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Bob Westbrook's new book, "Left Holding the Bag: A Watchdog's Account of How Washington Fumbled its COVID Test," details his experience having a major role in "the mother of all oversight missions." COURTESY BOB WESTBROOKS

Oversight

‘These were not normal times’: A former watchdog reflects on COVID-19 oversight

Bob Westbrook, who first joined the government in 1994, served as executive director of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee for over two years.

COURTNEY BUBLÉ | JUNE 30, 2023

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Even in “normal times,” efforts to hold government officials accountable for their stewardship of federal spending can be tricky, a former watchdog and government veteran wrote in a new book about the pandemic. The problem has only been exacerbated by increased political polarization, he said. Besides, due to the pandemic, “these were not normal times.”

Bob Westbrook, who first joined the government in 1994, served as executive director of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee from its inception in spring 2020 to the end of 2022. His new book, [“Left Holding the Bag: A Watchdog's Account of How Washington Fumbled its COVID Test,”](#) details his experience having a major role in “the mother of all oversight missions.” The committee is one of several entities conducting oversight of the trillions of dollars in COVID-19 funds and [one of three created by the CARES Act](#).

In addition to having to start an organization from scratch while working virtually, Westbrook and his fellow oversight officials had to navigate former President Trump’s various attacks on inspectors general. *Government Executive* interviewed Westbrook on June 27 about his book and experiences with COVID-19 funding oversight. The following transcript has been edited lightly for length and clarity.

You talk in your book about being hesitant to take on this role. Why was that and what changed your mind?

Quite honestly, I had the best job in the federal government. I was an IG at a small agency, [the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation]. It was very manageable. I was very good at what I was doing and this was a very uncertain time, I think for anybody in America. A global pandemic is not a very good time to change jobs. And there wasn’t clarity, necessarily, in the law about exactly what this new entity would be or what it would do, so that was part of my reluctance. But then [there’s] the public service mission itself: once in your career you have the opportunity to do something of this magnitude with all the uncertainty and trepidation that might come from a challenge like this.

You describe many issues early on with how the Trump administration handled pandemic oversight (from agencies not checking the “do not pay” list before making relief payments to the Office of Management and Budget issuing guidance on reporting spending without consulting the oversight community). Would you say these were deliberate acts, or due to the nature of spending money very fast? Both? Neither?

I can’t speak to anybody’s motive. All I can say is it was a chaotic time and we certainly, I think, not only in the IG community, but I think state and local officials as well, appreciated guidance getting out quickly. So, you’ll see in the book I don’t fault the initial guidance [from OMB] except for it didn’t call for reporting until July because they believed that agencies needed time to get systems set up and new codes put in to track the money and they didn’t go far enough. There was this line in the original OMB guidance that

said additional guidance would be forthcoming. Unfortunately, we were hit with competing crisis after competing crisis that unfortunately I think took the attention of Congress and the administration, so that additional guidance never came. And then we rolled into the American Rescue Plan era.

Trump issued a signing statement for the CARES Act objecting to some of the oversight provisions: was that ever brought up during your oversight work?

It’s just a historical footnote. It was a blip [and] we just went about our business.

As for congressional oversight, you complimented in the book the fact-gathering by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, led by Rep James Clyburn, D-S.C., but said some of their report titles involving the Trump administration were “inflammatory.” How can this be handled better down the line in an era where oversight has become so polarized?

I believe the fact-finding was exceptional. But I think too many people wouldn't look past the cover, or the title of the reports. I think the advice to congressional oversight officials is it's best to stick with the facts. And if you do that, your message will always get out and people will want to hear it and they won’t turn away just because of a preconceived notion.

In President Biden’s first State of the Union address in March 2022, he said, “the watchdogs are back,” and he repeated the line in this year’s address. But were they ever actually gone?

I know that the watchdogs were never gone... With that said, there are advantages when you have an administration that is more open to oversight. The tone at the top matters... Nobody likes independent oversight. Let's be honest. Right? Most folks don't welcome it with open arms. And to be receptive to it and open to it, I think is critical.

The Biden White House implemented “gold standard meetings” for COVID oversight between the watchdog community and administration officials. Were they helpful? Could they be used for other oversight initiatives down the line?

They were essential... They were extraordinarily candid and you had all of the right people at the table... The work was really done prior to the actual technical gold standard meeting, but that was the driver, that anchored something for folks to say, “we're going to have to do this, we're going to have to be at the table and share candidly what we're doing and candidly share our vulnerabilities with our independent watchdog.”

You left the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee in December 2022. At the time, was there anything else you think the committee could have used in terms of resources or access?

It's all about data and data access. The [accountability committee] was able to, after I left, get an excellent report on potential fraud with the use of suspicious Social Security numbers, it was a risk alert, billions of dollars in potential fraud. It took entirely too long for us to complete that work in dealing with the agency who has legal requirements and restrictions on the use of data. I think that's one of the lessons learned that I think Congress really needs to look at before we sort of lose focus on the challenges of the pandemic. I think they really need to look long and hard at data access for oversight officials and how they can ensure access up front now, rather than next time during the crisis. And I think there are several datasets out there that will be of use to oversight officials.

Do you think we’ll ever know how much fraud was in the COVID-19 relief programs? (For context, the Small Business Administration IG said on Tuesday the agency distributed over \$200 billion in potentially fraudulent small business relief, but their work continues and that doesn’t even include the other programs.)

We will never know with absolute precision. First off, there's not the resources to audit every single relief benefit that was paid out. But even if you could audit all of it, that only gives you reasonable assurance whether there was fraud or not. And you certainly wouldn't have the resources for the criminal investigation. So, will we ever know with absolute precision? No. Are we going to get closer as time goes on? Absolutely... In my judgment without question it's hundreds of billions of dollars that were lost to fraud. And to me, it's an unacceptable and unfathomable amount.

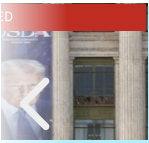
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