



A DHS Official Says He Was Punished for Not Pushing Trump's Agenda

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After years of tension between President Donald Trump's administration and the United States intelligence community, a new whistleblower complaint filed by a former senior Department of Homeland Security official alleges a grim climate of bias and politicization within the Department of Homeland Security's intelligence apparatus. In particular, it accuses DHS leadership of working to minimize intelligence findings about Russia's threat to the 2020 US election and beyond, as well as the national security risk from rising white supremacist ideology.

The complaint comes from Brian Murphy, who ran DHS's intelligence branch until the end of July and was then reassigned to the agency's management division. Murphy was transferred after controversy over revelations, which he disputes, that his department had produced intelligence reports about journalists and protesters in Portland, Oregon. In his complaint, Murphy alleges that he faced repeated pressure from acting DHS secretary Chad Wolf to curtail intelligence findings, including those about the threat of Russian meddling.

"Mr. Wolf stated to Mr. Murphy the intelligence notification should be 'held' because it 'made the President look bad,'" the complaint says.

The document also describes directives from acting deputy DHS secretary Kenneth Cuccinelli to modify assessments about the threat of white supremacy, and to highlight the activities of "left-wing" organizations. The complaint additionally alleges that DHS officials overstated intelligence findings to Congress about the threat of suspected terrorists entering the US through the southwest border.

The common thread throughout the complaint: Allegations that Wolf and others sought to alter or manipulate intelligence conclusions to suit the President's political agenda. If true, this would confirm what Trump himself has indicated many times, that he prizes loyalty to his administration's agenda over objective and unbiased intelligence gathering. And it aligns with specific linchpins of the Trump administration's stated priorities, including building a border wall and minimizing the scope and impact of Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election. Trump has also repeatedly declined to condemn—and in some cases arguably courted—white supremacists in tweets and other public commentary.

The complaint says that Murphy made at least five disclosures to his superiors between March 2018 and August 2020 about these alleged breaches of protocol, and asserts that this was the true

reason for his removal. Murphy filed the complaint on Tuesday and the House Intelligence Committee released it on Wednesday.

"The whistleblower retaliation complaint filed by former Acting Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis Brian Murphy outlines grave and disturbing allegations that senior White House and Department of Homeland Security officials improperly sought to politicize, manipulate, and censor intelligence in order to benefit President Trump politically," committee chairman Adam Schiff said in a statement on Thursday. "This puts our nation and its security at grave risk."

The intelligence community has long prized political neutrality as core to its national security mission. President Trump has very openly flouted this norm, though, throughout his presidency, frequently ignoring and deriding intelligence community assessments he disagrees with and installing appointees who frequently lack experience. That most recently includes director of national intelligence John Ratcliffe, previously a fervent Trump supporter in Congress who is by far the least-qualified individual to lead the ODNI.

"The substance of the complaint is not hugely surprising given everything else we know, both about the administration's other efforts to politicize intelligence and law enforcement and its assault on independent Inspectors General," says Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "Trump's view from the outset has fairly clearly been that the job of intelligence agencies is to produce analysis that validates his own political rhetoric and bolsters his image. And to the extent they fail to do so, they are disloyal representatives of a 'Deep State.'"

Murphy's complaint calls on DHS's inspector general to investigate. The House Intelligence Committee has requested that Murphy testify about the allegations.

The risks of politicizing intelligence work, especially to the extremes detailed in the complaint, are manifold. If officials have a political agenda they will promote some intelligence gathering and deprioritize other efforts, eventually creating potential blindspots that could prove disastrous.

"These are allegations of serious silencing and skewing of intelligence for political purposes. If true, they are perhaps most worrisome because they don't appear to be outliers during the Trump administration," says Joshua Geltzer, former senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council and executive director of Georgetown Law School's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection. "Instead, we've seen this administration use and abuse intelligence for President Trump's personal political gain. Moreover, intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination looks like just one of the tools of the executive branch that Trump is willing to exploit, alongside military aid and even domestic assistance."

While not all of Murphy's allegations have yet been verified, recent news reports appear to substantiate some of the claims. ABC News revealed last week that DHS withheld an intelligence bulletin in early July that would have cautioned law enforcement agencies about a Russian effort to sow doubt about former vice-president Joe Biden's mental health status. Murphy's complaint describes this incident as well.

Top intelligence officials also said last week that they will cease providing in-person briefings to Congress about election security intelligence and will instead only provide written updates. Though not mentioned in Murphy's complaint, representative Schiff noted in his statement that the move seems in line with the tenor of Murphy's accusations.

"I think anyone reading this complaint would be amply justified in worrying that the intelligence community has, at least to some extent, been effectively directed to get out of the way of Putin's efforts to help Trump," Sanchez says.