

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074  
MINORITY (202) 225-5051

<https://oversight.house.gov>

August 7, 2024

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is continuing its investigation into the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC). The State Department (Department) has demonstrated a pattern of noncompliance with congressional inquiries which has prevented full transparency of the SPEC office's activities. Only after the threat of compulsory process did the Department release some documents and communications revealing a sophisticated and targeted coordination between leftist environmental groups and the SPEC office that undermines U.S. foreign policy, energy policy, and national security policy. In a recent production to the Committee regarding the SPEC office's staff names and payroll information,<sup>1</sup> the Department made significant unjustified redactions and has withheld fully responsive information, thus undermining the Committee's ability to effectively perform its oversight functions. As such, we demand the complete fulfillment of our request for documents and information and require transcribed interviews with Department staff to conduct necessary oversight of the SPEC office's activities.

On May 23, 2024, over 15 months since the Committee's initial inquiry, the Department produced only three documents purporting to satisfy the request for "[a] full list, including names, titles, and salaries of all individuals currently and previously employed by the office of the SPEC, as well as all ethics and financial disclosures of those individuals."<sup>2</sup> These documents include an April 15, 2021, organization chart, a document produced to a third-party as part of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, and a "report generated by the Bureau of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services that lists SPEC employees, titles, and annual salaries

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<sup>1</sup> State Dep't Production to the H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (May 23, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability to John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy, The White House (Feb. 2, 2023); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Apr. 25, 2023); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight Accountability to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Feb. 7, 2024).

as of February 24, 2024.”<sup>3</sup> The FOIA document completely redacts staff names except for seven individuals including two named SPEC staff holding the titles of policy analysts.<sup>4</sup>

We understand the FOIA document predates the February 24, 2024, Bureau of the Comptroller and Global Financial Services document, therefore leading us to believe that the size of SPEC office size has decreased from 61 to 27 individuals during that time between those documents. This significant downsizing of the SPEC office coincides with the January 31, 2024, announcement of former SPEC Envoy John Kerry’s resignation from the Department and John Podesta’s ascension to assume his duties.<sup>5</sup> Further, as of February 24, 2024, it appears the SPEC office no longer retains the services of a “Senior Advisor (Expert)”, “Senior Advisor for Management”, and redacted individuals holding other roles. Notably, as of February 24, 2024, it appears the SPEC office no longer retains a staffer specializing in foreign affairs with a listed salary of “0.00”, raising questions about that staffer’s identity and rate of compensation. Those questions include whether the Department has engaged with third parties to place “‘climate’ ‘staff’ in governmental offices of the United States,”<sup>6</sup> or to what extent the SPEC office employs detailees within the Department or from other federal agencies.

In the 118th Congress, the Committee has expressed multiple concerns regarding the composition of the SPEC office and its coordination with leftist environmental groups to the Department,<sup>7</sup> forcing the Committee to again consider the use of compulsory process to require a complete disclosure of the information originally requested by the Committee including SPEC staff names, titles, salaries, ethics disclosures, and financial disclosures.<sup>8</sup> We require that the Department provide unredacted names, titles, and salaries of all individuals *currently* and *previously* employed by the office of the SPEC, since January 20, 2021, as well as all ethics and financial disclosures of those individuals.<sup>9</sup> To date, the Department has declined to provide fully

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Naz Durakoğlu, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Legislative Affairs, to James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (May 23, 2024), *available on file with Comm. staff*.

<sup>4</sup> State Dep’t Production to the H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (May 23, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> The White House, Statements and Releases, *Statement from National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on John Podesta* (Jan. 31, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Complaint, *Power the Future v. U.S. Dep’t of State*, 1:24-cv-00425-ACR, (D.C. filed Feb. 13, 2024).

<sup>7</sup> See Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability to John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, The White House (Feb. 2, 2023); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Apr. 25, 2023); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight Accountability to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Jan. 5, 2024); and Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight Accountability to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Feb. 7, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Apr. 25, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability to John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, The White House (Feb. 2, 2023); Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (Apr. 25, 2023); Letter from James

responsive information to this request, and has inconsistently applied their own purported policy to avoid transparency by disclosing junior staff names to the Committee.

The SPEC office's lack of transparency regarding staffing also extends to potential compliance issues with the Periodically Listing Updates to Management (PLUM) Act, which requires Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to publish data on presidentially-appointed positions and civil service leadership, including their immediate subordinates.<sup>10</sup> Last updated on March 4, 2024, two days before former Envoy Kerry stepped down,<sup>11</sup> the current PLUM dataset identifies presidentially-appointed former Envoy Kerry, but excludes the Principal Deputy Envoy for Climate, Sue Biniaz, and the Deputy Envoy for Climate, Rick Duke, despite both having directly reported to former Envoy Kerry.<sup>12</sup> Questions linger about whether Biniaz and Duke hold covered positions necessitating their inclusion in the PLUM Report dataset as immediate subordinates of presidentially-appointed former Envoy Kerry. Confirming their status as covered position would help inform the Committee's legislative efforts to improve government transparency.

Simultaneously with its evolving staff size, role, and activities, the SPEC office has undergone significant reorganization following the departure of former Envoy Kerry. On March 13, 2024, I wrote the Department seeking information regarding Mr. Podesta's transition to assume SPEC office responsibilities and highlighted organizational changes to the SPEC office.<sup>13</sup> Documents since released to the Committee illustrate significant confusion regarding Mr. Podesta's role with the SPEC office, and support our concerns that the Biden Administration has taken steps to avoid congressional accountability by keeping him in the White House to evade law requiring his Senate confirmation,<sup>14</sup> despite Mr. Podesta's extensive coordination with the Department and SPEC office. Additionally, because the SPEC Envoy role remains vacant according to the Department,<sup>15</sup> the SPEC office's current leadership plan—an apparent combination of Sue Biniaz, Rick Duke, and Richard Verma—raises questions about the Department's compliance with the Federal Vacancies Act.<sup>16</sup> The Act stipulates only certain employees can take over for high-level officers after their departure, and limits the time for

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Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight Accountability to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Feb. 7, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Periodically Listing Updates to Management Act, P.L. 117-263, div. E, title LIII, §5322; 5 U.S.C. 3330f.

<sup>11</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000009.

<sup>12</sup> Office of Personnel Mgmt., *PLUM reporting*, available at <https://www.opm.gov/about-us/open-government/plum-reporting/plum-data/> (last visited July 18, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Mar. 13, 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Dep't of State production to the H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability (June 24, 2024); *See* Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony J. Blinken, Sec'y, Dep't of State (Mar. 13, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000061.

<sup>16</sup> Federal Vacancies and Reform Act, 5 U.S.C. § 3345 (1998).

which those employees can serve in that role.<sup>17</sup> As the SPEC office’s current leadership advances its work in the wake of former Envoy Kerry’s departure, and Mr. Podesta continues to not officially hold the SPEC Envoy title, it is unclear how the Department will comply with the Act.

The documents the Committee has reviewed raise alarming questions regarding both Mr. Podesta’s role and the current role of former Envoy Kerry, especially since former Envoy Kerry “noted he and now-retired [People’s Republic of China] climate envoy Xie Zhenhua will continue to ‘stay in touch and push [their] governments’ through their perches at Yale and Tsinghua University.”<sup>18</sup> On February 2, 2023, the Committee initially raised concerns about former Envoy Kerry’s negotiations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>19</sup> On May 6, 2024, we again raised those concerns in a letter to the Department about the threat of the CCP’s political warfare and the role of high-ranking Department officials in combatting that threat, specifically referencing former Envoy Kerry’s activities.<sup>20</sup> In lieu of former Envoy Kerry’s departure, the American people deserve to understand what role Mr. Podesta has in these negotiations with the CCP and any other malign foreign power.

We believe that members of your staff have information that will assist us in fully understanding: the role, activities, and composition of the SPEC office; off-the-record meetings with leftist environmental groups; and actions of the Department to keep SPEC activities from the purview of Congress and the American people. We therefore request that the following individuals be made available for transcribed interviews:

1. Kitty DiMartino, SPEC Chief of Staff;
2. Jesse Young, Policy Analyst;
3. Richard Verma, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources;
4. Rick Duke, Deputy Special Envoy for Climate;
5. Sue Biniiaz, Principal Deputy Special Envoy for Climate; and
6. Suzy George, Chief of Staff.

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<sup>17</sup> Cong. Research Service, *The Vacancies Act: A Legal Overview* (Aug. 1, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> STATE-2024-0004-0000032.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability to John Kerry, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, The White House (Feb. 2, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Letter from James Comer, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Accountability, to Antony Blinken, Sec’y, Dep’t of State (May 6, 2024), at 7.

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken

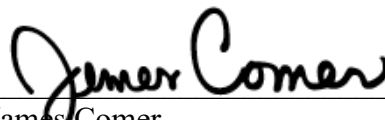
August 7, 2024

Page 5 of 5

To schedule the transcribed interviews or ask any related follow-up questions, please contact the Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority Staff at (202) 225-5074 no later than August 14, 2024.

The Committee on Oversight and Accountability is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate, “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Comer". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

James Comer

Chairman

Committee on Oversight and Accountability

cc: The Honorable Jamie B. Raskin, Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Accountability