

## New York Times Reassigns Reporter in Leak Case

The New York Times, July 3, 2018



Ali Watkins, who had been covering federal law enforcement in Washington, will be assigned a mentor and moved to a new beat in New York.

Ali Watkins, the New York Times reporter whose email and phone records [were secretly seized by the Trump administration](#), will be transferred out of the newspaper's Washington bureau and reassigned to a new beat in New York, The Times said on Tuesday.

Ms. Watkins, 26, had been the subject of [an internal review](#) by The Times after revelations that she had a three-year affair with a high-ranking aide on the Senate

Intelligence Committee, which she covered for several news organizations before joining The Times in December.

The aide, James Wolfe, 57, who handled classified material for the committee, [was arrested last month](#) as part of a leak investigation in which the Justice Department also seized Ms. Watkins's communications, an unusually aggressive move against a journalist that [prompted an outcry](#) from press advocates. Mr. Wolfe was charged with lying to the F.B.I. but not with leaking classified information; he has pleaded not guilty.

[\[Read more\]](#) about how Ms. Watkins's relationship with Mr. Wolfe rattled the world of Washington journalists.]

Ms. Watkins, who had been covering federal law enforcement at The Times, will be assigned a mentor and moved to a new beat in New York "for a fresh start," the paper's executive editor, Dean Baquet, wrote in a memo to the newsroom.

"We hold our journalists and their work to the highest standards," Mr. Baquet wrote. "We are giving Ali an opportunity to show that she can live up to them. I believe she can." He added: "I also believe that The Times must be a humane place that can allow for second chances when there are mitigating circumstances."

In a statement on Tuesday, Ms. Watkins wrote: "I respect and understand the Times's review and agree that I should have handled aspects of my past relationships and disclosures differently. I sincerely regret putting The Times in a difficult position and am very grateful for the support I've received from my editors and colleagues here. I also appreciate the review's conclusion that my reporting has been fact-based and accurate."

The story of Ms. Watkins's affair rattled Washington journalists and raised questions about prosecutorial overreach and journalistic ethics. In his 575-word memo, Mr. Baquet acknowledged the complexity and sensitivity of Ms. Watkins's situation.

"As an institution, we abhor the actions of the government in this case," he wrote, calling the Justice Department's seizure of her records "an attempt to interfere with the work of journalists by an administration whose leader has called the media 'the enemy of the people.'" Other Times journalists have noticed sources "clamming up because of this assault of on how we do our jobs," he wrote.

But, Mr. Baquet added, "We are troubled by Ali's conduct, particularly while she was employed by other news organizations. For a reporter to have an intimate relationship with someone he or she covers is unacceptable."

Ms. Watkins, who has not written for The Times since Mr. Wolfe's arrest, was notified in February by the Justice Department that her email and phone records had been seized. On the advice of her personal lawyer, she did not inform her editors in The

Times's Washington bureau, and only revealed the information last month when her colleagues were about to report on Mr. Wolfe's arrest. Mr. Baquet wrote that those actions "put our news organization in a difficult position."

The government's pursuit of Ms. Watkins — who at one point was confronted in a bar by a Customs and Border Protection officer, who seemed to have gained access to her private travel records — has outraged press advocates. But journalists were also unsettled by her violation of a bedrock norm of their profession: avoiding romantic involvement with a person she covered.

Reporters at The Times, and at other news organizations, have expressed unease over Ms. Watkins's conduct. Women in particular say the episode has made them more vulnerable to an ugly and false stereotype often lobbed at female reporters, that they exchange sex for information.

Ms. Watkins met Mr. Wolfe while reporting on the intelligence committee as a 22-year-old intern at McClatchy Newspapers, where her coverage led to a series of stories named a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize.

She has said the relationship did not turn romantic until after those stories ran. During the relationship, she continued to cover the Senate Intelligence Committee for The Huffington Post, BuzzFeed News and Politico, telling editors at those organizations that she did not rely on Mr. Wolfe as a source. Last fall, after Ms. Watkins and Mr. Wolfe had broken up, she briefly dated another staff member at the intelligence committee, friends said.

Although her disclosures varied in detail, none of her editors barred her from covering the intelligence committee, or explicitly told her that the relationship was inappropriate.

Mr. Baquet echoed that point, writing, "As she started her career, I believe she was not well served by some editors elsewhere who failed to respond appropriately to her disclosures about her relationships."

He added that leaders at The Times "also bear some responsibility: our inquiry found that during the hiring process she disclosed aspects of her past relationships to some editors."

The Times, Mr. Baquet wrote, intends "to tighten our job candidate screening process to ensure that significant questions make their way to the newsroom leadership for full discussion — which did not happen in this case."

[\[Read Mr. Baquet's memo.\]](#)

The Times has dealt with several sensitive personnel issues in recent months. Glenn Thrush, a political reporter in Washington, was temporarily suspended, [and then](#)

[removed from the White House beat](#), after allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior. The paper's metro editor, Wendell Jamieson, [resigned in April](#) after he was accused of inappropriate behavior by at least three female employees of The Times.

A version of this article appears in print on July 4, 2018, on Page B3 of the New York edition with the headline: Times Reassigns Reporter in Federal Leak Case After Internal Review. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)