

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

September 18, 2018

The Honorable Rob Bishop  
Chairman  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representative  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We write to request oversight hearings on the Culture of Corruption at the Department of the Interior (DOI). At least 15 federal investigations have been opened into Secretary Ryan Zinke's ethical conduct and leadership alone. He has accumulated more confirmed federal investigations than the four previous secretaries – Democratic and Republican – combined. This committee has been conspicuously silent on those investigations and the multitude of legal and ethical issues they raise. The time for that silence is over.

The sheer number and breadth of incidents for which independent investigative bodies have found sufficient evidence to warrant a full investigation is staggering. Investigations by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Department of the Interior Office of the Inspector General (OIG), and the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) have spanned Secretary Zinke's tenure and touched on almost every aspect of his conduct and leadership.

1. OIG: Did DOI break the law when forcibly reassigning senior personnel?<sup>1</sup>
2. OSC: Did DOI break the law in reassigning Joel Clement, whose work focused on helping native Alaskan Communities threatened with displacement by climate change?<sup>2</sup>
3. OIG: What are the facts surrounding the threats Sec. Zinke made to Alaska Senators over Sen. Murkowski's health care vote?<sup>3</sup>
4. GAO: Do the known facts surrounding the threats Sec. Zinke made to Alaska senators over Sen. Murkowski's health care vote suggest that laws were broken in levying the threats?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Reassignment of Senior Executives at the U.S Department of the Interior*. Report no. 2017-ER-061. U.S Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General. 1-30.

[https://www.doioig.gov/sites/doioig.gov/files/FinalEvaluation\\_SESReassignments\\_Public.pdf](https://www.doioig.gov/sites/doioig.gov/files/FinalEvaluation_SESReassignments_Public.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Filing a Complaint with OSC."

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/550c5930e4b0a2d2fd8f1a7b/t/59701680cf81e05cd2e3df7/1500518017846/C>. May 10, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "Interior Department Inspector General Letter on Secretary Zinke's Threats Against Senator Murkowski." Mary L. Kendall to Raul M. Grijalva, Frank Pallone, Jr. August 29, 2017. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC. [http://democrats-](http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Interior%20Department%20Inspector%20General%20Letter%20on%20Secretary%20Zinke's%20Threats%20Against%20Senator%20Murkowski.pdf)

[naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Interior%20Department%20Inspector%20General%20Letter%20on%20Secretary%20Zinke's%20Threats%20Against%20Senator%20Murkowski.pdf](http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Interior%20Department%20Inspector%20General%20Letter%20on%20Secretary%20Zinke's%20Threats%20Against%20Senator%20Murkowski.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "U.S. Department of the Interior—Telephone Calls between the Secretary of the Interior and United States Senators from Alaska." Thomas H. Armstrong to Raul M. Grijalva. June 27, 2018. U.S Government Accountability

5. OIG: Did Sec. Zinke's use of chartered and other flights break the law and should the taxpayers have paid for his trips that used a chartered flight, including a \$12,500 charter flight to give a motivational speech unrelated to DOI for a former campaign donor's hockey team?<sup>5</sup>
6. OIG: What are outstanding issues pertaining to Sec. Zinke's travel not covered in the first travel investigation, including the use of DOI-owned vehicles<sup>6</sup>
7. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by charging taxpayers for travel to Las Vegas for political activity?<sup>7</sup>
8. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by charging taxpayers for travel to the U.S. Virgin Islands for political activity?<sup>8</sup>
9. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by charging taxpayers for travel for political activity between March 2017 and October 2017?<sup>9</sup>
10. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by charging taxpayers for travel for political activity when he took a trip to a Congressional district in Pennsylvania right before a special election?<sup>10</sup>
11. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by charging taxpayers for travel for political activity when he took a trip to Florida for a press conference with potential Senatorial candidate Rick Scott?<sup>11</sup>
12. OIG: Did the editing of an NPS report on the effects of sea-level rise on NPS facilities to omit language about climate change violate scientific integrity standards?<sup>12</sup>
13. OIG: Was the decision about whether to allow a new casino on the Connecticut-Massachusetts border handled improperly?<sup>13</sup>
14. OSC: Did Sec. Zinke violate the Hatch Act by using his official account to Tweet a political slogan on his clothing?<sup>14</sup>

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Office, Washington, DC. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/GAO%20Letter%20to%20Grijalva%20and%20Pallone%20on%20Zinke%20Threats%20to%20Alaska%20Senators%20June%2027%202018.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Investigative Report on Secretary Zinke's Use of Chartered and Military Aircraft Between March and September 2017*. Report no. 17-1040. U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General. 1-14.

[https://www.doiig.gov/sites/doiig.gov/files/WebRedacted\\_ZinkeTravel\\_Public\\_041618.pdf](https://www.doiig.gov/sites/doiig.gov/files/WebRedacted_ZinkeTravel_Public_041618.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> "Secretary Ryan Zinke's Use of Taxpayer Funds for Travel." Mary L. Kendall to Raul M. Grijalva, A. Donald McEachin. April 16, 2018. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC.

<http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Kendall-GrijalvaMcEachinTravelRespApril18.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Daly, Matthew. "Watchdog Clears Interior Chief Zinke in Speech to NHL Team." AP News. June 05, 2018.

Accessed September 10, 2018. <https://www.apnews.com/3910b728e455453c96836324dab7d8b>.

<sup>8</sup> Id.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> Email between House Natural Resources Committee staff and Office of Special Counsel staff on June 5, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Email between House Natural Resources Committee staff and Office of Special Counsel staff on April 9, 2018

<sup>12</sup> *Summary: Alleged Scientific Integrity Violations Related to National Park Service Report*. Report no. 18-0706. U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General. Washington, DC, 2018. 1.

[https://www.doiig.gov/sites/doiig.gov/files/InvestigativeSummary\\_NPSAllegedSIViolations.pdf](https://www.doiig.gov/sites/doiig.gov/files/InvestigativeSummary_NPSAllegedSIViolations.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Gosselin, Kenneth R. "Inspector General Probes Interior Department's Handling of Connecticut Casino Expansion." Hartford Courant. April 23, 2018. Accessed September 10, 2018. <http://www.courant.com/business/hc-inspector-general-probe-east-windsor-casino-20180423-story.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Rod, Marc. "Office of Special Counsel Opens Case File on Zinke's 'Make America Great Again' Socks." CNN. July 10, 2018. Accessed September 10, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/09/politics/zinke-socks-maga-trump-osc-case-file/index.html>.

15. OIG: Did Sec. Zinke break the law in his “ongoing involvement in and use of taxpayer resources to advance” a real estate deal in Whitefish, Mont., that involved the chairman of Halliburton and land owned by Zinke?<sup>15</sup>

Secretary Zinke’s handling of these investigations is as important as the investigations themselves. Indeed, the Zinke administration’s track record of obstructing federal investigations and withholding information from its own ethics team is a fitting place to start holding oversight hearings. Especially deserving of oversight, for instance, is the openly defiant letter from DOI refusing to provide GAO officials the information they needed about the Secretary’s threats to Alaska’s two senators over Sen. Murkowski’s health care vote. The letter included language that suggests DOI, on Secretary Zinke’s watch, does not feel itself accountable to outside parties or subject to legitimate scrutiny.<sup>16</sup>

DOI’s pattern of obstruction extends further. Before the investigation into Secretary Zinke’s travel was completed, the OIG issued an unusual rebuke of DOI’s recordkeeping, saying “We have found the documentation and adherence to Departmental travel policies deficient and without proper management oversight and accountability ... Our investigation has been delayed by absent, or incomplete documentation for several pertinent trips and a review process that failed to include proper documentation and accountability.”<sup>17</sup>

Even with incomplete documentation, the OIG was able to discover that Secretary Zinke and his staff withheld information from the ethics team that would likely have caused them to deny the Secretary’s request for a taxpayer-funded \$12,375 charter jet flight to Las Vegas to give a speech to a campaign donor’s hockey team.<sup>18</sup> As the OIG found, the speech had nothing to do with DOI. The investigation also found that an “official” event in the Las Vegas area was scheduled *after* the hockey team speech was scheduled, possibly to make the travel request appear legitimate. When asked whether the hockey team speech or the official event drove the schedule, the Secretary said the official event did, which contradicted an earlier statement made to ethics staff, and which was contradicted by the order in which the events were booked. The investigation further found that the charter flight “could have been avoided if the speech to the Golden Knights had not been on Zinke’s itinerary or if the time of the event had been changed.” The Secretary ultimately charged the \$12,375 charter flight to the American public – without apology.

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<sup>15</sup> "Interior Department Inspector General Confirm Investigation Zinke Halliburton Meeting July 2018." Letter to Raul M. Grijalva, A. Donald McEachin, Jared Huffman. July 2018. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC. <http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Interior%20Department%20Inspector%20General%20Confirms%20Investigation%20of%20Zinke%20Halliburton%20Meeting%20July%202018%202018.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> "DOI Response to GAO Request on Zinke." Daniel H. Jorjani to Edda Emmanuelli Perez. March 27, 2018. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC.

<http://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/imo/media/doc/DOI%20Response%20to%20GAO%20Request%20on%20Zinke%20Calls%20with%20Alaska%20Senators%20March%202018%202018.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> "Incomplete Documentation Identified During Investigation." Memorandum from Mary L. Kendall to David W. Bernhardt. Nov 15, 2017. Department of the Interior, Washington DC. [https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/MA\\_ZinkeTravel\\_111517.pdf](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/MA_ZinkeTravel_111517.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> *Investigative Report on Secretary Zinke's Use of Chartered and Military Aircraft Between March and September 2017*. Report no. 17-1040. U.S Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General. 1-14. [https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/WebRedacted\\_ZinkeTravel\\_Public\\_041618.pdf](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/WebRedacted_ZinkeTravel_Public_041618.pdf).



Just as seriously, the OIG investigation into the reassignment of Senior Executive Service personnel throughout DOI was unable to determine whether the law was broken because the political appointees that decided who would be reassigned did not document their decisions. When the OIG asked the political appointees for the reasoning behind their decisions, their answers were easily proven false. If independent investigative bodies are unable to find the answers to legitimate questions because of obstruction by DOI, it is incumbent on this Committee to get those answers.

Equally serious questions have been raised about the conduct of Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt. What little is known about his multiple, potential conflicts of interests arising from his years as a lobbyist, raises serious concerns.<sup>19</sup> In addition, he led the committee of political appointees that decided which senior DOI personnel would be reassigned – allegedly in retaliation for their work – and broke with years of precedent in deciding not to document its decisions.<sup>20</sup> That documentation failure, along with the false information provided to the OIG, prevented the OIG from determining whether laws were broken in the reassignment process.

The 13,000 pages of documents recently released pursuant to a Freedom of Information Act request about the handling of sage grouse habitat somehow included no emails sent by Mr. Bernhardt as of August 10.<sup>21</sup> Mr. Bernhardt appears to be more interested in covering his tracks than in providing transparency or answering questions about his decisions. This Committee would be derelict in allowing a figure with his level of public responsibility to operate without oversight and to ignore all requests for information about his work process. This level of stonewalling is irresponsible and unacceptable regardless of which party occupies the White House, and there is no reason to continue to accept it unchallenged.

The hearings we should hold in the coming months could build on hearings held in the previous Congress by the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee on what Republicans claimed was DOI's "Culture of Corruption" under the Obama administration. The hearing memorandum discussed "how DOI's culture and ethics structure has contributed to an environment in which ethics violations are commonplace, particularly on the part of political appointees."<sup>22</sup> Hearings in this vein would complement the letter you recently sent to Secretary Zinke on your continued concern about ethical behavior by DOI employees – a letter in which none of the ethical questions surrounding the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary were included.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rowland-Shea, Jenny, and Marc Rehmann. *President Trump's Interior Department Is Benefiting Past Political Donors and Lobbying Clients*. 2018 Center for American Progress, Energy and Environment. Clients. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2018/08/27/455150/the-favor-factory/>

<sup>20</sup> *Reassignment of Senior Executives at the U.S Department of the Interior*. Report no. 2017-ER-061. U.S Department of the Interior, Office of Inspector General. 1-30. [https://www.doioig.gov/sites/doioig.gov/files/FinalEvaluation\\_SESReassignments\\_Public.pdf](https://www.doioig.gov/sites/doioig.gov/files/FinalEvaluation_SESReassignments_Public.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Doyle, Michael, et al. "INTERIOR: Zinke's Deputy: Civil, Self-Confident and under the Radar." *HYDROPOWER: Canada Has Too Much Clean Electricity. Anybody Want It? -- Thursday, September 21, 2017*, [www.eenews.net/greenwire/stories/1060093769](http://www.eenews.net/greenwire/stories/1060093769).


<sup>22</sup> "Investigating the Culture of Corruption at the Department of the Interior." Majority Hearing Memo. Majority Committee Staff, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, House Committee on Natural Resources. Accessed September 10, 2018. [https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hearing\\_memo\\_-\\_ov\\_hrg\\_on\\_05.24.16.pdf](https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hearing_memo_-_ov_hrg_on_05.24.16.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Ryan Zinke from Rob Bishop. September 4, 2018. [https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2018-09-04\\_bishop\\_to\\_zinke\\_doi\\_re\\_workplace\\_misconduct\\_final.pdf](https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2018-09-04_bishop_to_zinke_doi_re_workplace_misconduct_final.pdf)

If the full Committee is too busy to conduct needed oversight hearings, perhaps the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations would be willing to make itself available. Since it has not had a single hearing since February, the workload involved in these hearings should prove manageable. At a minimum, the hearing currently planned for September 27<sup>th</sup> at 2 PM in the Federal Lands Subcommittee on the question of ethics problems at DOI must include Secretary Zinke as a witness.

I look forward to working with you to crack down on the culture of corruption at the highest levels of the Department of the Interior, and I eagerly await your reply.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Natural Resources



A. Donald McEachin  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight and  
Investigation

