



August 11, 2017

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dionne Hardy
FOIA Officer
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street NW, Suite 9204
Washington, DC 20503
OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov

Re: Expedited Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Ms. Hardy:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 5 C.F.R. Part 1303, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The United States is fast approaching its statutory debt limit, and experts across the country are calling for an increase to avoid the inevitable—what has alternatively been called a “debacle,” “crisis,” and “nightmare”—that would come from the world’s leading superpower defaulting on its loans.¹ In fact, the Treasury Department’s own website states: “Failing to increase the debt limit would have catastrophic economic consequences.”² American Oversight submits this request to inform the public about the activities of the Trump administration related to the inevitable decision point facing Congress and the president.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that OMB produce the following within twenty business days and seeks expedited review of this request for the reasons identified below:

All records reflecting communications (including emails, telephone call logs, calendar invitations/entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, draft

¹ See Akin Oyedele, *Wall Street Is Bracing for Another Debt-Ceiling Debacle*, BUS. INSIDER (Aug. 4, 2017, 6:07 AM), <http://www.businessinsider.com/debt-ceiling-concerns-treasury-bills-yields-2017-8>; Edward D. Kleinbard, *The Debt-Ceiling Crisis Is Real*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/07/opinion/debt-ceiling-congress-default-real.html>; Stan Collender, *These 3 Federal Debt Ceiling Nightmares Should Keep You Awake at Night*, FORBES (Aug. 6, 2017, 7:00 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stancollender/2017/08/06/these-3-federal-debt-ceiling-nightmares-should-keep-you-awake-at-night/#63ccaf46c6a0>.

² *Debt Limit*, U.S. DEP’T OF THE TREASURY, <https://www.treasury.gov/initiatives/Pages/debtlimit.aspx> (last visited Aug. 7, 2017).



legislation, talking points, or other materials) relating to the debt ceiling between any members of Congress or congressional staff and any of the following:

- a. the Director;
- b. the Deputy Director;
- c. the Associate Director for Legislative Affairs;
- d. the Associate Director for the General Government Programs;
- e. the Deputy Associate Director of the Housing, Treasury, & Commerce Division;
- f. the Chief of the Treasury Branch;
- g. the Assistant Director for Budget;
- h. the Deputy Assistant Director of the Budget Review and Concepts Division;
- i. any other political appointee or SES employee in the Office of the Director, Office of the Deputy Director, Office of Legislative Affairs; or
- j. anyone acting on behalf of any of these individuals (such as administrative assistants).

Please provide all responsive records from January 20, 2017, to the date the search is conducted. The search should include all individuals serving in these roles, whether in an acting or permanent capacity.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If OMB uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.³ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American**

³ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.⁴

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered OMB’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**⁵ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but OMB’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that OMB use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”⁶ If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is

⁴ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work-related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁵ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

⁶ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

actually exempt under FOIA.”⁷ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”⁸ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”⁹

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹⁰ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, OMB is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and OMB can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 5 C.F.R. § 1303.70, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a

⁷ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

⁸ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223–24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

⁹ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹⁰ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

significant way.¹¹ Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹²

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest because it is “likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.”¹³ The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the operations of the federal government, including the role executive branch officials are playing and have played in evaluating the current debt limit and determining what steps the federal government takes next in addressing the looming crisis.¹⁴ Because the information sought is not currently public and bears on a substantive area of federal policy that affects all Americans, disclosure will contribute significantly to the public’s understanding of key OMB operations and activities. And as described in more detail below, American Oversight will contribute to the general public’s understanding of OMB’s role in determining how to address the debt limit by sharing the records it receives on its website and social media accounts.

This request is primarily and fundamentally not for commercial purposes.¹⁵ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁶ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,¹⁷ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ’s process for ethics waivers.¹⁸ As another example, American Oversight has a project called “Audit the Wall,” where the

¹¹ 5 C.F.R. § 1303.70.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See Collender, *supra* note 1; Kleinbard, *supra* note 1; Oyedele, *supra* note 1; U.S. DEP’T OF THE TREASURY, *supra* note 2.

¹⁵ 5 C.F.R. § 1303.70.

¹⁶ American Oversight currently has over 11,200 page likes on Facebook, and over 33,500 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 7, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 7, 2017).

¹⁷ *Vetting the Nominees: Solicitor General Nominee Noel Francisco*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/our-actions/vetting-nominees-solicitor-general-nominee-noel-francisco>.

¹⁸ *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/news/francisco-travel-ban-learned-doj-documents>.

organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.¹⁹

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Application for Expedited Processing

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(i) and 5 C.F.R. § 1303.10(d)(1)(ii), (iv), American Oversight requests that OMB expedite the processing of this request.

I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, that there is an urgent need to inform the public about the federal government activity that is the subject of this request.²⁰ The records requested “pertain to a matter of current exigency to the American public” and “delaying a response to [this] request for records would compromise a significant recognized interest to and throughout the American general public.”²¹ Specifically, the debt limit affects the economic viability of the country by setting a borrowing limit that, if not raised, could trigger the United States to default on its financial obligations.²² The public has a strong interest in understanding and participating in the national debate over major changes to fiscal policy, including being aware of the roles that Congress, the executive branch, and outside groups are playing in shaping major legislation. Delaying disclosure of the requested records would deprive Americans of their right to participate meaningfully in that debate. Because of the looming September 29 deadline,²³ the American people simply cannot wait for disclosure of documents critical to their full participation in the democratic process.

I further certify that American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating information to the public. American Oversight's mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials.²⁴ Similar to other organizations that have been found to satisfy the criteria necessary to qualify for

¹⁹ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.

²⁰ 5 C.F.R. § 1303.10(d)(1)(ii).

²¹ *Al-Fayed v. Cent. Intelligence Agency*, 254 F.3d 300, 310 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (quoting H.R. Rep. No. 104-795, at 26 (1996), reprinted in 1996 U.S.C.C.A.N. 3448, 3469).

²² See Damian Paletta, *Debt-Ceiling Talks Between White House, Senate Break Up with No Progress*, WASH. POST, Aug. 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/08/01/debt-ceiling-talks-between-white-house-senate-break-up-with-no-progress/?utm_term=.a782a330887a.

²³ See Niv Elis, *Mnuchin: US Will Hit Debt Limit by Sept. 29*, THE HILL (July 28, 2017, 5:21 PM), <http://thehill.com/policy/finance/344399-mnuchin-us-will-hit-debt-limit-by-sept-29>; see also Niv Elis, *Top House Conservative Calls for Combined Appropriations Bills Free of Debt Ceiling Increase*, THE HILL (Aug. 7, 2017, 2:26 PM), <http://thehill.com/policy/finance/345624-top-house-conservative-calls-for-combined-appropriations-bills-free-of-debt>; Paletta, *supra* note 22.

²⁴ 5 C.F.R. § 1303.10(d)(1)(ii).

expedition,²⁵ American Oversight “gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw material into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience.”²⁶ American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, and other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.²⁷ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,²⁸ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ’s process for ethics waivers.²⁹ As another example, American Oversight has a project called “Audit the Wall,” where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.³⁰

I further certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, that there is widespread and exceptional media interest and there exist possible questions concerning the government’s integrity which affect public confidence. There has been extensive media coverage of the debt limit and the upcoming deadline.³¹ Additionally, an examination of how two co-equal

²⁵ See *ACLU v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 321 F. Supp. 2d 24, 30–31 (D.D.C. 2004); *EPIC v. Dep’t of Defense*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5, 15 (D.D.C. 2003).

²⁶ *ACLU*, 321 F. Supp. 2d at 29 n.5 (quoting *EPIC*, 241 F. Supp. 2d at 11).

²⁷ American Oversight currently has approximately 11,200 page likes on Facebook, and over 33,600 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 7, 2017); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 7, 2017).

²⁸ *Vetting the Nominees: Solicitor General Nominee Noel Francisco*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/our-actions/vetting-nominees-solicitor-general-nominee-noel-francisco>.

²⁹ *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/news/francisco-travel-ban-learned-doj-documents>.

³⁰ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, www.auditthewall.org.

³¹ See, e.g., Philip Bump, *Between Now and the Debt-Limit Deadline – Sept. 29 – the House Is in Session for Only 12 Days*, WASH. POST, Aug. 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/01/between-now-and-the-debt-limit-deadline-sept-29-the-house-is-in-session-for-only-12-days/?utm_term=.123a49ae3c9e; Jordain Carney, *McConnell: ‘Ideally’ Debt Ceiling Vote Is Before August Recess*, THE HILL (Aug. 1, 2017, 3:31 PM), <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/senate/341505-mcconnell-ideally-debt-ceiling-vote-is-before-august-recess>; Collender, *supra* note 1; Richard Cowan & Amanda Becker, *McConnell Says U.S. Debt Ceiling Debate Could Stretch into September*, REUTERS (Aug. 1, 2017, 2:48 PM), <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-congress-debtlimit-idUSKBN1AH52F?il=0>; Elis (July 28, 2017), *supra* note 23; Elis (Aug. 7, 2017), *supra* note 23; Max Greenwood, *GOP Lawmaker: House Republicans Not Likely to Back Clean Debt Ceiling Hike*, THE HILL (Aug. 8, 2017, 9:08 AM), <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/345700-gop-lawmaker-house-republicans-not-likely-to-back-clean-debt-ceiling-hike>; Kleinbard, *supra* note 1; Kevin Liptak & Jim Acosta,

branches of government are discussing a looming crisis could well raise “possible questions concerning the government’s integrity which affect public confidence”³² if radical ideologues are shaping fiscal policy to the detriment of the public interest and American solvency.³³

Accordingly, American Oversight’s request satisfies the criteria for expedition.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Cerissa Cafasso at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.869.5246. Also, if American Oversight’s request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,



Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

White House’s Mulvaney Backs ‘Clean’ Debt Ceiling Increase, CNNPOLITICS (Aug. 3, 2017, 3:21 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/03/politics/white-house-backs-clean-debt-ceiling-increase/index.html>; Oyedele, *supra* note 1; Paletta, *supra* note 22.

³² 5 C.F.R. § 1303.10(d)(1)(iv).

³³ See Carney, *supra* note 31; Seung Min Kim & Rachel Bade, *GOP Clash Looms Over Raising the Debt Ceiling*, POLITICO (Aug. 3, 2017, 12:31 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/03/debt-ceiling-republicans-clash-congress-241263>; Ryan McCrimmon, *House Freedom Caucus to Air Debt Ceiling Demands*, ROLL CALL (July 11, 2017, 11:38 AM), <https://www.rollcall.com/politics/house-freedom-caucus-air-debt-ceiling-demands>.