, 2024.

¹⁰ GAO-23-106203, *High Risk Series*, April 2023, page 158.

I applaud the Administration's interest in combatting waste, fraud, and abuse in government; as my testimony makes evident, my career, like those of many of my fellow IGs, was dedicated to that proposition. But I believe that the Administration has missed the mark in relying on the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to identify and root out waste rather than the mechanism that already exists — the Inspector General community.

First, DOGE is a centralized entity with little background in the agencies that they review. Inspector General offices, in contrast, are decentralized and embedded within their respective agencies. This structural difference means that IGs are better positioned to understand the specific operational challenges and risks within their agencies. Their proximity and background allows them to identify inefficiencies at a granular level and recommend targeted improvements. In contrast, DOGE's broad, government-wide mandate results in more generalized assessments that may fail to understand the context of specific activities.

Second, DOGE does not have the same accountability to Congress and the public. IGs are required to submit written reports to Congress detailing their findings and recommendations, which are then published, ensuring transparency and accountability. IG staff regularly meets with Congressional staff to discuss reports and recommendations. IGs regularly initiate reviews based on recommendations from their Committees of jurisdiction. IGs regularly testify before Congress to explain their findings and answer questions. Congressional appropriators routinely cite IG work product in their Committee Reports, directing agencies to fix the problems that the IGs have found. DOGE does not operate under the same statutory reporting requirements, meaning there is less Congressional and public oversight of its effectiveness and the accuracy of its actions. Without this level of transparency, there is little assurance that DOGE is truly identifying and addressing waste as effectively as the IGs.

Third, and most importantly, DOGE is not governed by the same professional standards as IGs. They have both an oversight and operational role, are not required to comply with the quality standards for accuracy and objectivity that govern IG reports, and they may lack the necessary expertise and training to identify fraud. Moreover, IG staff is conscious of best practices in conducting reviews, such as securely handling information, protecting sensitive personal information, protecting attorney-client and other privileges, and following appropriate data security requirements.

An Inspector General's findings and recommendations are credible specifically *because* they are the result of a rigorous, professional, and transparent process. No ad hoc process, no matter how well intentioned, will garner the same level of credibility and trust.

The False Economy of Mass Firings of Federal Employees

Intuitively, it makes sense that reducing the federal workforce through mass firings would lower costs. In reality, such actions will be unlikely to do so. Indiscriminate personnel cuts often lead to reduced efficiency, increased reliance on contractors, loss of institutional knowledge, and the potential for expensive rehiring efforts later.¹¹ Any reductions in force should be part of a well-thought-out management plan that aligns agency priorities and mission requirements with the workforce needed to carry them out.

Rather than resorting to indiscriminate mass firings, workforce reductions should be approached strategically. Agencies should conduct documented assessments to determine their mission requirements and match the current workforce against those requirements. Cuts should be made only after a full understanding of the agency and its function, an inventory of the current skills present and missing, an assessment of what functions can be eliminated and which roles are essential, and how workforce adjustments align with long-term goals. A well-planned approach—based on data-driven decision making—ensures that cost savings are realized without jeopardizing agency performance or incurring unforeseen expenses. It also avoids what we have recently seen, where employees are dismissed but then brought back after realizing that they provide a necessary, often life-or-death, government mission.

Abrupt reductions in workforce can create critical gaps in expertise and institutional knowledge. Many federal agencies rely on employees with specialized skills and knowledge that take years to develop. Significantly, the Government Accountability Office recently noted that federal agencies currently suffer from a “skills gap” that poses a high risk to the government. These current gaps are broad and affect a variety of functions, including science, technology, engineering, mathematics, cybersecurity, and acquisitions.¹² When these employees are suddenly removed, agencies are left struggling to fulfill their missions, leading to delays in essential services, compliance failures, and operational inefficiencies. Moreover, creating a climate of fear and uncertainty in the government workforce simply drives high quality employees — the ones with the necessary skills and record of performance — out of government service. In many cases, reductions in employee headcount will reduce the necessary controls guarding against fraud, waste and abuse in the

¹¹ That contractors can cost the taxpayers more than federal employees in many circumstances has been well documented. See, e.g., Government Executive, *Civilians are Cheaper than Contractors for Most Defense Jobs, Internal Report Finds*, December 18, 2018 (reporting on internal DOD Study); *Contractors: How Much Are They Costing the Government?*, Hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, March 29, 2012; Project on Government Oversight, *Bad Business: Billions of Taxpayer Dollars Wasted on Hiring Contractors*, September 13, 2011.

¹² GAO-23-106203, *GAO High Risk Series*, April 20, 2023, page 46.

administration of grants or public benefits, or collection of revenue, thereby increasing waste, fraud, and abuse.

Finally, any reduction in force must comply with the laws that Congress has enacted, be decided and executed by those without conflicts of interest, and avoid prohibited personnel practices. Failure to do so results in wasteful and time-consuming litigation, allegations of improper motive, and loss of agency focus in dealing with the fallout from such actions.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.