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Federal Agents Raid Office of Special Counsel

By Carrie Johnson and Christopher Lee
Washington Post Staff Writers
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Nearly two dozen federal agents yesterday raided the Washington headquarters of the agency that protects government whistle-blowers, as part of an intensifying criminal investigation of its leader, who is fighting allegations of improper political bias and obstruction of justice.

Agents fanned out yesterday morning in the agency's building on M Street, where they sequestered [Office of Special Counsel](#) chief [Scott J. Bloch](#) for questioning, served grand-jury subpoenas on 17 employees and shut down access to computer networks in a search lasting more than five hours.

Bloch, who was nominated to his post by [President Bush](#) in 2003, is the principal official responsible for protecting federal employees from reprisals for complaints about waste and fraud. He also polices violations of Hatch Act prohibitions on political activities in federal offices.

Bloch has long been a target of criticism, some of it by his agency's career officials, but the [FBI](#)'s abrupt seizure of computers and records marked a substantial escalation of the executive branch's probe of his conduct. Retired FBI agents and former prosecutors called the raid an unusual, if not unprecedented, intrusion on the work of a federal agency.

Agents from the [Office of Personnel Management](#)'s inspector general's office, who have been investigating Bloch for more than two years, visited his home on Stockade Drive in Alexandria yesterday. They left carrying boxes of files.

A Kansas lawyer who previously worked at the [Justice Department](#)'s Task Force on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, Bloch repeatedly clashed with his own workforce and with other Bush administration officials he targeted for improper behavior. By his own account, the [White House](#) twice asked him to resign.

Yesterday, a Bush spokesman declined to address Bloch's status. Roscoe C. Howard, the former U.S. attorney in the District who represents Bloch, declined to comment.

The agents from the FBI's Washington Field Office arrived around 10:30 a.m., just as senior staff members had begun their weekly management meeting. Deputy Special Counsel James Byrne later told employees that they were not the targets of criminal investigators, who were interested in Bloch's conduct, according to two witnesses.

Byrne instructed workers to notify him if Bloch attempted to contact them for any reason, said the

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witnesses, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they feared becoming ensnared in the case.

"The subpoena is very broad, and it covers a lot of territory," special counsel spokesman James P. Mitchell told reporters outside the agency's locked offices. "We're all just standing back and watching the agents do their work."

Since Bloch's confirmation 4 1/2 years ago, he has been fighting calls for his ouster by independent watchdog groups. He drew fire quickly for removing from the OSC Web site references to the agency's authority to hear complaints by federal employees who alleged discrimination based on their sexual orientation, said Debra S. Katz, a lawyer representing OSC whistle-blowers.

Complaints from Katz's clients and others ultimately prompted the inspector general at the Office of Personnel Management to begin examining Bloch's treatment of workers and his handling of cases involving whistle-blowers at other agencies. During the probe, Bloch hired the technology service Geeks on Call to erase his computer hard drive and those of two aides, giving rise to new allegations that he was obstructing justice.

Bloch told lawmakers that he employed the consultants to wipe out a computer virus and erect firewalls so hackers could not gain access to sensitive information.

The files the FBI asked to view yesterday include documents relating to Bloch's recent investigation of [Lurita Alexis Doan](#), who resigned last week as [General Services Administration](#) chief at the White House's request. Agents also asked for files from a now-closed investigation into the travel of then-national security adviser [Condoleezza Rice](#) before the 2004 election, according to a person who saw the search warrants and subpoenas.

Agency employees and independent groups have criticized Bloch for not fully investigating older claims that he inherited when he took office in early 2004, and for allegedly blocking or instigating probes for political reasons.

Bloch previously has defended his work. "Five earlier investigations revealed no wrongdoing by me," he wrote [The Washington Post](#) in December.

An official present during the raid yesterday said federal agents asked for access to computers and e-mail messages from Bloch and from the mid-level workers who received subpoenas. Investigators also sought credit card receipts, an agency employee said. Some staff members had complained that Bloch used agency funds to buy for his office restroom \$400 hand towels decorated with a special OSC seal, according to another person familiar with the raid.

The head of the Office of Special Counsel is appointed for a five-year term and, unlike the leaders of other federal agencies, can be removed by the president only for a cause such as inefficiency or abuse of power. Those protections were designed to insulate the OSC from political pressure by officials it investigates.

Staff writers Stephen Barr and Daniela Deane and research editor Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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