

Trump fires intelligence community watchdog who defied him on whistle blower complaint

By [Natasha Bertran](#) & [Andrew Desiderio](#)

The president informed Congress of the move in a Friday-evening letter to the House and Senate intelligence committees.



Michael Atkinson, inspector general of the Intelligence Community. | Mark Wilson/Getty Images

President Donald Trump has fired the intelligence community's chief watchdog, Michael Atkinson, who was the first to sound the alarm to Congress last September about an "urgent" complaint he received from an intelligence official involving Trump's communications with Ukraine's president.

Atkinson's decision set in motion the congressional probe that culminated in Trump's impeachment and ultimate acquittal in a bruising political and legal drama that consumed Washington for months.

Trump formally notified the Senate and House Intelligence Committees of his intention to fire Atkinson, to take effect 30 days from Friday, according to two congressional officials and a copy of the letter obtained by POLITICO dated April 3. "This is to advise that I am exercising my power as president to remove from office the inspector general of the intelligence community, effective 30 days from today," the president wrote.

Trump said in the [letter](#) that he "no longer" has the fullest confidence in Atkinson. "As is the case with regard to other positions where I, as president, have the power of appointment, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, it is vital that I have

the fullest confidence in the appointees serving as inspectors general,” he wrote. “That is no longer the case with regard to this inspector general.” Trump added that he would be submitting a new nominee for the position to the Senate “at a later date.”

In an unusual rebuke of a president, Michael Horowitz, the chair of the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, said in a statement: “Inspector General Atkinson is known throughout the Inspector General community for his integrity, professionalism, and commitment to the rule of law and independent oversight. That includes his actions in handling the Ukraine whistle-blower complaint, which the then Acting Director of National Intelligence stated in congressional testimony was done ‘by the book’ and consistent with the law.”

Democrats immediately blasted the move as an abuse of power at a dangerous time for the United States.

Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.), the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called Atkinson’s firing “unconscionable,” and accused the president of an ongoing effort to politicize intelligence.

“In the midst of a national emergency, it is unconscionable that the president is once again attempting to undermine the integrity of the intelligence community by firing yet another intelligence official simply for doing his job,” Warner said in a statement.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) described the firing as “retribution” coming in the “dead of night” and called it “yet another blatant attempt by the president to gut the independence of the intelligence community and retaliate against those who dare to expose presidential wrongdoing.”

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said Atkinson’s ouster was evidence that Trump “fires people for telling the truth.”

Mark Zaid, a national security lawyer who represented the Ukraine whistle-blower, called the firing “delayed retaliatory action” for Atkinson’s “proper handling of a whistle-blower complaint.”

“This action is disgraceful and undermines the integrity of the whistle-blower system,” Zaid said. “It is time GOP members of the Senate stand up for the rule of law and speak out against this president.”

According to a congressional source, Atkinson was only informed on Friday evening that he had been fired. He was immediately placed on administrative leave, the source added, which allows the Trump administration to “effectively circumvent” a law requiring 30 days notice to the congressional intelligence committees.

The whistle-blower complaint effectively kicked off the House’s impeachment inquiry, which began in late September amid allegations that Trump had solicited foreign interference in the 2020 election when he asked Ukraine’s president to investigate his political opponents, including Joe Biden.

Atkinson opposed the decision by then-acting director of national intelligence Joseph Maguire to withhold the whistle-blower complaint from the House and Senate intelligence committees — in particular, Maguire’s decision to seek guidance on the issue from the Justice Department, rather than turn it over to Congress as required by law.

The impasse highlighted the fact that whistle-blower protection laws never envisioned a scenario in which the director of national intelligence would withhold a complaint from lawmakers — especially one the inspector general had deemed “urgent” after investigating the matter. Nor did they envision a scenario in which an intelligence agent would blow the whistle on the president, whose unique legal status made the situation unprecedented.

Atkinson was nominated by Trump in November 2017 after serving 16 years at the Justice Department. The inspector general conducts investigations and reviews of activities within the purview of the director of national intelligence, and also handles whistle-blower complaints from within the intelligence community.

The issue of whistleblower protection was a central focus of Atkinson’s confirmation hearing, where he pledged to establish “a safe program where whistleblowers do not have fear of retaliation and where they’re confident that the system will treat them fairly and impartially.”



Atkinson's removal follows that of Maguire, who was removed after his staff briefed members of Congress about Russian interference in the 2020 campaign.

Maguire was replaced in the acting role by Richard Grenell, Trump's fiercely loyal ambassador to Germany. Weeks into the job, Grenell has plowed ahead with a series of internal changes despite the president announcing a permanent pick for the director of national intelligence post, Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-Texas).

Those moves led to furious denunciations from Democrats and a relatively cool reception from Republicans, who have nonetheless signaled that they will not oppose Ratcliffe.

Trump's move to oust Atkinson by suspending him and waiting out the 30-day congressional notification period appears to have precedent about a decade ago in President Barack Obama's removal of Gerald Walpin, the inspector general of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Obama took action to dismiss Walpin in 2009 after receiving reports that he was "confused, disoriented [and] unable to answer questions" at a meeting of the agency's board, according to a letter sent to Congress.

While Atkinson had been recently focused on Trump's conduct, there was no indication Walpin was investigating Obama at the time of his dismissal, although Walpin later said he thought his removal might have been related to an investigation into one of Obama's prominent supporters.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and then-Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) [both objected](#) to the process Obama used, saying the 30-day period should have been used to consult with Congress rather than removing Walpin immediately.

Kyle Cheney and Josh Gerstein contributed to this report.