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Protection for Endangered Whistle-Blowers

Congress is finally ready to stand up to the Bush administration and for those courageous federal workers who dare to reveal waste and abuse in government. The Senate has passed strong reforms to the 1989 whistle-blower protection law, counteracting the gag orders, retaliatory investigations and other harassments that have become shamefully standard practice during the last seven years.

The reforms would provide stronger outside review protection for whistle-blowers and would make it more difficult for their security clearances to be revoked, a common shunning device. Workers would also be freer to share classified information with Congress — when necessary to reveal the details of abuse and fraud — and would have a strengthened court review process for appealing disputed cases.

More than 400 workers a year make firsthand allegations of on-the-job waste and fraud, risking their careers in the process. In response, too many administration political appointees have flouted the law, demoting and demeaning workers who speak up, even subverting the inspector general system in the process.

The House has passed an even stronger version, and negotiators will begin meeting soon after Congress returns. The White House, predictably, is threatening a veto. Both chambers of Congress have registered a veto-proof commitment, and the next priority should be to steer the strongest possible final measure into law.

In particular, conferees must include House provisions extending whistle-blower protection to workers at the F.B.I. and national intelligence agencies. White House complaints that homeland defense would be threatened are, in fact, contradicted by the history of 9/11 and the F.B.I. field agent whose preattack warnings to superiors went unheeded. Also vital is the House's guarantee of protection of airport baggage screeners, extending the right to reveal misconduct and antiterrorism gaffes without fearing for their jobs. The House would extend this protection to private government contractors, as well — a rich area of abuse laid bare in the management of the Iraq war. Clearly, these times demand the strongest possible whistle-blower law.

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