



Carnegie

RESULTS

The Project On Government Oversight: In recent years, this nonprofit organization that works with whistle-blowers to add transparency to government operations has expanded its outreach and achieved noticeable results.

James P. Mitchell paid the ultimate Washington price: he lost his important job after he worked with the Project On Government Oversight (POGO) to oust a government official accused of wrongdoing. Yet he considers his experience a success story.

Through clandestine meetings with POGO, Mitchell blew the whistle on his boss, a controversial U.S. government special counsel, for failing to do his job, which, ironically, was protecting whistle-blowers. "Essentially, I was a whistle-blower for the guy who was supposed to be taking whistle-blowers' complaints," Mitchell says.

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Ultimately, the FBI raided the special counsel's office, leading to the controversial official being fired by the White House in 2008 at the behest of POGO and others. But before that happened, Mitchell's role as a whistle-blower was discovered when a trusted co-worker revealed that he was working with POGO and he was ousted from his job.

Yet Jim Mitchell remains a staunch supporter of the organization whose work might have imperiled his position. "It was worth it," declares Mitchell. "I'm very pleased with POGO." The hearty endorsement by a man who feels he may have lost his job because of the organization's work affirms both the reach and reputation of POGO and its executive director, Danielle Brian, in Washington.

By courting whistle-blowers, monitoring government contracts, working with members of Congress and even training their staffs, POGO has become a Washington institution for keeping track of what the government is doing in the name of its citizens and with their tax money. Its offices are located between the Capitol and the White House, and POGO has been treading a path to both locations.

Powered by \$850,000 in Carnegie Corporation grants, POGO has made itself known at the White House, where it works with President Obama's staff on open government. Inside Carnegie Corporation, POGO is known for being able to create a huge impact with a strategically important but comparatively modest amount of Corporation funds. "It's a tiny percentage of the overall corporate giving, but we think it's unusually important," explains Geri Mannion, director of Carnegie Corporation's U.S. Democracy Program and of the Special Opportunities Fund. "It gets a huge bang for the buck."

The first Carnegie Corporation grant produced an explosion of growth for POGO. "It was transformative for us in breaking into the other large foundations," Brian observes. "We had been very fortunate to have some very loyal but smaller foundations that were supporting us for years. But the initial Corporation grant really opened doors for us."

Last year, POGO revealed misbehavior by State Department contract security guards in Afghanistan. The organization received full media credit worldwide for its revelations. POGO is now working alone and with other organizations on monitoring the hurriedly put together multi-billion-dollar efforts on both the federal financial bailout and disbursement

of government stimulus funds. It has also monitored federal funds spent in the Hurricane Katrina cleanup and recovery.

But beyond these efforts in widely publicized situations, POGO has worked to reveal details on more obscure programs that can mean hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in savings to the government and American taxpayers. POGO has spent years fighting a pitched bureaucratic battle over a program allowing private companies to pay the government lower oil and gas royalties from drilling on federal lands than POGO, after years of research, thought was appropriate. And it worked with a whistle-blower to derail a fine-print change in government travel reimbursement, saving the government many millions each year.

Not content just to work outside the government, POGO is also trying to strengthen the progress of federal investigations inside the bureaucracy. The group is placing a new priority on monitoring the safety work of the federal Food and Drug Administration and other public health issues. It has an ongoing effort to work with inspectors general in various agencies throughout the vast federal government bureaucracy.

POGO is the type of organization where Capitol Hill aides and POGO staffers unwind at the annual holiday party by engaging in small talk on federal whistle-blower statutes. From a network of inside clandestine sources to open requests under the Freedom of Information Act, the project has spent decades devoted to shining a light on government.

That approach brought POGO critical Carnegie Corporation support to fund and expand its work. "One of the most important tenets" of the Corporation grants, according to Mannion, "was making sure the sunlight discourse was an ongoing component."

With congressional connections, ongoing relationships with investigative reporters, and a highly active web site and social networking efforts, POGO regularly demonstrates Washington public relations savvy in promoting its work on opening up the government. The project's investigative research is featured in articles in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, television news, public radio and congressional hearings.

POGO is also widely known for compiling a database to supply details on not only the scope, but the specifics of government contracting. "They've carved out an amaz-

ing niche for government contractor oversight. Their work really has no peers,” declares Ellen Miller, head of the Sunlight Foundation, which has worked in conjunction with POGO in Washington.

POGO has achieved a D.C. organization’s dream by working with the White House on open government issues. “They have a really solid impact,” Miller says, “particularly in this administration, which is far more sympathetic to the notion of contractor abuse than the previous one.”

A large amount of this influence stems from what observers point to as the nonpartisan political charm and savvy of Danielle Brian. A former POGO intern, the longtime executive director is a highly visible face of POGO in public appearances, private negotiations and cobbling together coalitions of public interest groups.

“Danielle has an incredible reputation in Washington,” says Ryan Alexander, head of Taxpayers for Common Sense, who serves on POGO’s board. “She’s really well liked, which is tough when you’re beating people up all the time. People trust her.”

POGO routinely partners with other organizations to leverage its work. These partners wear a variety of ideological stripes, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to the National Taxpayers Union. In a city that has become increasingly polarized in the past decade, POGO’s Washington efforts are praised by legislators and their staffs, from both parties. “What I love about POGO is that POGO takes no prisoners,” Mannion explains. “It will do stuff about Democrats as much as Republicans. That’s the most important thing: that truth will out.”

Carnegie Corporation Fuels Major Growth

POGO’s origins were in an organization known as the Project On Military Procurement, which was founded in 1981 to point out abuses in military spending. (One of the notorious examples from that time was a \$436 hammer, which helped bring calls for reform.) But a decade later, POGO would take on the entire government bureaucracy. “In 1990, after many successes reforming military spending,” the group’s history states, “POGO decided to expand its mandate and investigate waste, fraud, and abuse throughout the federal government.” Now, its work is quite broad. POGO’s efforts

not only include government contracting, but open government, housing, transportation, homeland security, government corruption, public health, nuclear power plants and a variety of other issues of concern.

“They’ve spread out” from their origins, says David Burnham, a former *New York Times* reporter and investigative journalist who believes in the organization to the point of having his own investigative nonprofit’s D.C. office at POGO headquarters in downtown Washington. “Over the years, POGO has done a lot of good work on a lot of important subjects,” says the well-known Burnham, who also serves on POGO’s board.

Early on, POGO was funded by small foundations. Brian cites the Fund for Constitutional Government as “a terrific longtime funder.” Another early funder was the Sherman Foundation. “Something that has been very gratifying to me is that even when we gained the support of the larger foundations, the smaller foundations stayed with us,” says Brian. The result has been an “unusually large list of donors,” which Brian, ever the watchdog, says “is a great way to hold a nonprofit accountable” with numerous reviews of its work.

POGO proposed a variety of projects over the years before receiving its first Carnegie Corporation grant in 2003. Prior to that, although POGO was turned down for a grant, it was being watched and encouraged by Mannion. When the Corporation did begin to fund POGO, it was part of the foundation’s overall aim of “making government accountable to the people,” Mannion says. “The way we have funded POGO... has been related to what we call government accountability grants. This actually came out of our support for many years of campaign finance reform.”

The \$850,000 allocated to POGO by the Corporation was divided into three grants. The first was for \$200,000 in November 2003, at a time when one of POGO’s projects was to push the Federal Election Commission to provide accurate campaign finance data to the public. Mannion was impressed by the potential of POGO and other “relatively small groups” working in the government transparency area.

That first grant was close to half of POGO’s annual budget at the time. “When the Corporation invests in you, they invest big,” notes Miller, who has also benefited from being a Corporation grantee. “It’s kind of an imprimatur.” With its

first major foundation support, POGO was able to leverage the Carnegie Corporation name and greatly expand its budget. “It was not long before we saw other foundations, MacArthur and Ford and so on, become supporters of POGO. I very much believe [it was] because the serious reputation of Carnegie Corporation grantmaking gave the other foundations a reason to look at us as well.”

She adds, “The kind of work we do is a little edgy and it is potentially going to be scary to a foundation or a board that isn’t very familiar with our history,” Brian notes. “POGO is going to do some things that are pointing fingers that can make some people uncomfortable. The fact that the Corporation was okay with that and trusted our judgment was so important to their comfort level at other large foundations.”

General Support Allows POGO to Shift Resources on Critical Issues

Rather than limiting POGO to specific projects approved long in advance, the Corporation has been providing “general support” to the project to allow it to pounce on critical issues as they arise. “Especially for groups that we know do a really good job, you want them to be able to use the funds in a timely manner instead of going out and trying to get project support. That’s always an issue with groups that do investigative reports,” Mannion points out. “It gives them flexibility and the ability to move quickly.”

An example of this ability to pursue an important story was last year’s revelation from POGO of allegations that contractors providing security at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, engaged in lewd and improper behavior in their living quarters. POGO wrote a ten-page letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who investigated the project’s allegations, which received international media coverage. The impact of the POGO probe was soon demonstrated by government action. In December 2009, the State Department responded to POGO’s charges by announcing the security contract would not be renewed.

The same impact can be seen on monitoring the federal bailout, which arose quickly after American financial institutions became imperiled in 2008 and 2009. “We have full-time staff working now on just oversight on the bailout. That’s the kind of thing that we couldn’t have done without Carnegie

Corporation giving us general support,” explains Brian.

Another area boosted by Corporation general support is POGO’s long struggle with the government over oil and gas royalties on federal lands. POGO has issued five reports since 1995 on the Royalty in Kind Program, which allows producers to pay royalties in the form of oil and gas rather than cash. Brian called it “a gift to the industry.” The POGO research demonstrated there was questionable auditing of the multi-billion-dollar program. Interior Department staff members were also linked to accepting gifts and gratuities. A major victory for POGO came in September, when Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced he would cancel the program, which he termed “a blemish on this department.” A *New York Times* article on the decision cited POGO as the “watchdog group that has criticized Interior’s royalties oversight” and called the program “a failure.”

But even after the huge bureaucratic victory, Danielle Brian, who testified before the House Committee on Natural Resources, pressed Congress to adopt legislation reforming the Interior Department program. The issue has high stakes. Brian says the royalties account for the second highest source of revenue for the federal government, exceeded only by taxes. She adds that generally, half of the royalty money goes to the states. In California, for example, “the money is earmarked for the public school system. You really have a direct revenue stream that goes back to the things that are tremendously important to the common good.”

POGO’s new emphasis on federal oversight of drugs and medical issues is “a perfect example” of the effect of Carnegie Corporation funds, Brian points out. A Corporation grant helped POGO support the work of Dr. Ned Feder, a Harvard-educated physician with decades of federal government experience, as its staff scientist, including investigating questions of ethical conduct among biomedical researchers. At POGO, he is looking into “the quality of the government processes” Brian says, “and are they being corrupted or not.”

A Bipartisan Watchdog Using Investigative Journalism Techniques

Even in the relatively more open Obama administration, observers say POGO still keeps up the pressure for freedom of information in government. “A lot of what they do is in fact

ensuring that...even with this current administration, they don't renege on promises for transparency and openness," says Geri Mannion.

In fact, some see POGO as a kind of inspector general (IG) outside of the government. POGO's efforts are "like a public IG," according to Washington administrative law judge J.J. Mahoney. "They have a good reputation at [bringing] out things that need to be exposed."

Eric Lipton, an investigative reporter in the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*, says POGO has regularly aided his investigative efforts. "They've been helpful in quite a number of stories, everything from homeland security to the bailout and TARP program to Katrina stuff." Lipton adds, "I think their analysis is generally reliable." And POGO "doesn't wait for things to happen. They're pretty aggressive and they seem to have a fair amount of initiative on their own," he says. POGO "does not just write reports. They [take] their own efforts to get government documents."

Investigators for POGO also function like journalists in their efforts to gather information about the government. Some, including POGO head Brian, have journalism experience, but there are even veterans of long journalism careers now reporting for POGO's web site and publications. For example, Adam Zagorin is a veteran *Time* magazine reporter who now works for POGO as journalist in residence.

Their research "is done by really good investigative reporters," notes Mannion. The ubiquitous layoffs of mainstream magazine and newspaper journalists have strengthened the hand of organizations like POGO in obtaining talented individuals who are trained at ferreting out information for public exposure. "Especially these days," Mannion notes, "there are a lot of people who want to continue to do the kind of research that they have in the past."

These journalistic functions performed by organizations outside the mainstream media are highlighted in a report released last year by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In this aspect, POGO is playing a role that is similar to one of its allies, the Center for Public Integrity, a Washington nonprofit also funded by Carnegie Corporation. The Columbia report, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, notes that the Center for Public Integrity has "a relatively large" budget and endowment that spurs investigative reporting efforts.

The report by the prestigious journalism school also focuses on the trend for organizations like POGO to take on reporting roles that once were largely the province of news organizations. "Advocacy groups and nongovernmental organizations...do research and have sometimes created what resemble news staff to report on the subject of their special interests."

Richard Loeb, adjunct professor at the University of Baltimore Law School, points to the "financial stress on the media" that "allows POGO to fill a role that was traditionally filled by media organizations. That's helping POGO tremendously." He terms the situation "a vacuum that I think POGO is going to more and more have the opportunity to fill."

Administrative judge Mahoney cites POGO as having "the kind of impact that will get the attention of committees in Congress." Indeed, last year POGO published its first book, *The Art of Congressional Oversight: A User's Guide to Doing It Right*. The book is promoted as "a compilation of tips, case studies, and best practices...POGO hopes the book will inspire a new generation of staffers to continue in the rich tradition of congressional oversight."

Working for Change with the White House, Congress and Federal Inspectors

A highly successful program, which spawned the book noted above, is POGO's Congressional Oversight Training series. The monthly series is extremely popular on Capitol Hill. Topics range from "The Nuts 'n Bolts of Investigations" to "How to Prepare for an Oversight Hearing" to "Working with Insiders and Whistleblowers."

Congressional aides from both parties praise the training seminars. Honorary chairs are Republican and Democratic members of Congress, including well-known senators Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and Carl Levin (D-Michigan). Staffers who have gone to the seminars routinely refer new colleagues to the POGO training. "There aren't really places in Washington where you can say, 'this is how you do oversight,'" one congressional committee aide points out. "They serve as sort of a touchstone or rallying point for like-minded individuals." The training sessions provide "both a sense of history" and practical information about congressional oversight, another aide notes. He refers junior staffers there saying, ruefully, it was the type of information

he “had to learn by trial and error” when he began working on Capitol Hill in the 1990s.

Less formal efforts have also been employed by POGO to direct Congress’s attention to legislation to protect whistle-blowers, such as a whistle-blower film festival. It emerged from POGO’s feeling that there was a need for “something dramatic to highlight the legislation that has been stalled... for the staff on Capitol Hill who advise their bosses on why this is important,” recalls Brian. “The problem with some of these policies is they become so dry and obscure that people on the Hill don’t get engaged” in caring about them. “Health care—people get why it matters. Whistle-blower protection—it seems very distant,” Brian explains. “Most people don’t know a government employee who was a whistle-blower. So it is important for us to personalize these stories.” One movie showing, with Daniel Ellsberg of Pentagon Papers fame also appearing in a panel discussion, drew 400 people.

Another POGO effort is aimed at shoring up the internal inspector general system in all of the federal agencies. “Ultimately, our goal is a more accountable, effective, open and ethical federal government and we want to help the government help itself,” Brian says. POGO believes in criticizing government inspectors general when the organization feels they need to be prodded. But it has also defended inspectors general when they have taken unpopular stands inside their government agencies. “They’re a watchdog, so they don’t have a lot of friends when they’re good,” Brian notes.

Blowing the Whistle on Wrongdoing

One government official—a senior-executive-level whistle-blower working with POGO—says “a silent plurality” of government employees back the organization’s efforts toward openness in their work. “There are a large number of people in government who tend to support what POGO does... It’s pretty obvious they have a lot of people in government who provide them with all sorts of technical advice and analysis.”

When the government essentially puts “a gag order... on political decisions,” he says, “POGO is really good on picking up on that... It is frequently a mouthpiece for people with expertise in public administration who cannot use official

channels to discuss these matters—or when to do so would be very hazardous to their career health.”

POGO’s corps of whistle-blowers is “almost like a brotherhood” or sisterhood when they recognize each other. Sometimes “it’s pretty obvious that they’ve been feeding or talking to people at POGO,” the official notes. “A person will tell you something and it looks exactly identical” to a POGO web posting or report. “It seriously drove what I call the official organs nuts,” he added.

Yet, POGO is frugal in its courting of whistle-blowers. The whistle-blower still meets with POGO “to go over stuff in my area of technical expertise. They’ve never paid me... The few times a year I go out to lunch with Danielle... I end up paying.” This anonymous whistle-blower is so taken with the group that he has even contributed a four-figure sum over the years to POGO to support its work.

Despite its connotation, not every whistle-blowing experience is one that would be unwelcome at the highest levels of government. Brian sees POGO’s role as also “providing information that heads of agencies might wish they had. Because we’re working with insiders and whistle-blowers who are in the middle of agencies” and often providing information “to people at the top of agencies about things they wish they would know.”

But when Jim Mitchell blew the whistle on his boss, who headed the Office of Special Counsel, he needed to be discreet. That’s why he decided to give the information to POGO that eventually brought down the office head. “I chose them because of their integrity,” Mitchell says. “I had worked with them over the years. I was giving them ammo” of the type that later sparked an FBI investigation. “I worked with them under the table,” Mitchell explains. “I had to blow a quiet whistle.”

POGO has a reputation for protecting whistle-blowers—their web site gives detailed instructions on how to funnel information to the project without running afoul of government job restrictions. In addition, members of Congress are more likely to offer protection for POGO whistle-blowers because, according to a veteran congressional aide, the project doesn’t sacrifice individual reputations for its own ends. “They don’t throw people under the bus,” says the aide. So “when whistle-blowers need help and protection... when POGO knocks on the door, those are calls that get returned.”

A High-Tech Approach and Partnership Leverage Pry Open Government Doors

One of POGO's major efforts is using technology to open up the government to anyone with a computer and Internet access. POGO painstakingly put together what has been hailed as the only database on federal contractor misconduct. A congressional staff member who works with POGO terms it "one of their great resources" and says the database "was our source" in congressional oversight of contracts.

Taxpayer group head Ryan Alexander says, "For years, different agencies were saying we can't get this information and we can't get it out. But POGO wouldn't take no for an answer and essentially did the work" government agencies failed to do.

However, one observer pointed out that despite compelling content, POGO could benefit from better technical expertise in its database use. "They don't have the greatest technology," the observer says. "They just kind of hack it together whatever way works."

POGO regularly partners with other organizations on transparency in government issues. Alexander serves on the board of POGO and Brian returns the favor for Alexander's Taxpayers for Common Sense.

As a result, POGO provides "huge leverage from what we do" to support the project, Carnegie Corporation's Mannion declares. "Their outreach to other groups is amazing. We love to be able work in with other groups. It just allows our money to go further."

With billions at stake in government stimulus programs, POGO and other organizations worked together to forge a new group called the Coalition for an Accountable Recovery. The steering committee of the coalition is made up of POGO, OMB (Office of Management and Budget) Watch, the Good Jobs First group and the Sunlight Foundation. Several dozen other organizations are members of the coalition, which examines data on stimulus expenditures.

These organizations of varying interests aim to use their joint strength to bring scrutiny to federal funds expended in the massive U.S. recovery effort. "Members of the Coalition for an Accountable Recovery have diverse views about how and where the recovery money should be spent, but all agree on the need for transparency and accountability,"

the coalition notes in explaining its mission. "With such large amounts of money being spent so quickly, taxpayers deserve to know where their money is going."

The objective is "strength in numbers," according to Ellen Miller. Organizations are interested in how stimulus money is spent "perhaps for different reasons," she says, "but it's much smarter to band together and pool resources." Miller, who utilizes the web for her tech-savvy Sunlight Foundation, also funded by Carnegie Corporation, notes she has given a small grant to POGO to encourage its new media efforts. POGO's moves to use the newer forms of electronic communication resulted in the Sunlight grant. "We discussed a proposal from them that would enhance their blogging," Miller says. By contrast, "there are many Washington organizations that have not understood the web and its power."

Using Twitter and Facebook, which POGO employs to extend its reach beyond the Washington Beltway, helps the project put its research "directly into the hands of citizens who never heard of them before," Miller notes. "Technology has spread the ability to monitor what government does to millions of citizens who find information online and enable them to take a significant [step] in monitoring and holding government accountable."

POGO's future plans include new efforts around what Brian terms "transparency in public health." She has announced POGO's intention to work this year on government actions in the critical health arena.

Geri Mannion compares POGO's work to that of Upton Sinclair, a crusading journalist in the early 1900s, whose writing eventually brought federal inspections of meat and inspired the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. Noting the drug issues POGO is working on, Mannion says that in an era marked by the decline of newspapers, the organization is stepping up as the twenty-first century equivalent of a muckraking journalist.

But POGO's impact can go well beyond traditional journalism, Brian explains. "I really hated being a bystander as a journalist and not really fixing the problems," she says. "I really see POGO as this perfect blend of having all the fun where you're really exposing and fixing all the things you care about."

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Shining a light on government isn't a need that is likely to disappear soon, even with twenty-first century technology. "As much as in my utopia, POGO would go out of business," Brian observes, "that isn't going to happen."

Written by: Lee Michael Katz. Katz is a Washington, D.C., area freelance writer. He won a Stanley Foundation Reporting Project Journalism Award in 2007. Katz's work has appeared in *Carnegie Results* and numerous magazines and Web sites, as well as *The Washington Post* and through The New York Times Syndicate. Previously, Katz was national reporter and Senior Diplomatic Correspondent at *USA Today* and Managing Editor/International of UPI.



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