

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Hearing on H.R. 984, the Executive Branch Reform Act, and H.R. 985, the Whistleblower
Protection Enhancement Act

February 13, 2007

Today, the Committee holds a hearing on two bills, the Executive Branch Reform Act and the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act. Both of these bills are the product of hard work and close bipartisan cooperation. Both of these measures were also reported out by this Committee on near-unanimous votes in the last Congress.

Last year when we marked up these bills, I said they were an example of how Congress ought to work. I still feel that way, and I want to thank Ranking Member Davis for all the effort he has put into these measures, and for the truly bipartisan spirit with which he has approached these issues.

The indictments and scandals that have gripped Washington in recent years are proof that our existing laws need to be strengthened. The public wants honesty and accountability in government, and it is our job in the Oversight Committee to take the lead on reform.

At the end of last Congress, Ranking Member Davis and I released a bipartisan report on Jack Abramoff's contacts with White House officials. Our report offered – and I quote – “an unusually detailed glimpse into a sordid subculture of fraud and attempted influence peddling.” We undertook this investigation because we wanted to learn what reforms would protect the integrity and increase the transparency of government.

We were able to reach agreement on a report about Jack Abramoff because we decided to let the facts speak for themselves and avoid characterizations, inferences, and spin. And although we drew somewhat different conclusions from the facts we recounted, we did reach agreement about the need for fundamental reform. We recognized that changes in the law were needed to bring – and I quote – “greater transparency to meetings between the private sector and executive branch officials by requiring all political appointees and senior officials in federal agencies and the White House to report their contacts with private parties seeking to influence official government action.”

Today, we begin this reform process.

The Executive Branch Reform Act, which Ranking Member Davis and I have introduced, is a comprehensive reform measure that would increase transparency in the executive branch by requiring senior government officials to report significant contacts with lobbyists. It would end the secret meetings between special interests and government officials that characterized the operations of Vice President Cheney's energy task force. And it would expose the activities of influence-peddlers like Jack Abramoff to public scrutiny.

That's why this bill may be the most significant open-government legislation since the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act.

Today, we will also be considering the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act. This important bill would for the first time extend whistleblower protections to national security officials and employees of federal contractors. It would make key improvements to current law to protect all whistleblowers in federal government agencies. And it would ensure that federal scientists who report political interference with their work are protected from retribution.

A key component of accountability is whistleblower protection. Federal employees are on the inside. They see when taxpayer dollars are wasted. They are often the first to see the signals of corrupt or incompetent management. Yet without adequate protections, they cannot step forward to blow the whistle.

There are many federal government workers who deserve whistleblower protection, but perhaps none more than national security officials. These are federal government employees who have undergone extensive background investigations, obtained security clearances, and handled classified information on a routine basis. Our own government has concluded that they can be trusted to work on the most sensitive law enforcement and intelligence projects. Yet these officials receive no protection when come forward to identify abuses that are undermining our national security.

This bill would finally give these courageous individuals the protection they deserve.

I am very proud of the leadership role our Committee – on a bipartisan basis – is taking on these important bills.

We are the Committee with the authority to reform the ethics laws that govern the executive branch of the federal government. We are the Committee with the authority to restore the principles of open government. And we are the Committee with authority to close the revolving door between federal agencies and the private sector ... to ban secret meetings between government officials and lobbyists ... and to halt procurement abuses.

To meet these challenges, we must use our broad oversight power to investigate and expose abuses. But we should not stop there. We should also use our legislative authority to draft essential reforms.

Today, we begin this important legislative process.