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Putting the Squeeze On

Democrats widen their probes, and a controversial Bush insider chimes in

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Every spring, residents of the nation's capital sniffle and commiserate over their seasonal allergies. But this year the Bush White House is suffering from an especially potent seasonal affective disorder: an unremitting wave of formative scandals. Most may amount to nothing, but with the White House's immunity to oversight severely weakened by November's election rout, Bush officials are swamped with endless subpoena requests and preparations for Capitol Hill grillings.

Although Democrats seem to be as indiscriminate as pollen in the focus of their investigations, one particular target is Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove. Among other things, the House and Senate Judiciary committees and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee are seeking E-mails sent by Rove to Justice Department officials about the firing of federal prosecutors, as well as documents and testimony from Justice and White House officials that could shed light on whether a former aide to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales illegally considered party affiliations when hiring career prosecutors. Democrats also want to know whether Rove and other officials improperly or illegally used E-mail accounts set up by the Republican National Committee, or violated the law by conducting briefings about key political races on federal property. (Rove's RNC E-mails, which are missing, are the subject of much partisan ire.) Democrats also are threatening to subpoena Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to obtain her testimony about pre-Iraq war intelligence failures, and they've summoned former CIA director George Tenet as well. Matters got so fractious last week that even the chairman of the traditionally low-key House Education and Labor Committee became swept up in the paper chase, demanding all White House communications relating to a controversial student loan program and the administration's contentious billion-dollar reading initiative.

Explosive. Until recently, White House officials were able to fob off some of these requests as a partisan smear campaign. But then one of Bush's own political appointees, heading the little-known U.S. Office of Special Counsel, announced yet another potentially explosive investigation into the missing Rove RNC E-mails, the political briefings at federal buildings, and the firing of David Iglesias, the U.S. attorney for New Mexico. Scott Bloch, 48, has served as Bush's head of the Office of Special Counsel since January 2004. With a bare-bones budget of \$16 million and 106 employees, the special counsel's office enforces obscure laws that protect federal employees including whistleblowers from discrimination.

Bloch says that his other mandate, to enforce civil statutes such as the Hatch Act—which protects employees from being coerced into campaign activities and bars the use of federal resources for electioneering—gives him jurisdiction to investigate the missing RNC E-mails and related matters. And Bloch wants to know whether Gonzales's firing of Iglesias—because he was periodically an "absentee landlord," when fulfilling his military duties as a captain in the Navy reserve—violates the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act, which Bloch also enforces. "We felt it was incumbent upon our office, in the public interest," Bloch told *U.S. News*, "to look at all these issues." A tall, imposing man, Bloch clearly is no shrinking violet when it comes to taking on such a volatile probe. But at the same time, the special counsel has come under great fire from liberal activist groups who say Bloch is hugely conflicted because he is the target of a big investigation initiated by the White House into his alleged lax enforcement of whistle-blower and sexual-orientation discrimination cases, and his alleged intimidation of whistle-blowers within his own office.

In October 2005, the White House asked the inspector general of the Office of Personnel Management to investigate Bloch after a group of anonymous career employees in his office—along with four public interest groups including the Project for Government Oversight, which monitors federal contracts, and the gay and lesbian rights advocacy group Human Rights Campaign—filed an administrative complaint. POGO'S Beth Daley says Bloch's questioning by the inspector general was imminent, making his own sudden investigation of Bush highly suspect. "The White House has been threatening to fire him for months, and he's been whining about it all around town," says Daley. "For him to turn around and say he's going to conduct an impartial investigation of the White House, that's a huge conflict of interest."

But Bloch, describing the complaint filed against him as a bunch of "trumped up charges by outside interest groups" without a "scintilla of evidence," vows to stay the course on the Bush probe. "I can't be deterred from doing my job because outside interests are screaming," says Bloch. "We've had a legal opinion from our legal counsel policy division that there is no conflict of interest, no reason for me to recuse myself whatsoever, and I won't." White House spokeswoman Emily Lawrimore says Bush officials will "cooperate with the special counsel investigation as appropriate." They may not have much choice. Bloch is a political appointee, just like the U.S. attorneys whom Bush fired. But unlike those federal prosecutors, Bloch does not serve "at pleasure" but was named to a five-year term. So unless Bloch is found guilty of specific wrongdoing and fired, he could become a veritable thorn in this little thicket of scandals that is turning into a major irritant to the Bush White House.

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Note: Chitra Ragavan's story was shortened significantly from what had been envisioned, and she was able to use far less information than she had been provided. Editors wanted it to fit into a cover theme for this issue: "[Bush's Last Stand](#)" He's plagued by a hostile Congress, sinking polls, and an unending war. Yet he won't budge. Is he resolute -- or delusional? /JPM