

Ryan Zinke, former interior secretary, lied to investigators in casino case, watchdog finds

Written by Administrator

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Former interior secretary Ryan Zinke, who's favored to win a new House seat representing Montana this fall, lied to investigators several times about conversations he had with federal officials, lawmakers and lobbyists about two Indian tribes' petition to operate a New England casino, the department's watchdog said in a [report released Wednesday](#) .

Investigators with Inspector General Mark Greenblatt's office concluded that when questioned about his talks with Interior attorneys and others outside the department, Zinke and his then-chief of staff failed to comply with their "duty of candor" as public officials to tell the truth, the report said.

"We found that both Secretary Zinke and the [chief of staff] made statements that presented an inaccurate version of the circumstances in which [the Interior Department] made key decisions," the report said. "As a result, we concluded that Secretary Zinke and the [chief of staff] did not comply with their duty of candor when questioned."

Investigators found that Zinke, who served one term in the House before joining the Trump administration, and his chief of staff "made statements to OIG investigators with the overall intent to mislead them."

A letter from Zinke's attorney's office included in the report pushed back on its findings, calling them "distorted and misleading" and questioning the timing of the report's release. After the release, an attorney for Zinke, Danny Onorato, blasted the report as "misleading and inaccurate" and said the former secretary was "completely candid in his interview" with investigators.

"The content of the IG report and the timing of its release will be seen for what it is, another political smear," Onorato wrote in an email to The Washington Post.

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In 2017, the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribes wanted to open a casino in East Windsor, Conn. They petitioned Interior, asking department officials to approve amendments saying their plans to jointly operate a facility would not violate their existing gambling agreements. This sparked a lobbying campaign by MGM Resorts International, which operates a competing casino a short distance away, to persuade Zinke not to sign off on the tribes' plans.

The inspector general's report found that from the spring to fall of 2017, lobbyists, a political consultant and a U.S. senator spoke repeatedly with Zinke and his chief of staff, urging them to reject the amendments. The report said that on one occasion, Zinke had dinner at his residence with a political consultant and a lobbyist. The lobbyist spent the evening texting a casino executive with updates on the discussions.

Zinke neither granted nor denied the tribes' request; instead, he sent it back to them, saying it was "premature and likely unnecessary." His action became the subject of intense scrutiny at Interior and the White House during President Donald Trump's first months in office.

The inspector general's office opened an investigation into whether Zinke had been improperly influenced and had sidestepped the recommendations of career staff members at the Interior Department to approve the casino application. But the office shifted its focus from the decision in the casino case to the truthfulness of Zinke's and his chief of staff's statements.

According to the report, Zinke told investigators that he based his decision on the recommendation of attorneys in Interior's solicitor's office. But the report found the evidence contradicted this claim. Interior attorneys denied to investigators that they spoke with Zinke, gave him advice or approved his decision not to take a position on the petition. And people Zinke denied meeting with said they had regular contact with him to press him to deny the tribes' application, according to emails and other documents obtained by investigators.

When told that his account was contradicted by the evidence, Zinke doubled down, the report found. He claimed that while he may have met socially with then-Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.) about the casino project, he did not recall any conversation.

Investigators interviewed Zinke and his chief of staff twice in 2018 before Zinke [announced his resignation](#) as

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secretary later that year
under a cloud of ethics investigations that included the casino case.

In a harsh rebuttal included in the report, Zinke blamed the inspector general's office for releasing its findings so close to the November midterm elections. He said the report should have been held until after the election. Zinke is the [GOP nominee](#) in the race for a Republican-leaning U.S. House seat representing western Montana.

"Given the unnecessary delay in completing the report, we find the timing of the release of this report disturbing and improper," wrote an attorney for Zinke, whose name was not included.

Zinke's attorney also attacked the substance of the report, writing, "There was no basis to even conduct such a review of Secretary Zinke, but it is crystal clear that Secretary Zinke acted lawfully and ethically in carrying out his duties."

Scott Hommel, who is Zinke's former chief of staff and was not named in the report, was also found to have misled investigators. The Post asked to speak with him through his current employer, but he did not respond.

The inspector general referred the matter to the Justice Department in 2018 for possible criminal investigation. But the department waited for 2½ years to make a decision. The delay effectively tied the inspector general's hands, preventing the office from making its findings public. Under Biden, the department reviewed the case for another six months before formally declining it. Wednesday's report was issued almost a year later.

In early 2019, Zinke's successor, David Bernhardt, approved the tribes' petition to build an off-reservation casino in Connecticut, ending what was likely to be a long legal battle.

Zinke, when interviewed by investigators, was adamant that he had not discussed the casino matter with those who wanted him to deny the tribe's application.

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“OIG investigators also asked Secretary Zinke about any discussions he may have had with individuals outside the DOI about the Tribes’ ... requests,” the report said. “They specifically asked the Secretary, ‘Did ... you discuss, uh, outside of — outside of, say the DOI personnel, did you have these same discussions with — with representatives from the Tribes, the states? Others?’ Secretary Zinke responded, ‘I didn’t — no.’ ”

But the report goes on to set out a lengthy list of emails, text messages and other communications between Zinke and casino representatives, a political consultant who acted as a go-between with them, and former Nevada senator Heller, showing the secretary’s close contacts about the casino matter.

“The U.S. Senator also stated that he was sure he asked the Secretary not to approve the Tribes’ amendments and that his communications to the Secretary were clear,” the report said of investigators’ interviews with Heller, who is not named.

The political consultant is described as having “a close personal relationship” with Zinke and told investigators that he brought up the casino with Zinke on a ski trip the two took in March 2017, according to the report.

Wednesday’s report comes six months after Greenblatt’s office accused Zinke of also lying about his role in negotiations over [a land deal in his hometown](#) of Whitefish, Mont. That investigation found that Zinke had violated his duty of candor when he told a federal ethics official that his involvement in the deal was minimal. He had claimed his meeting with the project’s developers at Interior Department headquarters was “purely social.”

Email and text message exchanges obtained by the watchdog told a different story.

They showed that Zinke had communicated with the developers 64 times to discuss the project’s design, the use of his foundation’s land as a parking lot, and his interest in operating a brewery on the site. Investigators found that Zinke broke federal ethics rules repeatedly by continuing to represent his family’s foundation in the negotiations for nearly a year. This violated an ethics agreement in which he committed not to do any work on the foundation’s behalf after he joined the Trump administration.

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The report also found that Zinke had misused his official position by directing some of his staff to arrange a meeting with the developers and print documents related to the project. Federal officials are generally prohibited from assigning their employees tasks related to their private business.

Though Greenblatt, who oversaw the investigation, was appointed by Trump, Zinke slammed the investigation as a “political hit job” by the Biden administration.

The Justice Department declined to bring charges related to that investigation.

Read more <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2022/08/24/ryan-zinke-misled-investigators-watchdog-report/>