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From the Los Angeles Times

A Bush appointee goes after the White House

Prosecutor Scott J. Bloch, a committed conservative, is turning heads with his investigation of the administration's political operation, which is headed by Karl Rove.

By Tom Hamburger

Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON — At first glance, Scott J. Bloch seems to fit the profile of the "loyal Bushie," the kind of person the White House salted through the Washington bureaucracy to make sure federal agencies heeded administration priorities.

But Bloch, 48, is a man who defies expectations.

The lifelong Republican runs an agency — the Office of Special Counsel — that is turning its investigative spotlight on the White House, in particular the political operation headed by Karl Rove.

His office is investigating whether Bush administration personnel violated civil statutes by inserting GOP electoral politics into Cabinet agency meetings, firing at least one U.S. attorney, and discussing some of the activities in private e-mails that are missing.

When Bloch was recommended for the post by Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), few imagined his tenure would turn controversial among Bush Republicans. Although Bloch is a committed conservative, he says — displaying his Office of Special Counsel badge with a dash of drama — "I am a prosecutor."

Bloch says he felt compelled to initiate the broad investigation after reviewing results from two seemingly separate inquiries.

The first was a preliminary interview with the fired U.S. attorney from New Mexico, David C. Iglesias, who said, among other things, that his termination might have resulted from his failure to swiftly pursue a corruption case against Democrats.

The second involved a PowerPoint presentation highlighting upcoming battleground election races that a Rove aide, J. Scott Jennings, made at the General Services Administration this year.

"We are the ones who draw the line at putting the people's business into a political machine," Bloch said in an interview last week. "I consider myself a very tough cop

because I consider enforcement of the Hatch Act, which is what we do, an effort to keep government clean and accountable."

Most alarming for the White House is that if the inquiry proceeds as Bloch outlines it, his agency will focus on political strategist Rove's broad effort to harness the federal bureaucracy in service of Republican goals. Even if the investigation does not result in criminal charges, the process of discovery could expose the inner workings of the White House political operation.

Bloch has demonstrated a willingness to go after Rove, at least on the small stuff: The Times has learned that Bloch investigated complaints that Rove's politically related travel had been improperly billed to the government. Bloch's action resulted in a reimbursement to the Treasury Department for what some described as a bookkeeping error.

There is some skepticism about whether a Republican appointee can really investigate the White House, and some have called for the inquiry to be taken out of Bloch's purview.

Critics say Bloch has been soft on Republicans in the past, issuing warning letters instead of taking a hard line in some high-profile cases. They also say that Bloch's investigation is compromised because internal complaints about his management of the Office of Special Counsel have led to a probe by the Office of Personnel Management — putting him in the awkward position of investigating an administration that is investigating him.

"This should be viewed in the context of Bloch's past history, which is one filled with allegations of politicization, reprisal and efforts to use the agency to promote pet causes," said Debra Katz, a Washington lawyer. Katz has filed a lawsuit on behalf of former Bloch employees who allege, among other things, that Bloch stifled dissent as he pushed aside longtime employees and hired friends and political allies.

Bloch disputes the complaints, and the Democratic chairmen of congressional oversight committees provided statements last week expressing general support for his agency's investigation.

But there is no denying that since he was appointed by President Bush to run the obscure Office of Special Counsel in early 2004, he has proved controversial, infuriating government-watchdog and gay rights groups and annoying the White House in the process.

A deeply religious conservative, Bloch came to Washington from Kansas in 2001 through connections to then-Atty. Gen. John Ashcroft and worked on the president's faith-based initiatives in the Justice Department.

He was born in New York City, the son of a television scriptwriter. The family moved west from Brooklyn when Bloch was 3, and he grew up in Los Angeles while his father penned scripts for hit shows including "The Flintstones," "The Jetsons," "Gilligan's Island," "Gunsmoke" and the "The Mod Squad."

His father was a Republican, and as a boy Bloch worked for Ronald Reagan's his first gubernatorial bid.

Bloch surprised his family after graduating from William Howard Taft High School in Woodland Hills by opting for the University of Kansas instead of UCLA or UC Berkeley.

He chose Kansas, he said, because his deceased grandfather, an acclaimed artist who the young Bloch barely knew, had taught and lived there.

"There was a mystery and cachet" about returning to a familial home, he said. "I was attracted by the search for my roots."

What he discovered was the rich legacy of a pioneering German expressionist painter, a man who would become intensely interested in spiritual and religious themes. Although the paintings of Albert Bloch are now worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, the painter eschewed commercialism during his lifetime, telling his students that art "was a search for the truth."

At first, Scott Bloch seemed to be following the path of his father and grandfather, choosing the creative arts. He majored in English, and an emeritus professor, James Gunn, recalls his former student as an assertive and curious participant in a fiction-writing class who seemed destined to be a writer.

In his undergraduate years, Bloch joined a select group of students in a humanities seminar taught by three professors, all Catholic, who urged their students to study Latin and, according to Gunn, think about "traditional values." At least one student in the seminar converted to Catholicism, Gunn said.

Bloch said the course, which emphasized classical education, was a memorable part of his college career, but he declined to discuss any religious effect it might have had.

"I don't really want to talk about that," he said, his face reddening and voice rising. "I think it is an intrusion into my privacy ... for people to have an interest — a prurient interest, I would add — into whether I am a religious conservative or not. I think it is offensive and uncalled for." Some of his critics, he says, have cast his beliefs "into some kind of caricature."

After college, Bloch attended law school and became a litigator for an established Lawrence, Kan., law firm, where he specialized in employment, discrimination and civil rights law — and investigated lawyers charged with ethical violations.

Bloch also dabbled in politics. He managed a friend's failed congressional campaign and was active with the GOP at the precinct level. After George W. Bush won the 2000 election, Bloch sought a federal government job.

Although the Justice Department's task force on the faith-based initiative was not his first choice — he had hoped to be named a U.S. attorney or work in counter-terrorism — he apparently performed well there. Because of his experience in employment law, he was later recommended for the Office of Special Counsel, a quiet backwater in the federal bureaucracy that enforced discrimination bans, whistle-blower protections and the Hatch Act, the 1939 statute that generally prohibits use of government resources for campaign purposes.

The tranquillity vanished almost as soon as Bloch arrived. In one of his first official acts, Bloch created controversy by ordering his staff to remove references to the agency's jurisdiction over "sexual orientation discrimination" from the agency's website and publications. His action pleased religious conservatives, infuriated lesbian and gay activists, and annoyed some people in the White House, which had informally pledged not to roll back discrimination enforcement on behalf of gays and lesbians.

Bloch informed the White House of his plans and was insistent, arguing that the statutes governing his agency did not authorize treating gays and lesbians as a "protected class" entitled to special protection like that awarded to ethnic minority groups.

He said he opposed discrimination of all forms and was not singling out gays and lesbians, just carefully interpreting the statute.

Nonetheless, his actions got him tagged among some gay activists and other critics as being homophobic.

Among his friends back in Kansas, the charge didn't resonate.

"Absolutely not," said one of Bloch's friends, Tim De Paepe, an independent filmmaker and liberal Democrat, who is best known for his award-winning film "Shades of Gray," a sympathetic story about being gay in Kansas.

De Paepe, who is not gay, said Bloch offered support for the film, and De Paepe never detected anti-gay sentiments. The two are working together on a documentary about Bloch's grandfather.

Controversy continued at the once quiet Office of Special Counsel as Bloch transferred some senior employees and replaced them with lawyers he had selected — often on the recommendation of others — from conservative law schools and other federal agencies.

Advocates for whistle-blowers complained that Bloch was not representing concerns of federal bureaucrats who crossed their superiors to report wrongdoing. Some in Bloch's office complained that he would not tolerate staff members who disagreed with him.

Bloch denies the charges, saying he was bringing a different management style to an agency that suffered from bureaucratic malaise and a long backlog of cases. He cites internal statistics showing a big jump in productivity, including whistle-blower protection

and discrimination cases.

(Katz disputes his data in her lawsuit, saying the prior case backlog has been exaggerated.)

"We were mired in bureaucracy," Bloch said. "I wanted to bring a freshness to this place, open the windows, bring in some air.

"I am not conventional," he said. "My grandfather was not conventional. My father was not conventional.

"I do things the way I do them in the interest of doing them effectively, creatively, and doing them with an end in mind, achieving good things, good government and accountability."

It also meant displaying new office decor to signify change. He placed a bust of President Theodore Roosevelt outside his office. And near the entrance to the downtown Washington office suite, he hung a portrait of President James Madison with a quote underneath:

"Liberty may be endangered by the abuse of liberty — but also by the abuse of power."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Scott J. Bloch

- **Name:** Bloch was born Scott J. Black; he changed his name in 1975
 - **Age:** 48; born Sept. 19, 1958, in New York
 - **Experience:** Special counsel, U.S. Office of Special Counsel, 2004-present; associate director, deputy director and counsel for the Justice Department's Task Force for Faith-based and Community Initiatives, 2001-2003; partner in Stevens & Brand LLP, Lawrence, Kan., 1989-2001; graduate teaching assistant, University of Kansas School of Law, 1986; law clerk in various offices, 1984-86; various jobs as copywriter, painter, independent contractor and Wal-Mart assistant manager, 1980-84
 - **Education:** Bachelor of arts, University of Kansas, 1980; law degree, University of Kansas School of Law, 1986
 - **Family:** Wife, Catherine; seven children
- Source: Associated Press