

# The Art of the Watchdog: Fighting Fraud, Waste, Abuse and Corruption in Government

by Daniel L. Feldman and David R. Eichenenthal

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REVIEW AUTHOR

**Robin J. Kempf**

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York*

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Who monitors government in America, and how do they perform their work? Daniel L. Feldman and David R. Eichenenthal tackle this topic in their recent book, *The Art of the Watchdog: Fighting Fraud, Waste, Abuse and Corruption in Government*, which comes from a very personal place for both men. Based on their extensive professional experience in both elected and appointed roles in government, they provide a near-encyclopedic description of types of governmental oversight entities, coupled with an exhortation to citizens of all political stripes to recognize the importance of monitoring in preserving and promoting the integrity of government. Although more anecdotal than empirical, the book provides public affairs professors and students rich material to explore.

The authors' primary thesis is unapologetically in favor of governmental oversight. Oversight, and lots of it, is necessary in the fight against fraud, waste, abuse, and corruption in government. Effective watchdogs must have a "low 'boiling point'—an intolerance for abuse and injustice" (p. 2). Further, meaningful oversight requires ongoing effort and persistence. The most successful watchdogs are dedicated to

pursuing systemic reform rather than simply addressing the single case in front of them.

Feldman and Eichenenthal developed this thesis through professional experience. Feldman is an attorney and former New York state legislator, with prior experience as both a congressional and state legislative staffer. He also worked for the New York State Attorney General and continues to work for the Office of the New York State Comptroller. He currently teaches public management at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Eichenenthal is likewise an attorney. He has extensive experience in New York City government, including tenures with the City Comptroller's Office, the Department of Investigation, and the Public Advocate's Office; and he headed Chattanooga, Tennessee's Office of Performance Review. Currently, he is a director of Public Financial Management Inc. and a senior research fellow at the New York University School of Law, Center for Research in Crime and Justice.

*The Art of the Watchdog* is essentially divided into three sections. The first section introduces the topic and describes the authors' opinions on

the importance of the watchdog role. It also defines fraud, waste, abuse, and corruption and gives a detailed overview of the audit and investigation processes. The second section covers the many types of governmental watchdogs on the federal, state, and local levels of American government. The final section addresses nongovernmental watchdogs such as the press, not-for-profit organizations, citizens, and private attorneys. All sections are peppered with real-world tales of governmental oversight.

A major asset of this book is its broad definition of *watchdog* as any entity that may play a role in monitoring and reforming government to reduce fraud, waste, abuse, and corruption. A vast array of entities meet this description, and having all such types collected in one source gives students a broad introduction to the topic. Specific entities and functions might be covered in a more theoretical way elsewhere; for example, congressional oversight of bureaucracies has received attention in a rich literature on political control. But *The Art of the Watchdog* provides an expansive and thus pedagogically useful introduction to government accountability. Of particular use is that in every case, the authors assess the structural or other limitations of an entity's ability to perform its watchdog role.

The most valuable chapters are those addressing watchdogs that have not received much scholarly attention from social scientists in the context of oversight. For example, the chapters examining the extent to which state comptrollers, treasurers, and attorneys general have a role in monitoring other state agencies for fraud, waste, and abuse are enlightening, especially to those unfamiliar with state governments. Additionally, the chapter on the role of nongovernmental watchdogs is fascinating. The authors describe both liberal and conservative entities, for-profit *qui tam* attorneys, and not-for-profit advocacy groups.

Despite the authors' comprehensiveness, readers should be aware that this is not a traditional theory-based academic book. It is more descriptive, relying on the authors' personal observations or other anecdotes to support broad claims. For example, the authors assert that the existence, or lack thereof, of an audit function in a city government may be attributable to

political or cultural reasons (p. 185). This assertion is an empirical question that merits a scholarly response, which is not found here. Neither will readers find a unified theory of the role of watchdogs, if such a thing is possible. Thus, this book may not be rigorous enough for a doctoral-level class unless augmented with other theory-based work, though it does raise a number of ideas that merit further research.

Some readers may also be put off by the book's focus on New York. Examples of oversight are not exclusively drawn from the State or City of New York, but the vast majority are, and the authors readily acknowledge this. The geographic emphasis may be one reason this book made its way onto a *New York Times*' list of suggested reading for then newly elected Mayor Bill de Blasio (Roberts, 2013).

Overall, *The Art of the Watchdog* makes a strong contribution to public affairs education by providing professors with a reference book they can use to expose students to the concepts of government accountability and monitoring. It clearly presents the challenges that watchdogs face when exposing corruption or advocating for change. It would be a useful text to incorporate into a policy, ethics, or accountability class on either the undergraduate or master's level.

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## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robin J. Kempf** is assistant professor of public management at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Her research focuses on issues of government accountability, institutions, and public management.