



March 12, 2019

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Stephanie Carr  
OSD/JS FOIA Requester Service Center  
Office of Freedom of Information  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1155 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1155  
[whs.mc-alex.esd.mbx.osd-js-foia-requester-service-center@mail.mil](mailto:whs.mc-alex.esd.mbx.osd-js-foia-requester-service-center@mail.mil)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Ms. Carr:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552 and the implementing regulations of the Department of Defense (DOD), 32 C.F.R. Part 286, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Patrick Shanahan assumed the role of Acting Secretary of Defense on January 1, 2019, following less than two years of service at DOD. Prior to his recent roles at DOD, Acting Secretary Shanahan had spent his career almost exclusively in the private sector, raising concerns about his experience and potential ethical conflicts.<sup>1</sup> The president has reportedly indicated that he is likely to nominate Mr. Shanahan to serve as the permanent Secretary of Defense.<sup>2</sup> Members of Congress and former government officials have expressed concern that Mr. Shanahan may not be able to fill the important role of former Secretary Mattis in offering counsel that may be contrary to White House advisors, including National Security Advisor John Bolton.<sup>3</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the communications of Acting Secretary Patrick Shanahan and his assistants with key White House advisors.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stenographic Transcript Before the Committee on Armed Services, "Nomination - Shanahan," U.S. SENATE, June 20, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-61\\_06-20-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-61_06-20-17.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Starr & Jeremy Diamond, *Trump Leaning Towards 'Keeping' Shanahan at Pentagon to Replace Mattis Permanently*, CNN (Feb. 28, 2019, 3:56 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/28/politics/shanahan-trump-pentagon/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Lara Seligman, *Does Anyone Want to Be Secretary of Defense*, FOREIGN POLICY (Feb. 20, 2019, 1:33 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/20/does-no-one-want-to-be-us-secretary-of-defense-mattis-replacement-candidates/>.



## Requested Records

American Oversight requests that DOD produce the following within twenty business days:

All email communications (including email messages, attachments, and calendar invitations) between 1) Acting Secretary of Defense and former Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan, Chief of Staff Eric Chewning, any individual acting as Chief of Staff to Patrick Shanahan during his tenure as Deputy Secretary, Spokesman for the Secretary Joseph Buccino, Confidential Assistant Jillian Berrios, or Special Assistant Justin Johnson and 2) Assistant to the President Ivanka Trump (also known by the name Ivanka Kushner), White House Advisor Jared Kushner, or National Security Advisor John Bolton.

This request includes all messages on which DOD officials appear (whether in the to, from, cc, or bcc field), as well as all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto.

Please provide all responsive records from July 19, 2017, through the date of search.

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.”<sup>4</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records are 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 actually exempt under FOIA.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.’”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for

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<sup>4</sup> FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

<sup>5</sup> *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

<sup>6</sup> *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

<sup>7</sup> *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)).

<sup>8</sup> *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

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, DOD is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

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 32 C.F.R. § 286.12(l)(1), 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 public understanding of those operations. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

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 government operations and activities.<sup>9</sup> The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the operations of the federal government, including the email practices of a senior administration official and the steps taken to ensure compliance with federal records retention law, as well as the role of the president's relatives in decision-making at the Department of Defense in light of recent reporting that the president pressured his then-chief of staff and White House counsel to grant his daughter and son-in-law security clearances against their recommendations.<sup>10</sup> Disclosure of the requested information will also shed light more generally on the communications of the Acting Secretary of Defense with key White House advisors, including the National Security Advisor, a matter of great public import given the president's likely nomination of the Acting Secretary to the role of permanent Secretary of Defense. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide in response to FOIA requests publicly available. The subject of this request is a matter of public interest, and American Oversight would make these records publicly available.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>11</sup> As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the

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<sup>9</sup> 32 C.F.R. § 286.12(l)(1); 32 C.F.R. § 286.12(l)(2)(i)-(ii).

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Brown & Kaitlan Collins, *President Pressured Staff to Grant Security Clearance to Ivanka Trump*, CNN (March 6, 2019, 5:21 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/05/politics/ivanka-trump-security-clearance-pressure/index.html>.

<sup>11</sup> 32 C.F.R. § 286.12(l)(1); 32 C.F.R. § 286.12(l)(2)(iii)(A)-(B).

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.<sup>12</sup> 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,<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

## Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with DOD 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 Dan McGrath at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.897.4213. 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

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<sup>12</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 12,200 page likes on Facebook, and 54,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Mar. 12, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Mar. 12, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>14</sup> *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

<sup>15</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.