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IRS officials in Washington were involved in targeting of conservative groups

By Juliet Eilperin and Zachary A. Goldfarb, May 13, 2013



In a press conference Monday, President Obama addressed the Internal Revenue...

Internal Revenue Service officials in Washington and at least two other offices were involved with investigating conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status, making clear that the effort reached well beyond the branch in Cincinnati that was initially blamed, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post.

IRS officials at the agency's Washington headquarters sent queries to conservative groups asking about their donors and other aspects of their operations, while officials in the El Monte and Laguna Niguel offices in

California sent similar questionnaires to tea-party-affiliated groups, the documents show.

IRS employees in Cincinnati told conservatives seeking the status of "social welfare" groups that a task force in Washington was overseeing their applications, according to interviews with the activists.

Lois G. Lerner, who oversees tax-exempt groups for the IRS, told reporters Friday that the "absolutely inappropriate" actions were undertaken by "front-line people" working in Cincinnati to target groups with "tea party," "patriot" or "9/12" in their names.

In one instance, however, Ron Bell, an IRS employee, informed a lawyer representing a conservative group focused on voter fraud that the application was under review in Washington. On several other occasions, IRS officials in Washington and California sent conservative groups detailed questionnaires about their voter

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outreach and other activities, according to the documents.

“For the IRS to say it was some low-level group in Cincinnati is simply false,” said [Cleta Mitchell](#), a partner in the law firm [Foley & Lardner](#) who sought to communicate with IRS headquarters about the delay in granting tax-exempt status to True the Vote.

Moreover, details of the IRS’s efforts to target conservative groups reached the highest levels of the agency in May 2012, far earlier than has been disclosed, according to Republican congressional aides briefed by the IRS and the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) on the details of their reviews.

Then-Commissioner Douglas Shulman, a George W. Bush appointee who stepped down in November, received a briefing from the TIGTA about what was happening in the Cincinnati office in May 2012, the aides said. His deputy and the agency’s current acting commissioner, Steven T. Miller, also learned about the matter that month, the aides said.

The officials did not share details with Republican lawmakers who had been demanding to know whether the IRS was targeting conservative groups, Republicans said.

“I wrote to the IRS three times last year after hearing concerns that conservative groups were being targeted,” Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (Utah), the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, said in a statement Monday. “In response to the first letter I sent with some of my colleagues, Steven Miller, the current Acting IRS Commissioner, responded that these groups weren’t being targeted.”

“Knowing what we know now,” he added, “the IRS was at best being far from forth coming, or at worst, being deliberately dishonest with Congress.”

As new details emerged Monday, Democrats and Republicans alike decried the agency’s actions as an unacceptable abuse of power.

In a news conference Monday, President Obama said he learned of the investigating in media reports on Friday and has “no patience with it.”

“If in fact IRS personnel engaged in the kind of practices that have been reported on, and were intentionally targeting conservative groups, then that’s outrageous,” Obama said. “And there’s no place for it. And they have to be held fully accountable.”

White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters Monday that the White House counsel’s office learned of an upcoming IRS inspector general’s report on April 22 as part of a routine notification but had not received access to the report.

On Capitol Hill, two Senate panels — the Finance Committee and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations — announced Monday that they will investigate. The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and the Ways and Means Committee have been looking into reports of IRS attempts to single out organizations on the right for heightened scrutiny. Ways and Means has called IRS officials to testify Friday.

“These actions by the IRS are an outrageous abuse of power and a breach of the public’s trust,” said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.). “The IRS will now be the ones put under additional scrutiny.”

Separately, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Rep. Mike Turner (R-Ohio) introduced companion bills Monday that would require the IRS to fire any employee found “willfully” violating “the constitutional rights of a taxpayer,” according to statements by both lawmakers. The bills also would make them criminally liable for their actions.

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Johannes Climacus wrote:

5/13/2013 9:26 AM PST

It's only problematic if the motivation was political. If these groups were targeted more frequently because there is simply a much larger correlation between right wing anti-tax and government groups and skirting tax laws, then this is all a big collective yawn.



peterg73 responds:

5/13/2013 9:27 AM PST

How could you possibly conclude that the motivation wasn't political?



ThePartiesAreTheProblem responds:

5/13/2013 9:27 AM PST

Exactly. Hold some hearings and let's find out the "why" instead of jumping to conclusions.

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