

The Washington Times

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Senators question fairness in probe of FBI agent

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published July 18, 2004

An FBI agent cleared of misconduct in three investigations by bureau executives has been targeted for new interviews on "unspecified allegations" by Justice Department lawyers, and two senior members of the Senate Judiciary Committee want to know why.

Sens. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, and Patrick J. Leahy, Vermont Democrat, in a letter last week to Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III, questioned whether the agent was being unfairly punished for speaking out about problems within the bureau.

They said Agent Robert Wright Jr. had been cleared by the FBI's Office of Professional Responsibility (OPR) of wrongdoing in three previous internal investigations.

#4 "Our concern was that the latest investigation was a sign of the FBI's apparent haste to launch an OPR probe every time an agent speaks publicly about problems within the FBI," they said. "Recent internal documents of the FBI provided to the Senate Judiciary Committee escalate our concerns about retaliation against Agent Wright."

#5 Mr. Wright, a member of the FBI's counterterrorism task force in Chicago from 1993 to 1999, led an investigation known as "Operation Vulgar Betrayal" that resulted in the 1998 seizure of \$1.4 million in cash that authorities said was "destined for terrorist activities."

#6 The investigation, begun years before the September 11 attacks on the United States, showed that several U.S.-based terror organizations and Hamas and al Qaeda, used nonprofit organizations "to recruit and train terrorists and fund terrorist activities in the United States and abroad."

#7 The investigation was the first to culminate in the seizure of the U.S. assets of terrorist groups. The probe targeted, among others, Saudi Arabian businessman Yassin Kadi, who since has been identified as one of the "chief money launderers" for Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the September 11 attacks.

#8 Mr. Wright has said FBI executives "intentionally and repeatedly thwarted and obstructed" his attempts to expand the investigation to arrest other terrorists and seize their assets, an accusation the bureau has denied.

Mr. Grassley and Mr. Leahy said documents obtained by the committee show that top FBI officials discussed plans to "take him out" after the agent spoke out publicly about his concerns. They said the documents also show some officials already had decided to propose that he be fired based on their belief that he had committed insubordination, without conducting an investigation.

They also said that the Wright probe was ordered even after top OPR executives determined that "there was no predication to open a case," that at least two persons interviewed in the matter were allowed to review confidential FBI summaries on the inquiry and that officials at the Chicago field office sought to "smear Agent Wright in the media."

Mr. Grassley and Mr. Leahy said the continuing investigation of Mr. Wright showed that "problems still fester at FBI OPR," adding that information in the new documents was "especially disappointing because Director Mueller has made efforts to improve and reform FBI OPR."

They have given Mr. Ashcroft and Mr. Mueller until Aug. 5 to answer whether the Wright investigations were in accordance with FBI standards of conduct, when and why the investigation was moved to the Justice Department, why witnesses were allowed to review confidential summaries in the case and whether FBI officials in Chicago were permitted to talk to the press about Mr. Wright.

"Given our shared concerns about FBI reform and the treatment of FBI whistleblowers, we must get to the bottom of this situation quickly," they said.

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