

NASA's beleaguered watchdog steps aside

April 3 2009, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- Two weeks after three senators called for his ouster, the beleaguered NASA inspector general who came under fire from two watchdog agencies gave notice.

Robert "Moose" Cobb resigned Thursday, effective April 11, but did not say why.

Two Democrats and a Republican had urged President [Barack Obama](#) to oust Cobb, saying the inspector general "has been repeatedly accused of stifling investigations, retaliating against whistleblowers and prioritizing social relationships with top [NASA](#) officials over proper federal oversight."

In February, House Science Committee Chairman Bart Gordon, D-Tenn., urged Obama to get rid of Cobb as the watchdog over the \$17 billion in NASA spending, saying: "NASA cannot afford another four years with an ineffective inspector general."

A federal audit this year found Cobb saved taxpayers only 36 cents for every dollar he spent on investigations. The average for other inspectors general was \$9.49. The Government Accountability Office, Congress' investigative and auditing arm, found that Cobb's office "has generally not focused on audits with recommendations for improving the economy and efficiency of NASA's programs ... with potential monetary savings."

Two years ago, the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency issued a report saying Cobb abused his authority and didn't appear

independent enough from the agency he was investigating. One case involved whether to make public the theft of a ring from the remains of the [space shuttle](#) Columbia. Congressional leaders, who said Cobb was too subservient to the NASA administrator, had called for his resignation then, too, but it went unheeded.

In his brief resignation letter, Cobb said: "A new Inspector General will find an organization with extraordinarily talented employees dedicated to rooting out fraud, waste, and abuse and promoting the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of NASA."

Gordon, the Science Committee chairman, called Cobb's resignation "a first good step."

"Mr. Cobb was not up to the job," the congressman said. "But the end result can't just be the removal of an ineffectual IG. We need to put in place a strong IG. NASA is too important an agency, with too important a mission, to risk letting waste and abuse run rampant due to lax oversight."

Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., chairman of the Science Committee's investigations and oversight panel, said, "This is an opportunity for President Obama to return NASA to its original mission, to make it the 'right stuff' agency again."

"A scientific agency should not be political in the way NASA became in the last eight years," he said.

Cobb was appointed to the job in 2002 by President George W. Bush. Before that, he was an associate counsel to the president in the Bush White House, handling ethics issues. NASA referred questions to the White House.

On the Net:

NASA Inspector General: <http://oig.nasa.gov/Welcome.html>

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