

One Man Against Secrecy

Newsletter Editor Works to Limit Classified Information

By Dana Priest

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Around lunchtime on Sept. 26, a security officer at the Space Vehicles Directorate on Kirtland Air Force Base shot an e-mail to Steven Aftergood, who was sitting in his frayed tweed chair at his computer, in his office on K Street.

"Questions/concerns have been voiced by our scientists and engineers regarding material on your web," the officer informed him. "Please advise on your collection methods and who provides authorization to you allowing publication of what is presently on your web site."

"Collection methods?" Aftergood chuckled, then responded: "Authorization for publication of material on our web site is contained in U.S. Constitution, Amendment 1.

www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am1.

"If you have other specific concerns, let me know."

Aftergood, director of the Federation of American Scientists' Project on Government Secrecy, is an army of one, the David in an era of Goliath-strength government stealth.

Armed with a pocket-size copy of the Constitution, the Freedom of Information Act and an investigator's patience for source-building, Aftergood is out to slay what he sees as the arbitrariness of the U.S. system for classifying documents to keep them secret.

To do that, he asks foundations and donors for \$150,000 a year ("in a good year") to keep his online newsletter, Secrecy News (www.fas.org/sgp/index.html), and staff of one -- himself -- going. He often scoops the national media with anecdotes about government attempts to keep information secret.

In fact, the government's classification chief, J. William Leonard, has bookmarked Aftergood's Web site because it is usually easier to find critical national security documents there than on government Web sites. As director of the Information Security Oversight Office, Leonard has one goal for enhancing his office's Web offerings: "I want my information to be posted on my Web site before it's posted on Steve's. It's a matrix we have yet to meet."

"Steve is part of what we regard as the public interest groups," Leonard said. "He's at the top of the list in terms of being the most thoughtful and most comprehensive."

In a newsletter dated Oct. 28, Aftergood reported that the Congressional Research Service, Congress's research arm, had taken down its online reports. In typical Aftergood style, he retrieved numerous CRS reports from his archives and posted them on his Web site, along with another organization's database of most of the CRS reports ever published.

In the same issue, he revealed the Army had pulled its Center for Army Lessons Learned (www.call.army.mil) Web page after The Washington Post reported on an unusually blunt critique posted there about the inadequacies of U.S. military intelligence on Iraq. The Web site returned, Aftergood noted later, minus the report in question.

Another newsletter item hounded the Defense Science Board, traditionally packed with industry CEOs and policy elites, for removing the names of its members from its Web site. A DSB spokesman told Aftergood the names had been removed for security reasons following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but was unable to articulate how deleting names of corporate leaders who advise the government would increase security against terrorism.

Aftergood persuaded the spokesman to send him a list of members, and he put it online.

"What's important is not access to one particular document or another," he said. "What's important is the deliberative process and the health of American democracy when you impede access. Mundane information is the oxygen that permits public participation in political life."

Besides providing these daily morsels, Aftergood has been after the U.S. intelligence community since 1997 to publish its annual aggregate intelligence budget. He won the first release in 50 years when CIA Director George J. Tenet released the 1997 annual budget, which was \$26.6 billion. Aftergood has two pending lawsuits on the matter.

CIA officials warn that releasing other annual figures would allow foreign intelligence services to piece together a pattern. Also, they say, the CIA would soon find itself compelled to release the underlying components of the budget.

"No other intelligence agency in the world has released as much information as we have," said CIA spokesman Bill Harlow said. "Look at our Web site. There's volumes of material there."

The CIA's position on the budget release, Aftergood says, illustrates his larger point: "The intelligence budget total is a proxy for secrecy policy in general. It's an indictment of how far classification policy has become decoupled from real security threats."

A joint congressional inquiry into the events of Sept. 11, 2001, agreed that the declassification system is broken and recommended that federal agencies report to Congress "on proposals for a new and more realistic approach" to classifying information, including ideas "to protect against the use of the classification process as a shield to protect agency self-interest."

Included in that disclosure process, Aftergood says, should be the White House, which has refused to release relevant copies of the President's Daily Brief to Congress and independent investigators seeking to learn what U.S. intelligence officials told President Bush about the threat from Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network before Sept. 11, 2001, and, separately, about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

"It's taken for granted that it's sacrosanct," Aftergood said. "The White House should identify the sensitive information and sources" and remove those. But "the idea that the whole thing should be secret is pure mystification."

Aftergood said he recognizes the need for secrecy in some situations, and has been willing to practice what he preaches. Earlier this month, he received an angry e-mail from a Sheppard Air Force Base official concerning his posting of a Joint Staff manual on computer security: "Did you know that you have posted FOUO [For Official Use Only] information on the public web site? It clearly states this is a limited document NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE."

"Thank you for your message," Aftergood wrote back. "As a non-governmental organization, we are not subject to DoD regulations concerning "official use only" information. However, pending review, we have decided to remove this document from our website."

"I'm not dogmatic about any of this," he said. "I don't look at this as a game. I don't look at the government as the enemy. I'm interested in a rational information policy that respects the American public."

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