

Justice Dept. to Merge Two Internal Watchdog Units

By Michael Isikoff
Washington Post Staff Writer

Justice Department inspector general Richard J. Hankinson has been ordered to resign as part of a plan approved by Attorney General Janet Reno to overhaul the two department units charged with policing misconduct, department officials said.

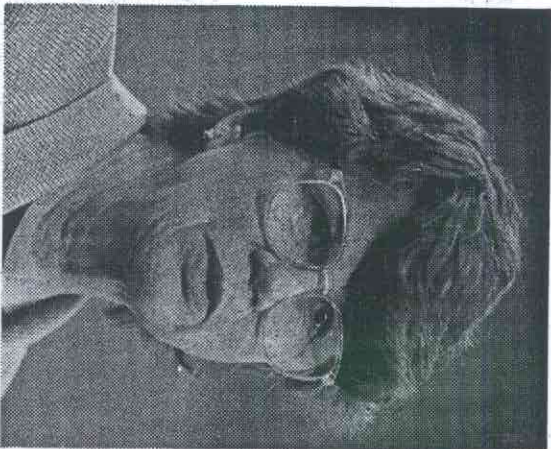
The officials said the plan calls for merging the inspector general's office and the Office of Professional Responsibility (OPR) into an expanded watchdog unit that will have broad powers to investigate and discipline any department employee accused of wrongdoing.

The new unit will be headed by Michael Bromwich, a Washington lawyer and former Iran-contra prosecutor, who will be nominated shortly as the new inspector general, officials said. Hankinson, a former Secret Service official appointed by President George Bush, was instructed by Deputy Attorney General Philip B. Heymann to submit his resignation this week, effective with Bromwich's confirmation this week, as his successor.

The action follows months of internal debate over how to handle allegations of misconduct—a problem that has become increasingly serious, with a series of recent judicial findings chastising department prosecutors for ethical indiscretions. It also resolves a long-standing turf battle between the two offices.

But the move has been bitterly resisted by OPR chief Michael E. Shaheen Jr., who has argued that any merger would compromise the independence of his office and undermine the integrity of internal investigations. A career employee who has headed the OPR office for 16 years, Shaheen has told department officials he will resign if his office is placed under the authority of a political appointee such as Bromwich.

Sources said the plan calls for temporarily retaining OPR as an intact unit under Bromwich's supervision, although the new inspector general



ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

... approves plan ordering inspector general to resign will have broad discretion to reorganize. Shaheen will be offered a "suitable" position elsewhere, a department official said. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Questions about the independence of Justice's internal investigations were raised recently when the department released a report, prepared by former department official Edward Dennis, on the tear-gassing of the Branch Davidian complex near Waco, Tex., last April that left 80 dead. The report found no mistakes by anybody at the Justice Department or the FBI. The issue arose again this week, after reports that Reno had asked for an inquiry into the conduct of a personal aide, Lula Rodriguez, who recently assisted in the Florida political campaign of a

relative who was convicted on corruption charges brought by the Justice Department.

Department rules call for referring allegations of legal or ethical misconduct either to the inspector general's office or OPR. But Reno chose instead to ask Heymann's office to review the matter, prompting officials in both offices to question why they were not consulted.

In general, OPR conducts investigations involving department attorneys and criminal investigators while the inspector general handles cases involving most other department personnel. But there are jurisdictional overlaps in some instances that lead to frequent turf battles between the two offices.

Department spokesman Carl Stern said yesterday that the merger was designed to "rein-vigorate the operation" and improve efficiency. "This is a streamlining," he said. "Whenever you have overlap, it's useful to eliminate duplication."

Department officials said that Hankinson kept a generally low profile as inspector general, conducting mostly routine audits that rarely raised controversy. Because he is not a lawyer and had no background at the Justice Department, he was ill-equipped to do battle with Shaheen or challenge the actions of senior department officials.

Bromwich brings much stronger credentials to the job, having served as a colleague of FBI Director Louis Freeh in the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan and as one of three prosecutors handling independent counsel Lawrence Walsh's case against former National Security Council aide Oliver L. North.

Bromwich also served briefly as a volunteer on Bill Clinton's presidential campaign and has personal ties to Heymann. A former student of Heymann's at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Bromwich served briefly as a special assistant to Heymann when he was named as chief of the Justice Department's criminal division during the Carter administration.