

SEC Chair Nominee Paul Atkins Must Answer for His Anti-SEC Record

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Paul Atkins is President Trump's nominee to be the Chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). However, Atkins has a remarkably long and disreputable record of being vigorously if not adamantly opposed to the very reasons the SEC was created and its mission and mandate since then. The stakes are very high if the SEC does not do its job: investors will be ripped off, our markets will be less transparent and liquid, investor confidence and trust in those markets will evaporate, capital formation and our economy will suffer, and financial crises will ensue.

That's what happened with the catastrophic 2008 crash, which Atkins's prior actions contributed to when he was a Commissioner on the SEC from 2002-2008. In consistently siding with Corporate America, Wall Street's megabanks, and the financial industry generally, Atkins appears to have been blind to the dangers that under-regulated and under-policed firms pose to hardworking Main Street Americans. For example, in April 2008, after the Bear Stearns investment bank spectacularly collapsed, Atkins said that it was his "hope that any regulatory response will focus on improving markets by enhancing investor ability to understand and price risk rather than by restricting access to or prohibiting the offering of new, innovative financial products." By "new, innovative financial products," Atkins was presumably referring to the predatory subprime loans and derivatives like NINJA loans (no income, no job, no assets), naked credit default swaps (CDS), collateralized debt obligations (CDOs, CDO², synthetic CDOs, etc.), and other worthless financial products that actually blew up Bear Stearns and would soon blow up Lehman Brothers, AIG, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs and ultimately the entire financial system, causing trillions of dollars in bailouts and the Great Recession.

That benighted attitude prevailed even as the financial system and economy began to crack. For example, in July 2008 – just weeks before the onset of the worst financial crash since 1929 – Atkins gave a <u>speech</u> in which he recognized that "the financial markets are going through some difficult times . . . because of issues related to the lack of available credit, the securitization of certain home mortgages, and business and investment decisions made by professionals." But Atkins <u>said</u> that, although the current economic conditions had prompted calls for greater regulation and a new regulatory order, "we must not immediately jump to the conclusion that failures of firms . . . is caused by market failure, or indeed regulatory failure."

While the world was blowing up around him and while he was a key policymaker responsible for regulating the markets effectively so that they didn't blow up, Atkins still found no reason to worry because, he <u>said</u>, economic indicators were strong and

what goes on in Wall Street does not necessarily translate to Main Steet.

It is difficult to think of someone being more catastrophically wrong about an historically consequential event as he was.

While what goes on in Wall Street may not *necessarily* translate to Main Street, it often does, and it is grossly irresponsible for a policymaker to rely on the theoretical possibility that it may not, as was exposed just weeks later when <u>Lehman Brothers collapsed</u> which

was the most terrifying moment for business and the US economy since the Great Depression.... The panic that followed plunged the American economy into a severe downturn, now known as the Great Recession.

Demonstrating the grievous danger to Main Street Americans of Atkins's views, the 2008 crash left <u>90% of Americans poorer in 2016 than they were in 2007 by an astonishing 17%-35%</u>, and it took ten years for the unemployment rate to return to pre-crash levels.

Given that history and those stakes for Main Street Americans, Atkins must be required to provide clear, direct, specific, and detailed answers to questions about his record in his nominating process. We highlight just ten of his anti-investor, markets, and financial stability actions and statements below, but there are more and all bear on his suitability for the position and the effectiveness – or not - of the SEC over the next four years if he is Chair.

Background

Congress <u>created</u> the SEC in 1934 in the wake of the stock market crash in 1929 to help restore confidence in the capital markets, and it has served that role pretty well for over 90 years. <u>The SEC</u> has helped make the U.S. capital markets the broadest, deepest, and most liquid markets in the world because investors know that the SEC works to ensure that those markets are fair, well-regulated, and well-policed. It does so by enforcing the securities laws to protect investors, maintain fair, orderly and efficient markets, and facilitate capital formation. As the SEC's third Chair, the future Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, <u>said</u> the SEC is "the investor's advocate."

Those priorities changed dramatically, however, in the early 2000s when Atkins was a Commissioner at the SEC from 2002 until just days before the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the onset of the catastrophic crash in 2008. As one scholar observed, in an aptly titled law review article "Why the SEC Failed: Regulators Against Regulation," Atkins's tenure coincided with a change in the SEC's focus "from protecting investors to protecting the companies and investment firms that the SEC is required to regulate."

As a result of that change and Atkins's role in driving that change, less than a year after Atkins left the SEC, the same scholar remarked that

the reputation and effectiveness of the agency [were] at their lowest point in its <u>history</u>. This is especially sad because the SEC was known for years as one of the finest, if not the finest, of the federal regulatory agencies.... [A] rot [had] set in several years earlier.... [T]he main reason for the decline is that the Commission succumbed to the anti-regulatory climate of recent years. Too many of its members just did not believe in regulation.

That aptly describes Atkins during those years when he was a member of the Commission; he "just did not believe in regulation." He has long been a <u>critic of regulation</u>, as evidenced more recently in his role as a <u>contributor</u> to Project 2025, which seeks to "dismantle" what is pejoratively referred to as the "administrative state" – which includes the SEC itself, the very agency he now seeks to lead.

His virulent anti-regulation views go so far as to blame the government for the Great Crash of 1929 and for the Great Depression of the 1930s, as he said in a <u>speech</u> when he was a Commissioner:

Many economists argue that the government's monetary and economic policy exacerbated the markets' rise and heavy fall. And, many economists have shown that the stock market crash was not itself the cause of the Great Depression. They point instead to continued, flawed government policies after the Crash that exacerbated the business downturn and actually stifled the recovery that had begun.

The moral of the story is that the cause of the poor market performance and extended depression was not the result of the markets' failure, but U.S. economic and regulatory policy. The government failed to recognize that its attempt to fix the economy by interfering with market forces first enhanced the stock market bubble, then sent the market into a whirlwind crash, and then prolonged the business depression.

Following the stock market crash, the government attempted to pull the country out of the depression by continued intervention with the economy. . . . Wall Street became the easy scapegoat for the economic deterioration in the United States.

While some have said that (just like some think the world is flat), this revisionist history isn't supported by the record, facts, or history. For example, the United States Congress <u>found</u>, when it passed the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, that

[n]ational emergencies, which produce widespread unemployment and the dislocation of trade, transportation, and industry, and which burden interstate commerce and adversely affect the general welfare, are precipitated, intensified, and prolonged by manipulation and sudden and unreasonable fluctuations of security prices and by excessive speculation on such exchanges and markets.

As a result, Congress found that it was "necessary to provide for regulation and control of such transactions and of practices and matters related thereto." This conclusion that the actions and activities of Wall Street financial firms were culpable for the Great Crash and Great Depression was well supported.¹ As a result, there was ample basis for creating the SEC and assigning it the key missions of protecting investors, maintaining fair, orderly and efficient markets, and facilitating capital formation. Any nominee who thinks Wall Street was not responsible for the Great Depression and that the real problem was the attempts to regulate Wall Street is a dangerous choice for SEC Chair.

No less a warning sign is that Akins, within months of leaving the SEC, founded Patomak Global Partners, a consulting firm whose clients *include financial services firms subject to the SEC's watch*. These industry clients paid Patomak millions of dollars over the past decade. Patomak has spent years advising these clients regarding how to influence policy and counteract investigations. In the past, it has even stood to benefit from potential regulatory changes at the SEC. Presumably, that explains why Atkins was the only one of 68 business leaders who refused to endorse a report titled "Crony Capitalism" that called for enacting stricter prohibitions on the revolving door between government and lobbyists.

This record and conduct give rise to genuine concerns about serious, multiple conflicts of interest between the clients who have enriched Atkins and the very same firms that will be subject to SEC regulation when he is Chair if confirmed. At the least, investors and the public might worry that an SEC Chair who has spent the last 15 years promoting the interests of the firms the SEC regulates

¹ See, e.g., Saule T. Omarova and Graham S. Steele, Banking and Antitrust, 133 Yale L.J. 1162, 1181 (2024) ("Following the 1929 stock market crash, the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency established a special subcommittee to investigate unsound and abusive practices in the U.S. financial markets. This body, known as the Pecora Commission, documented a range of speculative activities and proliferation of investment trusts, which gave rise to conflicts of interest, self-dealing, concentration of wealth, and undue enrichment. Wall Street bankers, the Commission found, exhibited a 'tendency toward' monopoly, steered capital to favored and connected clients, and otherwise abused their access to the public's money.") (citing Comm. on Banking and Currency, Stock Exchange Practices, S. Rep. No. 73-1455 (1934)); Todd Haugh, The Most Senior Wall Street Official: Evaluating the State of Financial Crisis Prosecutions, 9 Va. L. & Bus. Rev. 153, 186 (2015) ("Beginning in 1932, the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency created the Pecora Commission, which publicly inquired into the causes of the stock market crash. This led to the indictments of 'several of the era's finance titans,' including Charles Mitchel, president of what is now Citibank, and utilities magnate Samuel Insull."); Stephen R. Ross, et al., The Rise and Permanence of Quasi-Legislative Independent Commissions, 27 J.L. & Pol. 415, 427 (2012) ("Similarly, the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency in 1932 began investigating the stock market losses of 1929. Dubbed the Pecora Commission after the committee's chief counsel Ferdinand Pecora, the investigation included dramatic hearings into the activities of J.P. Morgan and others, and 'uncovered widespread fraud and abuse on Wall Street, including self-dealing and market manipulation among investment banks and their securities affiliates.") (citing Joel Seligman, The transformation of Wall Street: A History of the Securities and Exchange Commission and Modern Corporate Finance 1 (2003) and Donald A. Ritchie, The Pecora Wall Street Exposé, 1934, in 4 Congress Investigates: A Documented History, 1792-1974, at 2555, 2555-78 (Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. & Roger Bruns eds., 1975) and quoting SEC Chair Mary L. Schapiro, Testimony Concerning the State of the Financial Crisis Before the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission (Jan. 14, 2010), available at http://www.sec.gov/news/testimony/2010/ts011410mls.htm)). For those interested in a new popular history about the Great Crash of 1929, Wall Street's culpability in causing it, the pain inflicted on the country during the Great Depression, and the need to rein in Wall Street and finance more broadly, see Diana B. Henriques, Taming the Street: The Old Guard, The New Deal, and the Fight to Regulate American Capitalism.

might not be looking out for their best interests. Similarly, one might reasonably ask how someone who thinks Wall Street was a scapegoat for the Great Depression and who was a member of the Commission when it hit its lowest point in its 75 years of existence and whose conduct as a Commissioner contributed to that decline and "rot" - which included contributing to causing the worst financial crisis since the Great Crash of 1929, the worst economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the largest industry bailouts in the history of the country - could even be allowed back in the building, much less taken seriously or allowed to return as Chair.

Ten reasons investors and the public should be very concerned about Atkins as Chair

1. Atkins thinks the law Congress passed to prevent another financial crisis is a "calamity." Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Act in 2010 in response to the 2008 financial crisis. That crisis led to the worst economy since the Great Depression, throwing 27 million Americans out of work, 16 million out of their homes, and leaving 90% of Americans poorer in 2016 than they were in 2007. Wall Street's megabanks and the country's other gigantic financial institutions caused that crash and inflicted that horrific damage on the American people. The purpose of Dodd-Frank was to prevent them from doing that again by creating rules that would force the financial sector to reduce its high risk, dangerous activities and better serve society. Indeed, Dodd-Frank compelled the financial institutions that caused the crash to <u>adopt essential reforms</u> to protect Main Street from Wall Street.

Yet in 2011, Atkins gave a <u>statement</u> to the Senate Banking Committee in which he called Dodd-Frank "a calamity," which it probably was for his private sector clients who were trying to kill the reforms put in place to protect Main Street Americans from their high risk, dangerous, destabilizing activities. He criticized Dodd-Frank's creation of the Financial Stability Oversight Council (FSOC), even though he acknowledged that the purpose of the council was to identify threats to the financial stability of the United States, like those that caused the 2008 crash. In a later speech, he went further and <u>said</u>: "Let us call the regulatory threat posed by the FSOC and the Federal Reserve for what it is—fundamentally antithetical to free markets and capital markets in general and a terrible idea for investors." This about a body that was created <u>to identify and police systemic risk</u> and save taxpayers and investors from another financial crisis. He has also <u>said</u> that Dodd-Frank's requirement that investment advisers to hedge funds and private equity firms register with the SEC "endangers all investors," even though hedge funds <u>contributed to the 2008 crash</u> and registration would enable the SEC to better protect Main Street Americans.

Atkins has also disparaged the <u>resoundingly successful whistleblower program</u> at the SEC that Dodd-Frank created. That program incentivizes people to "blow the whistle" on lawbreaking by Wall Street's biggest firms and has caught lots of fraudsters and returned billions to ripped off Americans. Yet, Atkins <u>said</u> the Program "created perverse incentives" and failed to account for "the unintended consequences of unfounded charges from disgruntled employees with ulterior motives." He totally ignored <u>the benefits to Main Street</u> of this Program and the many other protections in the Dodd-Frank Act, while apparently seeking to protect the profits of his clients. Unfortunately, the passage of time has not charged Atkins's views, as he gave a speech in 2015 in which he said Dodd-Frank contained "<u>a lot of rubbish</u>"—again, maybe for those clients that caused and profited from the 2008 crash, but not for the tens of millions of Americans who were hurt by Wall Street's reckless and illegal conduct.

2. Atkins does not think brokers should have to put their customers' interests first when handling their customers' own money. Dodd-Frank authorized the SEC to require a uniform fiduciary standard for broker-dealers and investment advisers. Investment advisers are already subject to a fiduciary duty, which means that they must act in their client's best interest. After Dodd-Frank's enactment, the SEC did a study and recommended the adoption of a uniform fiduciary duty that would apply to brokers too. Atkins nonetheless gave congressional testimony in which he criticized the study on the ground that a uniform fiduciary standard requiring brokers to put their customers' interests first would actually harm investors. Think about that: he is saying that requiring brokers to put their clients' best interests first when handling their clients' own money would harm the clients, when in fact the only harm would be to those brokers who line their pockets at their clients' expense.

3. Atkins thinks protecting retail investors with disclosures in connection with private securities offerings are burdensome and unnecessary. Congress enacted securities legislation in 2012 when it passed the JOBS Act, which expanded investments in private markets where there are fewer investor protections, disclosures, and remedies. In 2013, in light of that legislation and to better protect investors, the SEC proposed a <u>rule</u> requiring that certain private securities offerings contain legends or cautionary statements in any written general solicitation materials. These legends and cautionary statements were intended to "inform potential investors that the offering is limited to accredited investors and that certain potential risks may be associated with such offerings." Atkins <u>called</u> this proposed rule providing minimal but important disclosure to potential investors in the largely unregulated private markets "burdensome and unnecessary."

4. Atkins said a rule requiring the registration of hedge funds to protect investors like pension funds was unnecessary. This was not the first time Atkins opposed investor protection rules in the private markets. In 2004, while a commissioner at the SEC, he dissented from the SEC's adoption of a rule that required the registration of hedge funds. In doing so, he cited statistics that minimized the role of pension funds in hedge fund investments and said that the majority's concern about the exposure of retirees and retail investors to hedge funds through pension funds was "unwarranted." As predicted at the time, history has proved him wrong. By 2020, public pension plans in the United States represented 35% of all capital in private funds and were the largest investor in the asset class. The 2004 registration requirements have provided those pension funds and their retirees with important protections that they would not have had if Atkins's views prevailed.

5. Atkins doesn't think protecting retail investors is necessary because he thinks they are on the same playing field as gigantic, powerful and well-connected institutional investors. This was also not Atkins's only dissent from a rule intended to help retail investors. In 2005, the SEC adopted a rule to reinforce the fundamental principle that investors should obtain the best prices

on their trades – this would seem to be a no brainer for an investor protection agency. The rule was intended to give "<u>particularly retail investors</u>" greater confidence that they would be treated fairly when they participate in the equity markets and promote a more level playing field for retail investors. It's beyond dispute that retail investors do not have the same ability to navigate the markets as institutional investors or the leverage to obtain the same information or obtain the best prices. As a result, retail investors are often taken advantage of and do not get the best prices, hence the need for the rule. Yet in his <u>dissent</u>, Atkins "question[ed] the majority's basis for asserting that retail investors are not on the same playing field as other investors." Think about that: Atkins was saying that a small individual retail investor buying \$1,000 worth of a stock had the same market power as, for example, \$15 trillion Fidelity Investments with its 80,000 employees or \$11.6 trillion Blackrock with its 27,000. Those and the other gigantic institutional investors have armies of strategists, analysts, traders, and portfolio managers to ensure they are getting the best price. Retail investors have no one but themselves. It is by definition an unlevel playing field that Atkins is either ignorant of or intentionally blind.

6. Atkins supported a rule loosening the leverage requirements on Wall Street banks. Not only did Atkins dissent from rules designed to help retail investors, but he also supported rules that caused investors harm. In 2004, he supported a rule that significantly loosened the regulations governing Wall Street banks' leverage ratios—a measurement of how much a firm borrows compared to its total assets. The rule essentially allowed the largest Wall Street banks to take on more debt. It did so by changing the way the banks needed to calculate the <u>capital</u> firms had to have to protect customers assets should they experience losses on their securities and derivates. The new rules allowed banks to use their own models to underpin their capital requirements. The SEC itself estimated that the new rules would allow broker-dealers to reduce their average capital by 40%. Unsurprisingly, Wall Street supported the changes, with Lehman Brothers saying that it "applauds and supports the Commission." Subsequently, Bear Sterns, for example, increased its leverage ratio to <u>33 to 1</u>, meaning that for every \$1 in equity, it had \$33 of debt. Other firms' ratios including Lehman's also rose substantially. Just four years after passing that rule and after the financial firms then dangerously loaded up on debt, Bear Sterns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch and others collapsed due in part to their excessive borrowing and extraordinarily high levels of leverage allowed by the SEC rule. Their tiny sliver of capital – enabled by the rule Atkins supported - proved grossly insufficient to absorb their losses, and the end result was costly bailouts and a catastrophic financial crash that by 2016 had left 90% of Americans poorer than they were in 2007 by an astonishing 17%-35%.

7. Atkins helped repeal a rule designed to prevent manipulative short selling. Atkins also supported the repeal of a rule designed to prevent the manipulative short selling of securities. The rule, known as the <u>tick test</u> or uptick rule, only allowed short sales when the last sale price was higher than the previous price. It meant that a trader could not short a stock if the movement prior to the short sale was down, so short sellers could not add to the downward pressure on a stock that was already falling sharply. The rule had been on the books for 70 years, but in 2007 Atkins relied on an economic analysis that suggested the rule was no longer necessary. The rule's repeal made unlimited short selling possible, which allowed short sellers to <u>drive down the stock price</u> of

several financial firms during the 2008 crash. For example, Lehman Brothers' stock fell sharply in 2008 due to <u>short selling</u>. "After Lehman's bankruptcy, the SEC banned all short sales in financial stocks, a step that might not have been needed" had it not <u>repealed</u> its anti-manipulation rule.

8. Atkins has favored making it easier for companies to exclude shareholder proposals. Atkins has also taken anti-investor positions in the realm of corporate governance. Shareholder proposals are a critical part of corporate governance because they allow investors – the owners – to hold companies and executives accountable. For that reason, the SEC's rules must ensure that shareholders have a voice in the proxy process. Yet Atkins has criticized the shareholder proposal process as allowing "the tyranny of the minority" and "harassment of the corporations." Unsurprisingly, then, he has favored making it harder for shareholders to submit proposals, a step the SEC has sometimes taken. Indeed, when he was a Commissioner in 2007, he supported a rule that said companies could exclude from their proxy materials shareholder proposals to adopt bylaws giving shareholders the right to nominate director candidates for inclusion in management's proxy. Such rules prevent shareholders from exercising oversight, even though they are the ultimate owners of the company. Such rules also reveal Atkins's propensity for siding with management and against public shareholders.

9. Atkins has criticized the proxy advisory firms that give investors independent advice. Similarly, proxy advisory firms provide vital information and analysis to shareholders and help them navigate the proxy process. Because the volume, frequency, and complexity of proxy statements make it difficult for many investors to conduct their own analyses of matters subject to a shareholder vote, these firms play a crucial role. These private companies are hired by investors to provide them with valuable information that facilitates their engagement through research, analysis, and recommendations. Ultimately, they provide investors with independent advice that is not tainted or spun by the inherently biased management of the company. Yet Atkins has criticized proxy advisory firms, saying that they <u>push an agenda</u> and <u>often give investors</u> inaccurate information. Those with this position would leave investors dependent upon management without much ability to get independent advice.

10. Atkins has served as a lobbyist and adviser to financial firms with business before the SEC. Finally, and perhaps most troubling, Atkins's current firm, Patomak Global Partners, which he founded and apparently is the sole proprietor of, served as a lobbyist and adviser to innumerable financial firms with substantial business matters before the SEC. This creates enormous actual and apparent conflicts of interest. Atkins should be required to publicly disclose all those clients, what matters Patomak was hired to work on, and what it was paid for that work. Otherwise, the public will be in the dark as to those conflicts and how they might or might not be addressed if Atkins becomes Chair. One glaring example is that Atkins served as a lobbyist and adviser to Sam Bankman-Fried's FTX crypto exchange. In 2022, FTX collapsed virtually overnight, erasing \$8 billion in customer funds. Bankman-Fried was subsequently convicted on seven counts of fraud, conspiracy, and money laundering. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Although Atkins acknowledged the fraud, he is a strong crypto advocate, and said that FTX's collapse

happened <u>because</u> "the US didn't make our rules accommodating to this new technology."² Ironically, to defend crypto's lawless if not lawbreaking activities, Atkins shifts 180 degrees and now blames the lack of regulations for causing problems, albeit a lack of regulations favorable to the crypto industry. This anti-regulation to pro-regulation flip-flop would appear to be evidence of the extent to which he will go to side with the industry no matter what.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, Atkins's record raises serious concerns about whether as Chair of the SEC he will be an advocate for the interests of investors <u>over</u> the interests of Corporate America, Wall Street's megabanks, and gigantic financial firms. The SEC was created to stand up to those powerful forces on behalf of the investor.³ That's why it is imperative that the SEC Chair prioritizes the interests of Main Street investors over the interests of Wall Street. Otherwise, investors will be ripped off, our markets will be less transparent and liquid, investor confidence and trust in those markets will evaporate, capital formation will suffer, and financial crises will ensue. Indeed, the SEC's failure to do its job during Atkins's time as a Commissioner helped cause the 2008 crash and the human wreckage it caused.

As was written at the time, the 2008 financial crisis revealed

the SEC for what it has become. Created to protect investors from financial predators, the commission has somehow evolved into a mechanism for protecting financial predators with political clout from investors.

Atkins's record provides cause for concern that the SEC will repeat history if he returns as Chair. Atkins should be required to give clear, unambiguous assurances that as Chair he will not favor Wall Street over Main Street and, if he does so credibly, he must be accountable for those assurances.

There's no dispute that Atkins is <u>smart</u>, <u>experienced</u>, <u>and capable</u>. His views are surely reasonable for an industry lobbyist. But the fact that he so consistently opposed even the most sensible rules and actively contributed to the "rot" at the SEC and its decline to the lowest level in its then-75 year history should engender a searching, granular review of his prior conduct and statements to determine if he is really an appropriate choice to head the agency in charge of protecting investors, policing the securities markets, and promoting durable, sustainable capital formation, the foundation of a growing economy and rising living standards for Main Street Americans.

² While it is unclear what "new technology" Atkins was specifically referring to, FTX's proposal at the CFTC was to allow it as a clearing agency to be vertically integrated, thereby removing numerous layers of customer, investor and financial stability protections that had worked well for decades, including during the financial crash of 2008-2009. Fortunately, the FTX proposal was not approved before it collapsed and its crimes were revealed because there would likely have been many, many more victims of FTX.

³ See supra note 1 and accompanying text.



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