



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

The Inspector General Systems Aren't Broken. They're Failing Exactly as Designed.

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For years, the Department of Defense has treated failures in its Inspector General and administrative-investigation system as problems of process: a training gap here, a staffing shortfall there, a form that needs updating. Whistleblower reprisal is a starkly visible symptom, but it is not the whole disease. The system we mean is larger than the Office of the DoD Inspector General itself. It includes DoD OIG, the Military Department and component IG offices beneath it, and commander-appointed Investigating Officers (IOs) tasked with investigating IG, EO, command, and related administrative matters under governing investigative rules and standards. The same structural concerns extend to the Department of Homeland Security oversight architecture relevant to the Coast Guard, including DHS OIG and Coast Guard administrative investigations. Fix the mechanics, the thinking goes, and the outcomes will follow.

From our vantage point at the Foundation, working an ever-growing caseload involving uniformed service members, veterans, and federal civilians who have tried to navigate these systems, we no longer believe this is merely a mechanical problem. We believe it is an intentional design problem. Across complaint intake, investigation, command review, legal review, corrective action, appeal, and records correction, the same weaknesses recur: investigators who are inconsistently trained; chains of command that retain extraordinary influence over supposedly independent processes; complainants and subjects who receive too little transparency; investigations that can languish without meaningful consequence; and quality-control mechanisms that too often test whether a report is procedurally defensible rather than whether the investigation was actually thorough, impartial, and correct.

The point is not that every IG, IO, commander, attorney, or reviewer acts in bad faith. Many do not. The point is that a system of accountability should not depend on individual heroics to produce a fair result. A sound system should make competence, independence, transparency, and fidelity to evidence the default. Ours too often does not.





START WITH THE DEPARTMENTS' OWN NUMBERS, BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT SUBTLE

By the Department of Defense IG's own accounting,, the annual average substantiation rate for reprisal and restriction complaints across fiscal years 2022 through 2024 was 1.7 percent.¹ Of 2,037 complaints received in an average year, 1,658 were closed — and only 34 were substantiated. That figure does not capture every complaint screened out, referred elsewhere, or otherwise resolved before a full investigation, so it should not be mistaken for a complete measure of every allegation entering the system. It is, however, an extraordinary indicator of how rarely one of the system's most consequential complaint categories ends in substantiation.

But focusing exclusively on reprisal can obscure the broader pattern. Our 2024 report identified recurring failures across military administrative investigations: lack of due process and transparency; conflicts of interest created by command subordination; inadequate training of IG personnel and commander-appointed IOs; excessive delay; normalization of deviations from investigative rules; and the downstream personal and institutional damage those failures create.²

The Foundation's current intake data points in the same direction. Our current dataset of 242 intakes shows:

Reported / Coded Issue	Number of Intakes	% of 242 Intakes
Loss of trust in the system	216	89.30%
Career derailment	188	77.70%
Bias or unfair treatment	120	49.60%
Perceived predetermined outcome	104	43.00%
No opportunity to respond	82	33.90%
Mischaracterized evidence	77	31.80%
Command influence	76	31.40%
Failure to investigate	65	26.90%
Lack of independent IG authority	50	20.70%

Recurring Investigative and Institutional Problems Identified in WTTF Intake Data (n = 242) ³

These categories overlap and the dataset is not a scientific sample of the entire federal workforce. It is nevertheless a useful description of what people who seek our help say is going wrong.

That matters because the investigative enterprise handles far more than reprisal. It touches allegations of abuse of authority, fraud, waste, misconduct, discrimination and EO matters, command climate, personnel actions, security-clearance consequences, administrative separations, and other matters capable of altering careers and lives. The same investigative weakness that can miss reprisal can also distort a command-directed investigation, an EO matter, an adverse personnel action, or a Coast Guard administrative investigation. The failure mode is therefore not confined to one statute or one office. It is systemic.

ASK WHY, AND THE ANSWER ISN'T INCOMPETENCE. IT'S INCENTIVE.

Consider who is doing the investigating. Across this enterprise, the person gathering facts may be a career or assigned IG professional, a Service or component investigator, or a commander-appointed IO whose principal occupation is something else entirely. Our 2024 review found that some IG personnel received only rudimentary investigative preparation and that some commander-appointed IOs received training measured in hours, sometimes little more than written instructions and legal guidance.⁴ Yet these investigators can be asked to resolve credibility disputes, weigh conflicting evidence, identify the correct legal or regulatory standard, apply a preponderance-of-the-evidence threshold, and write findings that can trigger removal, separation, loss of promotion, clearance consequences, or permanent reputational harm.



That is not merely a reprisal problem, but instead a competency problem across administrative investigations. An investigator who does not know how to frame allegations, identify elements of proof, preserve and test evidence, assess credibility without substituting intuition for analysis, or distinguish inculpatory from exculpatory evidence can produce an unreliable result regardless of the allegation being investigated. And once an unreliable investigative product enters an official record, later systems — promotion boards, security-clearance adjudicators, separation authorities, correction boards, federal personnel processes, and even future IG reviewers — may treat that product as presumptively reliable. A weak investigation can therefore become the foundation for years of downstream administrative consequences.

THEN THERE IS THE WORD DOING THE HEAVIEST LIFTING IN THIS ENTIRE CONVERSATION: "INDEPENDENT."

The DoD IG system is described, in statute and policy, as an independent oversight mechanism. But the larger enterprise is structurally complicated: DoD OIG sits at the top of one portion of the architecture, while Military Department and component IGs operate within their own organizations, and commander-appointed IOs may be selected, tasked, resourced, and reviewed by the very commands whose interests are implicated by the investigation. Our 2024 report identified this subordination as a central conflict-of-interest risk.⁵ The problem is not solved simply because an investigator is personally honorable. Independence must be designed into assignment, supervision, scope, evidence access, review, and final disposition.

The Coast Guard illustrates why this discussion cannot stop at the Pentagon. When operating outside the Navy, the Coast Guard falls within the Department of Homeland Security, and Coast Guard administrative investigations are governed through a separate departmental and Service framework. Coast Guard policy itself recognizes administrative investigations as a means to gather information for command decisions and permits commanders and civilian directors to initiate inquiries into matters affecting their organizations.⁶ That makes the same questions unavoidable: Who appoints the investigator? Who defines the scope? Who controls access to evidence? Who reviews the findings? What happens when the investigation implicates the appointing authority or senior leadership? And what independent mechanism tests the quality of the finished product?

Nor is the problem exclusively military. Federal civilians can be complainants, witnesses, subjects, or targets of administrative processes; DoD OIG's own whistleblower-reprisal mission expressly covers categories of DoD civilian employees and other non-uniformed personnel.⁷ The Foundation's mission therefore encounters the same accountability problem from several directions — uniformed members, Coast Guard personnel, veterans living with the consequences of past administrative actions, and federal civilians navigating agency oversight and personnel systems.

Across these systems, meaningful quality control remains inconsistent. Legal-sufficiency review can be important, but legal sufficiency is not synonymous with investigative quality. A report may be legally defensible and still be incomplete, poorly scoped, evidentially thin, or distorted by untested assumptions. What is missing is a reliable enterprise-wide mechanism for independent peer review, investigator performance assessment, auditable evidence handling, and feedback from the people who actually experience the process. A system that measures paperwork more reliably than investigative accuracy will predictably optimize for paperwork.

WE HAVE WATCHED THIS DYNAMIC UP CLOSE — ACROSS OFFICES, SERVICES, COMMANDS, AND POPULATIONS.

In the fall of 2024, Walk the Talk Foundation representatives met directly with then–DoD Inspector General Robert Storch and laid out these exact gaps: the extraordinarily low reprisal substantiation rates, training shortfalls, and absence of meaningful quality control.⁸ Those concerns did not originate in a single meeting or a single class of cases. They reflected the same themes documented in our 2024 report and repeated in the cases that have continued to reach the Foundation since then.



Storch's proposed remedy: hold annual meetings to discuss the issues further.⁹

Not a task force. Not a pilot quality review. Not a credentialing requirement. Not an independent audit of investigative accuracy. A meeting, to be followed, presumably, by another meeting. Whatever one thinks of that exchange, it captures the institutional problem: the people harmed by a defective investigation experience consequences immediately, while the organizations responsible for improving the system can treat reform as an indefinitely discussable management issue.

And the same dynamic exists below the DoD OIG level. A Service IG can refer or oversee matters handled elsewhere. A command can appoint an IO. A legal office can review the resulting report. A commander can act on it. A later board or agency can rely on it. Responsibility is distributed across the system, but accountability for the quality of the final investigative product can become diffuse. When everyone owns a piece of the process, too often no one owns the failure.

HERE IS THE UNCOMFORTABLE CONCLUSION WE'VE ARRIVED AT AFTER ENOUGH CASES TO STOP BELIEVING IN COINCIDENCE:

If senior Department leaders genuinely wanted this fixed, it would already be fixed.

The mechanics are not mysterious. Investigators can be trained and credentialed before they are entrusted with consequential cases. Conflicts can be screened before assignment. Evidence can be logged and preserved. Investigative plans and allegation framing can be reviewed. Timelines can be enforced, with written justification when they cannot be met. Reports can undergo genuine independent quality review rather than only a legal-sufficiency check. Complainants and subjects can receive meaningful notice and status information consistent with law and legitimate privacy constraints. Agencies can collect feedback and publish aggregate performance data. And investigations that materially fail those standards can be returned, corrected, or independently reinvestigated. None of this requires new legislation or a blue-ribbon commission. It requires leaders who benefit from a system that rarely finds against them to stop benefiting from it. That has not happened, year after year, case after case, because the current system serves its actual clients extraordinarily well. Those clients are not the airmen, sailors, soldiers, marines, and guardians who report fraud, safety violations, and misconduct in good faith. The client is the institution itself, and specifically the leaders whose decisions might otherwise be scrutinized.

Every low substantiation rate, every undertrained investigator, every investigation shaped by command influence, every missing piece of evidence, every unexplained delay, and every supposedly "independent" review that never tests the underlying investigative work tells the same story. The central problem is larger than whistleblower reprisal and larger than DoD OIG. It is an accountability architecture that too often gives institutions greater procedural protection than the people whose careers and lives are determined by its findings.

For uniformed service members, Coast Guard personnel, veterans, and federal civilians alike, the question is ultimately the same: when the government investigates itself, what makes the result worthy of trust? The answer cannot be a seal on the cover page or the title of the official who signed it. Trust has to be earned through demonstrable competence, independence, transparency, timeliness, and accountability.

WHAT REFORM SHOULD LOOK LIKE

A credible reform agenda should address the whole investigative lifecycle rather than one complaint category. At minimum, DoD and DHS should establish common competency standards for personnel conducting consequential IG and administrative investigations; require role-appropriate training and certification before investigators lead cases; create conflict-of-interest screening and reassignment rules; impose enforceable milestones and completion timelines; standardize evidence preservation and case tracking; require independent quality-assurance review of a meaningful



sample of investigations; create mechanisms to identify repeat investigative deficiencies; and publish aggregate performance data that allows Congress and the public to distinguish activity from effectiveness.

For commander-appointed IOs, the need is particularly acute. An officer should not become an investigator merely because a commander signed an appointment memorandum. Where an investigation can materially affect a person's career, clearance, livelihood, or official record, the government should be able to demonstrate that the investigator was trained for the task, understood the applicable standards, had no disqualifying conflict, and followed a reviewable investigative methodology. The Coast Guard and DHS should be held to the same basic expectation even where their specific authorities and manuals differ from DoD's.

Independence also needs an operational definition. It should include more than organizational branding. Investigators must be able to pursue evidence that reflects poorly on senior leadership without career penalty; appointing authorities should not be able to manipulate scope or findings; and allegations involving senior leaders or the appointing chain should trigger review or transfer outside that chain. Quality review should ask whether the evidence supports the finding, whether contrary evidence was meaningfully tested, and whether the correct standard was applied — not merely whether a lawyer can defend the document's form.

FROM CRITICISM TO CONSTRUCTION: WHAT THE FOUNDATION IS DOING

Walk the Talk Foundation is not arguing that the only available response is to dismantle the existing system and wait for Congress to build another one. We are pursuing reforms on parallel tracks. Our proposed Military Investigative Competency Enhancement Act is designed to professionalize administrative investigation across DoD and DHS/Coast Guard through standardized training, credentialing, independence safeguards, compliance mechanisms, centralized evidence and credential tracking, and recurring external review. The proposal has been developed for legislative consideration in the FY2027 defense-policy cycle.¹⁰

In parallel, the Foundation has developed a draft Executive Order aimed at changes that can be driven through executive authority rather than waiting for every reform to move through the legislative process. The purpose is complementary: legislation can create durable statutory requirements, while executive action can establish government-wide expectations for competence, independence, timeliness, transparency, quality assurance, and accountability in administrative investigations and oversight.¹¹

Those efforts will not solve every problem identified in our casework. They are meant to attack one of the most remediable failures first: the government should not assign people to conduct life-altering investigations without first ensuring they know how to investigate. From there, reform must address the structural conditions that allow even a competent investigator's work to be compromised — command influence, fragmented oversight, weak quality control, opaque procedures, and the absence of meaningful consequences when investigative standards are ignored.

The objective is not a system that substantiates more complaints simply because complainants want it to. It is a system whose outcomes can be trusted because the process that produced them is demonstrably competent and fair. Sometimes a rigorous investigation will substantiate an allegation. Sometimes it will not. Legitimacy comes from knowing that either result was reached by a trained investigator, using the correct standard, considering the full evidentiary record, free from improper influence, within a reasonable time, and subject to meaningful review. That should not be an aspirational standard for government oversight. It should be the minimum one.



Notes

¹ Per DoD Office of Inspector General data (annual average, fiscal years 2022–2024), the Department received 2,037 reprisal and restriction complaints and closed 1,658 of them, substantiating 34 cases — roughly 1.7 percent of complaints received. Source: DoD OIG, “Administrative Investigations: Reprisal or Restriction,” published in connection with National Whistleblowers Appreciation Day 2025.

² Walk the Talk Foundation, “The Department of Defense Inspector General (DoDIG) System: ‘Independent Watchdog’ Turned Institution’s Lapdog,” 14 June 2024. The report identifies six recurring themes: lack of due process and transparency; conflicts of interest arising from command subordination; inadequate investigator training; lack of timeliness; harm associated with the investigative process; and normalization of deviations from law, policy, and investigative standards. [Watchdog Turned Lapdog - The Failure of the DoDIG \(Public Release\)](#)

³ Walk the Talk Foundation, Intake Database, uploaded September 2026. Dataset contains 242 intake records. Counts cited in this article are descriptive, overlapping issue flags and should not be treated as prevalence estimates for the DoD, DHS, Coast Guard, veteran, or federal-civilian populations as a whole.

⁴ Walk the Talk Foundation 2024 report and subsequent case-file review. The report describes IG training in some settings as rudimentary and commander-appointed IO preparation in some cases as measured in hours; it also documents recurring failures involving evidence evaluation and application of the preponderance standard. [Watchdog Turned Lapdog - The Failure of the DoDIG \(Public Release\)](#)

⁵ Walk the Talk Foundation 2024 report, Theme Two, addressing conflicts of interest created by the subordination of Inspectors General and commander-appointed Investigating Officers to commanders whose organizations they may be responsible for scrutinizing. [Watchdog Turned Lapdog - The Failure of the DoDIG \(Public Release\)](#)

⁶ U.S. Coast Guard, Administrative Investigations Manual, COMDTINST M5830.1A, ch. 1. The manual establishes procedures for Coast Guard administrative investigations, states that their purpose is to provide information for command decisions and corrective action, and recognizes authority for commanders and civilian directors to inquire into matters affecting their organizations.

⁷ DoD OIG, Whistleblower Reprisal Investigations mission statement. The directorate’s stated jurisdiction includes members of the Armed Forces, appropriated-fund DoD civilian employees (including members of the DoD intelligence community), certain contractor and grantee personnel, employees with access to classified information, nonappropriated-fund employees, and others.

⁸ Meeting between Walk the Talk Foundation representatives and then–DoD Inspector General Robert P. Storch, fall 2024. Storch served as DoD Inspector General from December 6, 2022, until January 24, 2025.

⁹ Statement attributed to Robert Storch per the Foundation’s account and records of the summer 2024 meeting.

¹⁰ Walk the Talk Foundation, proposed Military Investigative Competency Enhancement Act. The proposal is designed to apply across DoD and DHS/Coast Guard and includes standardized investigative training and credentialing, independence safeguards, compliance and credential-verification mechanisms, centralized tracking, auditing, and review/reporting requirements. [Congress Policy - Walk the Talk Foundation](#)

¹¹ Walk the Talk Foundation draft Executive Order on administrative-investigation reform. This article describes the proposal at a policy level; the final published language should be checked against the latest controlled draft before publication. [Congress Policy - Walk the Talk Foundation](#)

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