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Office of Special Counsel official quits in protest

James Byrne's resignation letter tells off his boss, Scott J. Bloch, for what he calls the Bush appointee's 'political agendas and personal vendettas.'

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WASHINGTON — James M. Byrne, second in command at the embattled Office of Special Counsel, resigned his post effective Saturday after leaving his boss, Scott J. Bloch, a stinging letter suggesting that Bloch's "political agendas and personal vendettas" were preventing the agency from fulfilling its mission.

The two-paragraph letter, obtained by The Times, was sent to Bloch last week at a time when the Bush appointee faces a Justice Department inquiry that includes allegations of illegally erasing information on his government computer. James Mitchell, a spokesman for the independent agency, declined to comment on the matter.

Among other responsibilities, the Office of Special Counsel is charged with enforcing the Hatch Act, which restricts electoral campaign activities by federal employees. Byrne, a former Justice Department prosecutor, led a task force investigating the politicization of executive branch agencies during the Bush administration.

When the investigation was first announced, some outside advocacy groups challenged whether Bloch, a Republican appointee with a controversial record, would conduct a thorough, aggressive inquiry. Byrne, who has a background in high-profile criminal investigations, gave the team experience and credibility.

Bloch has drawn attention almost since President Bush appointed him to run the Office of Special Counsel. In 2006, Bloch announced he was investigating presidential advisor Karl Rove in connection with the probe of executive branch agencies. He also looked into the firings of U.S. attorneys by the Justice Department.

Bloch has been dogged by complaints that he retaliated against, harassed and intimidated employees of the agencies. In May, federal agents raided his home and office as part of a federal investigation into those charges.

During his tenure with Bloch, Byrne oversaw some well-publicized investigations. His inquiry into political briefings at the General Services Administration was followed by

the resignation of the former chief of the agency, Lurita Alexis Doan.

In addition, his task force was actively investigating complaints about politicization and other problems at the Justice Department, including in some U.S. attorneys' offices.

Under Byrne's leadership, the Office of Special Counsel also pursued an investigation of Federal Aviation Administration decision-making inspired by whistle-blowers' complaints.

In his departing letter, Byrne chastised his boss but praised the agency's staff.

His concerns about Bloch were echoed in more detail Thursday by an outside reform advocacy group, the Project on Government Oversight. The organization's executive director, Danielle Brian, wrote White House Chief of Staff Joshua B. Bolten that Byrne's departure "removes a vital barrier protecting the OSC's staff from further retaliation and intimidation by Mr. Bloch and signals a disturbing downward spiral for the agency."

Her letter said that more than 20 employees had been subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury investigating Bloch's behavior.

"It is an untenable situation that witnesses continue to be subjected to the supervision of Mr. Bloch while they are being called upon to provide evidence to the grand jury concerning his wrongdoing," she wrote.

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