The Freedom of Information Act and the Ecology of Transparency

Seth F. Kreimer
*University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship)

Part of the Administrative Law Commons, American Politics Commons, Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons, Communications Law Commons, Constitutional Law Commons, Law and Politics Commons, Law and Society Commons, Legislation Commons, President/Executive Department Commons, Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Public Law and Legal Theory Commons

**Repository Citation**
[https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/192](https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/192)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Penn Carey Law: Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship at Penn Carey Law by an authorized administrator of Penn Carey Law: Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact PennlawIR@law.upenn.edu.
THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT AND THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSPARENCY

Seth F. Kreimer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION: THE FLAWS OF FOIA? .................................1012

II. THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSPARENCY: FOIA AND CONSTITUTIVE STRUCTURE .................................................1016
   A. “If a Policy Falls in the Forest and No Trees Are Killed”: The Creation of Records .......................1017
   B. A Machine that Won’t Go Of Itself: FOIA Requesters ..........................1020
   C. FOIA and Spheres of Public Contention .....................1025
      1. Prerequisite Knowledge and Public Contention...1025
         a. The Problem of Aladdin’s Lamp and the Status of “Deep Secrets” .............................1025
         b. The Problem of FOIA’s Flowchart: “Public Interest” as a Prerequisite to Access ..........1027
            i. Expedited Processing and “Urgency To Inform the Public” ..................................1028
            ii. FOIA Exceptions and Prerequisite Knowledge ......................................................1029
            iii. The Effect of the Zeitgeist on Bayesian Judges ..................................................1032
      2. The Struggle for Prerequisite Knowledge:
         Volatility of Information, Leaks and Legal Challenges ..................................................1033
         a. Technology and the Volatility of Information .........................................................1033
         b. Whistleblowers and Civil Servants ..........1037
         c. Legal Challenges .........................................................1045

† Kenneth W. Gemmill Professor of Law, University of Pennsylvania Law School. This Article has benefited from my discussions with Cary Coglianese, Chris Sanchirico, and Kim Scheppele; Nishchay Maskay has provided indispensable research assistance in its development. Each is entitled to my deep thanks, but none bears responsibility for remaining errors or misunderstandings.
D. FOIA Administration, Adjudication and Institutional Structure ........................................ 1046
  1. Administration, Organizational Dynamics, and the Rule of Law .................................. 1046
  2. A Portfolio of Judges ....................................................................................................... 1049

III. THE FORCE OF FOIA: THE QUESTION OF EFFICACY ................. 1052
  A. FOIA and the Half-Full Glass: Assessing Contributions to Public Information ...... 1053
    1. FOIA and the Partial Disclosures ................................................................................ 1053
    2. FOIA and the Cascades of Transparency .................................................................. 1056
    3. FOIA and the Network of Knowledge ........................................................................ 1059
  B. FOIA and the “Frozen Scandal”: The Substantive Impact of Disclosure on Abuses .... 1062
    1. FOIA and Institutional Leverage ............................................................................... 1064
       a. Litigation .................................................................................................................. 1064
       b. Political Redress of Specific Abuses ...................................................................... 1067
    2. Transparency and the Dynamics of Legitimacy ......................................................... 1069
  C. FOIA and the Question of Proportionality ................................................................. 1071
    1. The Robustness of a Broad FOIA Regime .................................................................. 1072
    2. FOIA and Optimality .................................................................................................. 1074
       a. Transparency and Pathology .................................................................................. 1074
       b. Sunsets, Secrecy, and States of Exception ............................................................... 1075

IV. CONCLUSION .................................................................................... 1079

I. INTRODUCTION: THE FLAWS OF FOIA?

Modern enthusiasts for presidential authority are fond of reminding the nation that the authors of the Federalist Papers lauded a single executive as partaking of the virtues of “[d]ecision, activity, secrecy, and despatch.”1 They invoke less fervently another basis of

Federalist approbation, a reason the authors regarded as “one of the weightiest”: that alternatives to a single executive would tend “to conceal faults and destroy responsibility.”

A unitary executive’s actions were apt to be more “narrowly watched and more readily suspected” by an informed public opinion than those of a plural executive or a council of advisors.

In the body of the Constitution, the task of informing that narrowly-watching public was left to the structures of divided government. The mutual jealousy of the elective branches of national government provided one assurance of information. State political structures were thought to supply a second: Federalist No. 84 argued that “[t]he executive and legislative bodies of each State will be so many sentinels over the persons employed in every department of the national administration,” whose “regular and effectual system of intelligence” would allow them to “communicate the same knowledge to the people.”

But neither the Framers’ Constitution nor the Bill of Rights went further. As Justice Stewart observed, “[t]he Constitution itself is neither a Freedom of Information Act nor an Official Secrets Act.”

What the text of the Constitution omits, the last generation has embedded as a part of modern “small c” constitutional practice. In the years since Watergate, America’s governing structure has entrenched a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), crafted to “ensure an informed citizenry, vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold the governors accountable to the governed.”

But FOIA is itself a subject of contention. Justice Scalia, before ascending to the bench, maintained that the Freedom of Information Act was not only constitutionally optional but practically unnecessary and normatively pernicious. While chief of the Office of Legal Counsel, he coordinated an unsuccessful opposition to amendments strengthening the Freedom of Information Act on grounds of exec-
tive autonomy. Upon his return to academia, then-professor Scalia decried:

[T]he obsession that gave [those amendments] birth—that the first line of defense against an arbitrary executive is do-it-yourself oversight by the public and its surrogate, the press. . . . It is a romantic notion, but the facts simply do not bear it out. The major exposés of recent times, from CIA mail openings to Watergate to the FBI COINTELPRO operations, owe virtually nothing to the FOIA but are primarily the product of the institutionalized checks and balances within our system of representative democracy.

In recent reflection, FOIA has also been the subject of a complementary criticism: not that it is unnecessary, but rather that it is ineffective. Journalists criticize “a Rube Goldberg apparatus that clanks and wheezes, but rarely turns up the data.” Dissenting judges protest that the aftermath of September 11 has led to “uncritical deference to the government’s vague, poorly explained arguments for withholding broad categories of information . . . [that] eviscerates both FOIA itself and the principles of openness in government that FOIA embodies.” Commentators deplore suppression of information by an increasingly secretive administration and the willingness of the judiciary to forego disclosure obligations on the flimsiest of speculations when “national security” has been invoked. Critics have lamented

---


8 Antonin Scalia, The Freedom of Information Act Has No Clothes, REGULATION, Mar./Apr. 1982, at 15, 19; cf. Ken Auletta, Fortress Bush: How the White House Keeps the Press Under Control, NEW YORKER, Jan. 19, 2004, at 53 (“Andrew Card, Bush’s chief of staff, . . . said of the press, ‘They don’t represent the public any more than other people do. In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election. . . . I don’t believe you have a check-and-balance function.’” (second ellipsis in original)).


that even where FOIA requests disclose abuses, disclosures have scant impact; revelation has not been followed by repudiation.  

A third constellation of criticism has discerned a mismatch between the legal regime of transparency and the goals of good governance. FOIA is said to be the “Sistine Chapel of Cost-Benefit Analysis Ignored,” burdening public servants in order to benefit “corporate lawyers” and criminal defendants rather than “John Q. Public.” Disclosure obligations are deemed to “exact financial, deliberative, and bureaucratic burdens on government, even when disclosure serves no useful purpose,” while “vast quantities” of important information “remain secret.” Transparency mechanisms, it is said, need reform to “calibrate an optimal process of open government.”

This Article assesses these criticisms in the context of the impact of our transparency regime on the “Global War on Terror” (or “Terrorism,” hereinafter GWOT). Drawing on prior case studies of transparency and the abuses of anti-terrorism, I argue that each group of critics misconceives important normative and practical issues. FOIA must be understood as functioning within a broader


In some sense, this is the obverse of Professor John Yoo’s claims that the 2004 election constituted an approval of imperial presidential decisions to engage in torture. See Jane Mayer, Outsourcing Torture: The Secret History of America’s “Extraordinary Rendition” Program, NEW YORKER, Feb. 14, 2005, at 106.

13 Scalia, supra note 8, at 15–16; see also MATTHEW SCALIA & NICOLE TAYLOR, FEW JOURNALISTS USE THE FEDERAL FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, http://www.heritage.org/Press/MediaCenter/FOIA.cfm (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (reporting on a 2001 investigation which found that “40 percent of the [FOIA] requests were from corporations . . . . A mere 5 percent of the requests were from individuals identifying themselves as journalists”).

14 Fenster, supra note 11, at 913.

15 Id. at 956; see also id. at 957.

ecology of transparency. As part of that system, it has done underappreciated service in the past half-decade and partakes of virtues of resiliency and efficacy that should be acknowledged and preserved.

II. THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSPARENCY: FOIA AND CONSTITUTIVE STRUCTURE

In his claim that the “institutionalized checks and balances” of the constitutional text render FOIA unnecessary, then-professor Scalia’s historical claims oversimplified matters considerably—indeed disingenuously. The “institutionalized checks and balances” he mentioned had proven efficacious during the Nixon crisis only with the goad and assistance of extra-institutional actors: leakers, investigative reporters, publishers, and, indeed, civilly disobedient sneak thieves. It is true that FOIA played no role in the Watergate drama, for it was at the time virtually toothless.\(^\text{17}\) FOIA was strengthened, along with a network of other structural checks, precisely in the hope that in future crises, it could serve not as the first line of defense, but the last.

In the last half-decade, the efforts of the Bush administration to centralize power and evade countervailing mechanisms of control have been characterized as “worse than Watergate.”\(^\text{18}\) This may be an overstatement. Still, in the aftermath of September 11, the administration demonstrably undertook initiatives of dubious legality and morality, while the “institutionalized checks and balances” contained in the text of the Constitution remained largely quiescent. Congress was initially paralyzed by the aftershocks of the attacks of September 11, and, after the President’s party gained control of the Senate in 2002, by party loyalty. The courts awaited justiciable controversies, delayed by a combination of secrecy and sequestration of potential plaintiffs. When confronted with legal challenges, judges often proved unwilling to exercise the power of judicial review.

One of the few arenas in which efforts to constrain abuses met with success was precisely in the initiatives by actors outside the tripartite constitutional structure to invoke mechanisms of transparency. As I have documented in an earlier article, what then-professor Scalia derided as the “romantic notion” of “do-it-yourself oversight” in

---


18 JOHN W. DEAN, WORSE THAN WATERGATE (2004).
fact provided building blocks for accountability regarding abuses during the first five years of political stasis regarding the GWOT. 19

Justice Scalia’s appeal to “institutionalized checks and balances” nonetheless points to an important insight, for the successes of FOIA in calling the GWOT to account have been predicated upon and facilitated by institutions beyond the statute itself. As we will see, to the extent that FOIA has functioned as an effective check, it has been a part of an ecology of transparency that includes the permanent infrastructure of federal civil servants with integrity, internal watchdogs, reasonably open opportunities to publish and share information, and a set of civil society actors capable of pursuing prolonged campaigns for disclosure.

A. “If a Policy Falls in the Forest and No Trees Are Killed”: The Creation of Records

Disclosure mechanisms such as FOIA can have no effect in the absence of information to disclose. One could imagine a regime in which government officials seeking to avoid disclosure of their actions destroy all records of them and thereby immunize themselves from subsequent accountability. In prior administrations, these efforts have taken the form of “operational secrecy” and document destruction. 20 In the current environment, we have seen the gambits of “ghost detainees,” missing documents, and sanitized e-mail records. 21


21 See, e.g., Jane Mayer, Lost in the Jihad: Why Did the Government’s Case Against John Walker Lindh Collapse?, NEW YORKER, Mar. 10, 2003, at 50 (describing a “purged” Justice Department file containing copies of e-mailed advice regarding ethical violations in the interrogation of John Walker Lindh “which had been a thick, staple-bound stack of paper, [but then] had been reduced to several sheets [with] [a]ll the staples . . . removed,” and which whistleblower Jesselyn Radack had retrieved with the help of the Justice Department computer help line); R. Jeffrey Smith, Fired Officer Believed CIA Lied to Congress; Friends Say McCarthy Learned of Denials About Detainees’ Treatment, WASH. POST, May 14, 2006, at A1 (“[T]he CIA’s general counsel had worked to secure a secret Justice Department opinion
Most dramatically, investigative journalists recently uncovered the CIA’s decision to destroy hundreds of hours of video recordings depicting “enhanced” interrogation of suspected terrorists. But effective bureaucracies run on records, and modern technology has exponentially enhanced the array of information recorded. It is difficult to eradicate entirely the evidence of any widespread policy.

Structural features of the federal government, and of records themselves, raise barriers to keeping initiatives entirely “off the books.” Efforts to avoid recordkeeping, or to sanitize files once kept, require unanimous consent of all participants. A secretary who declines to shred his copy of a memorandum, like a computer technician who retains the proscribed backup copy, is as effective in preserving information as is a general or department head. A career federal bureaucracy has endowed the government with a cadre of individuals whose allegiance to the current regime cannot be counted on to eliminate inconvenient information, both because they have been appointed by previous regimes and because they will be working for subsequent ones.

---


23 The Iran-Contra scandal unraveled in part because of the recovery of e-mail records; Abu Ghraib took shape in the shadow of pervasive digital photography, and the CIA would have had no images to destroy absent the lure of video recording capability.


To the extent that government activities are outsourced to the private sector, their records will be beyond the reach of FOIA requests. See Fenster, supra note 11, at 917–18.

Equally important, the federal governing structure is multivocal and professionalized. Officials build careers not on fealty to the current administration, but on commitment to a set of departmental goals and professional norms. Such commitments are likely to generate records inconvenient to administrations bent on concealment. Moreover, the State Department, Defense Department, Justice Department, Department of Homeland Security, and CIA have each been provided by statute in the aftermath of Watergate with an independent Inspector General, whose office is specifically tasked with discovering and recording malfeasance. In the current GWOT, the integrity of internal opponents among the ranks of civil servants who have committed to writing their opposition has been a prominent source of documentation of abuse.

26 Cf. Neal Kumar Katyal, Internal Separation of Powers: Checking Today's Most Dangerous Branch from Within, 115 YALE L.J. 2314 (2006); Daryl J. Levinson & Richard H. Pildes, Separation of Parties, Not Powers, 119 HARV. L. REV. 2311, 2376 (2006) ("[O]ne explanation for the rise of American bureaucracy is precisely that it was a response to the problem of the first overwhelmingly unified party government in American history, and to the threat that government was thought to pose to traditional American political practice.").


Inspectors General are presidential appointees, but they must be appointed "without regard to political affiliation and solely on the basis of integrity and demonstrated ability," Inspector General Act of 1978 § 3(a), may be removed only with special notice to Congress, § 3(b), are required to appoint their own assistants, § 3(d), and may demand information, issue subpoenas, and inquire into matters within their jurisdiction without interference from the heads of their departments, § 3(a).

B. A Machine that Won’t Go Of Itself: FOIA Requesters

The existence of records does not entail their dissemination, for FOIA does not place affirmative disclosure obligations on federal record holders. Rather, the prospect of effective transparency rests on requesters who seek information. 28

From the beginning of the GWOT, efforts to obtain judicial review have been impeded by the fact that those most directly affected by GWOT excesses were unavailable as plaintiffs in federal court, and those who objected to the abuses on principle were said to lack “standing.” 29 FOIA, which gives “any person” the right to seek information, provides a forum in which principled opponents may seek legal leverage. 30 And—a matter not to be taken for granted in international comparison—black-letter First Amendment doctrine precludes the government from retaliating against citizens who ask inconvenient questions. 31

Legal entitlement to seek information is only the first step, however. To press a recalcitrant administration for disclosure under FOIA requires time, money, and expertise. 32 Officials seeking to avoid disclosure regularly endeavor to levy substantial fees as a pre-

---

28 Sally Katzen has noted that OMB Circular A-130 put the onus on federal agencies to disseminate information to the public, but acknowledges the likelihood that civil servants will fail to disclose important information. Sally Katzen, Do New Technologies Support a Broadening of Public Information Rights?, in A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE: PRIVACY, SECURITY, AND PUBLIC INFORMATION AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, at 103–15 (Peter M. Shane, John Podesta & Richard C. Leone eds., 2004).

29 Most recently, see ACLU v. NSA, 493 F.3d 644, 687 (6th Cir. 2007) (holding that the ACLU and other plaintiffs did not have standing to challenge the Terrorist Surveillance Program).


condition for processing FOIA requests. Since 1986, FOIA has provided for the waiver of processing fees for non-commercial requests by institutions engaged in “scholarly or scientific research” or by “a representative of the news media,” and waiver of duplication fees “if disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.” But asserting these waiver rights against the current administration has often required resort to litigation.

Even where government-levied fees are waived, the costs of wresting information from an uncooperative administration can be substantial. Successful efforts by the Associated Press to pry loose information regarding the Combatant Status Review Proceedings in Guantanamo began in November 2004 and extended through tenuous litigation over the course of two years. Attempts by a coalition of civil liberties organizations, librarians, and booksellers to obtain information regarding the use of the “Patriot Act” commenced in August 2002 and generated disclosures only fitfully over the next three years as continued FOIA requests combined with litigation and political pressure. ACLU’s “Torture FOIA” campaign began with a request filed in October 2003; the ultimate release of over 100,000 pages of documents required three and a half years of the legal

---


37 See Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1164–68.

38 Id. at 1168–85.
equivalent of trench warfare.\textsuperscript{39} FOIA efforts by the Electronic Privacy Information Center have required long-term and persistent litigation to quarry information regarding surveillance activities from administration files.\textsuperscript{40} The effort by a coalition of immigrant rights organizations to obtain the legal basis for the administration’s reversal of policy regarding enforcement of immigration laws by local governments consumed three years of litigation.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Id. at 1196–1209. More recently, see Gov’t: CIA Not Required to Save Tapes, CBSNEWS.COM, Jan. 12, 2008, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/12/national/main3704277.shtml, (reporting motions for contempt over the destruction of tapes that were the subject of pending FOIA requests); Mark Mazzetti, ’03 U.S. Memo Approved Harsh Interrogations, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 2, 2008, at A1 (reporting declassification and release of an eighty-one page memorandum authorizing abusive interrogation techniques in response to continued ACLU litigation).


\textsuperscript{41} See Nat’l Council of La Raza v. Dep’t of Justice, 411 F.3d 350 (2d Cir. 2005) (upholding an order to comply with FOIA requests filed initially in August and April of 2002), aff’d 345 F. Supp. 2d 412 (S.D.N.Y. 2004); see also Nat’l Council of La Raza v. Dep’t of Justice,
Where an administration seeks to resist disclosure, the efficacy of FOIA depends on requesters sufficiently well-funded and tenacious to deploy the expertise and personnel to overcome the roadblocks. Some such requesters are members of the media—like the Associated Press—whose resources may be available as part of the infrastructure of a news organization. The stock of such organizations is a function, in turn, of the institutional structures that preserve an independent investigative press. For the most part, only news organizations sufficiently large to allow speculative investigation and expenditure of attorneys’ fees that might bring reputational gains in the medium-term future are likely to undertake the expenditures necessary to bring FOIA effectively to bear. Such organizations, however, are subject to the vicissitudes of public opinion, the need to remain on good terms with government sources, and the demands of competing priorities for their resources.

---


Whether because of resource constraints, political caution or co-optation, news media have not been prominent at the vanguard of successful FOIA inquiries directed at the GWOT.\textsuperscript{45} It has been predominantly the availability of well-financed NGOs, combined with the possibility of assistance from the private bar, that has made FOIA a force to be reckoned with in this arena.\textsuperscript{46} The most effective requesters have included the National Security Archives, the ACLU, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Center for Constitutional Rights, Judicial Watch, and the Center for National Security Studies.\textsuperscript{47} The existence of an independent civil society sector, protected by rights of association\textsuperscript{48} backed up frequently by the litigation muscle of private law firms that have donated their services pro bono,\textsuperscript{49} and nourished by tax exemp-
tions and 501(c)(3) status, has proved to be the institutional matrix within which successful FOIA inquiries regarding the GWOT have been seeded.

C. FOIA and Spheres of Public Contention

1. Prerequisite Knowledge and Public Contention

   a. The Problem of Aladdin’s Lamp and the Status of “Deep Secrets”

Professor Alexander Bickel famously observed, with regard to constitutional theory, “No answer is what the wrong question begets.” The aphorism applies a fortiori to FOIA requests posed to a recalcitrant administration. For FOIA requests to generate illuminating documents, they must be precisely framed, and framing such requests requires knowledge regarding the activities to be illuminated.

In the GWOT, some of the activities that have been subject to FOIA requests have been publicly announced. The existence of the prison camp at Guantanamo which generated the FOIA efforts to obtain information regarding the treatment and trial of detainees has never been a secret. The Patriot Act, enacted with great fanfare though relatively cursory consideration, provoked a series of FOIA requests and litigation. When the Department of Justice repeatedly relied publicly on an opinion of the Office of Legal Counsel to justify its reversal of position regarding local enforcement of immigration laws, FOIA requests for that opinion followed naturally. When the Defense Department publicly solicited bids for projects in its “Total Information Awareness Program,” privacy advocates sought informa-

---


51 The government did attempt to suppress pictures of the hooded and shackled detainees. Joe Williams, Some Networks Nix Prisoner Video, N.Y. DAILY NEWS, Jan. 12, 2002, at 8. For discussion of the FOIA litigation seeking information regarding Guantanamo, see Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1164–68.


53 See supra note 41 (discussing litigation by the National Council of La Raza).
tion through FOIA regarding the program and its director, Admiral John Poindexter. 54

But the existence of many initiatives has been shrouded in secrecy. The use of physically and psychically coercive methods of interrogation was hinted at, but the administration officially denied engaging in “torture.” 55 Legal opinions advised officials that the president’s power as commander-in-chief superseded legal limitations, and that infliction of abuse short of lethal pain comported with the law, but the opinions were held in tight security. 56 Programs of “extraordinary rendition” covertly seized suspects and ferried them to CIA “black sites” and foreign interrogators. 57 Intelligence agencies engaged in broad and surreptitious surveillance of wire and Internet communications without judicial oversight and in violation of applicable law, while the administration disavowed any program of “warrantless wiretaps.” 58

Such veiled initiatives could not be the subject of FOIA requests until requesters discerned their existence. Indeed, mere hints and suspicions were inadequate; until identified with sufficient specificity that they could be the subject of reasonably precise inquiry, FOIA re-

quests regarding such programs were likely to be fruitless.\textsuperscript{59} FOIA mechanisms thus depended on institutions that could reveal the “deep secrets” of GWOT initiatives.\textsuperscript{60}

b. The Problem of FOIA’s Flowchart: “Public Interest” as a Prerequisite to Access

Prior revelations form a prerequisite to successful FOIA requests for a second set of reasons. Even when requesters have knowledge sufficient to frame productive questions, the stock of FOIA requests always exceeds the resources available to process them, and an inconvenient request can rest at the back of a long queue for processing.\textsuperscript{61} The current administration, moreover, has admonished officials that FOIA disclosures “should be made only after full and deliberate consideration of the institutional, commercial, and personal privacy interests,”\textsuperscript{62} “giving full and careful consideration to all applicable FOIA exemptions”;\textsuperscript{63} decisions to resist disclosure were to be defended “unless they lack a sound legal basis.”\textsuperscript{64} Piercing every exemption based on an arguably “sound legal basis” is no small task.

\textsuperscript{59} A precise inquiry is more likely to be correctly processed by harried civil servants at ground level; it is less subject to evasion by hostile ones, and it presents the requester with smaller costs of sorting signal from noise in the material provided. So, too, the broader the inquiry, the more legitimate basis a recalcitrant administration has to claim a need to delay administering the request, or refusing it as “unreasonably burdensome.” See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(A) (2000) (providing that a FOIA request must “reasonably” describe records requested).

\textsuperscript{60} For elaboration of the useful concept of ”deep secrets,” distinguished by the fact that the uninformed party does not know of their ignorance of the information withheld, see KIM LANE SCHEPPELE, LEGAL SECRETS: EQUALITY AND EFFICIENCY IN THE COMMON LAW 8–9, 21–22 (1988), and AMY GUTMANN & DENNIS THOMPSON, DEMOCRACY AND DISAGREEMENT 121–26 (1996).

\textsuperscript{61} See, e.g., Open Am. v. Watergate Special Prosecution Force, 547 F.2d 605, 616 (D.C. Cir. 1976) (recognizing right of defendant to process requests on “first in, first out” basis).


Each of these gambits becomes less formidable if the programs at issue are already the subject of public contention. For statutory reasons, the ability of requesters to obtain timely processing and to overcome claims of FOIA exemptions are both functions of prior disclosures and attention focused by other structural actors.

i. Expedited Processing and “Urgency To Inform the Public”

When a FOIA requester seeks expedited processing to bypass the queue (as most seeking accountability in GWOT have done), success will be a function of the prior release of information into the public sphere. FOIA, as amended in 1996, provides that expedited processing should be made available in cases where the requester “demonstrates a compelling need.” FOIA and its implementing regulations provide that a compelling need can be demonstrated by “a person primarily engaged in disseminating information” who makes a showing of “urgency to inform the public concerning actual or alleged Federal Government activity.” Implementing regulations also authorize expedited processing for matters “of widespread and exceptional media interest in which there exist possible questions about the government’s integrity which affect public confidence.” These showings cannot be made until enough information has made its way into public discourse. Media interest and public contention are the gateways to expedited FOIA processing.

This structure has meant that inquiries regarding the interrogation of immigrants, a recondite data mining program, and a covert attempt to enlist U.S. Attorneys to lobby for funding for Patriot Act programs were denied expedited processing because the requesters could not demonstrate adequate media discussion of the requested material. Conversely, requests regarding controversial military sur-

---

68 ACLU of N. Cal. v. Dep’t of Justice, No. C 04-4447 PJH, 2005 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 3763, at 36 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 11, 2005) (denying expedited processing for inquiries regarding interro-
veillance of political dissenters, the use of publicly disputed provisions of the Patriot Act, and the revelation of illegal wiretapping programs by the NSA were held to be entitled to expedited processing on the basis of prerequisite public contention.\(^{69}\) Processing of requests regarding a deep secret sufficiently securely held can be delayed because of a lack of current public controversy, while a sufficiently distracted or intimidated media can bar the way to immediate disclosure.

ii. FOIA Exceptions and Prerequisite Knowledge

Alongside disclosure obligations, FOIA provides a series of statutorily crafted exemptions from those obligations. Most broadly, Exemption 6 shields from disclosure “personnel and medical files and similar files the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy,”\(^{70}\) and Exemption 7(C) exempts “records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes” if their production “could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.”\(^{71}\) Since in the contemporary environment GWOT initiatives carry the prospect of stigma, as well as the whiff of danger, virtually any personally identifiable information is potentially subject to withholding under one of these exemptions.\(^{72}\)

The current administration has been cavalier in its regard for the

---


\(^{70}\) 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(6).

\(^{71}\) 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(C).

\(^{72}\) See U.S. Dep’t of State v. Wash. Post Co., 456 U.S. 595, 602 (1982) (holding that Exemption 6 applies to any detailed information in government files about a particular individual from which the identity of the individual can be discerned).
freedom and the psychic and bodily integrity of the targets of GWOT initiatives. But when it comes to FOIA requests, it has been scrupulous regarding their privacy. Administration lawyers have regularly maintained that information about those in its custody, like information regarding participants in GWOT initiatives, is exempt from FOIA disclosure because of Exemptions 6 and 7(C).  

In addressing claims of exemption under FOIA, courts have balanced the degree of intrusion against the degree of public interest to determine whether an invasion of privacy is "unwarranted." A requester who presses the "public interest" side of this balance plays a stronger hand the more she already knows. The Supreme Court's latest account of the process, in National Archives and Records Administration v. Favish, counseled:

[W]here there is a privacy interest protected by Exemption 7(C) and the public interest being asserted is to show that responsible officials acted negligently or otherwise improperly in the performance of their duties, the requester must establish more than a bare suspicion in order to obtain disclosure. Rather, the requester must produce evidence that would warrant a belief by a reasonable person that the alleged Government impropriety might have occurred."  

---

73 The incongruity of the argument has been remarked upon by judges to whom it has been presented. See, e.g., Associated Press v. U.S. Dep't of Def., 410 F. Supp. 2d 147, 156 n.2 (S.D.N.Y. 2006) ("[I]t is hard to escape the inference that the Government's entire Exemption 6 argument before this Court is a cover for other concerns . . . ."); Associated Press v. U.S. Dep't of Def., 395 F. Supp. 2d 15, 16 (S.D.N.Y. 2005) (commenting, regarding the names of Guantanamo detainees, that "[o]ne might well wonder whether the detainees share the view that keeping their identities secret is in their own best interests"); Associated Press v. Dep't of Def., 395 F. Supp. 2d 17, 18 (S.D.N.Y. 2005) ("[S]ome might think it strange, even hypocritical, that the military officials who held the detainees incommunicado for so many months now express such solicitude for the detainees' privacy rights . . . .").


Knowledge is thus a prerequisite to the assertion of public interest: a deep secret or a program whose outlines are only dimly known can preclude the requisite evidence of impropriety.\footnote{Cf. News-Press v. U.S. Dep’t of Homeland Sec., 489 F.3d 1173, 1192 (11th Cir. 2007) (granting access to addresses of disbursement of funds since “the newspapers have put forth ample evidence that FEMA’s response to Hurricane Frances in Miami-Dade County may have been plagued with fraud, waste, or abuse”).}

As in the pursuit of expedited processing, requesters have been most successful in overcoming claims of FOIA exemptions regarding GWOT initiatives where they can adduce already-available evidence of abuse or public contention. Thus, in \textit{Associated Press v. U.S. Department of Defense}, Judge Rakoff relied on an existing stock of public evidence of abuses at Guantanamo in rejecting Exemption 6 and 7(C) privacy claims to order the release of the identities of detainees who charged abuse by their captors and who had been involved in detainee-against-detainee abuse.\footnote{No. 05 Civ. 05468 (JSR), 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 67913, at *13–14 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 20, 2006); see also Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Studies v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 215 F. Supp. 2d 94, 105–06, 105 n.17 (D.D.C. 2002) (rejecting both 7(C) and 7(F) claims regarding the identity of non-citizens swept up in post-September 11 dragnet in light of “numerous media reports documenting abuses, . . . [and] first-hand accounts given to Congress, the media, and human rights groups . . . .”), rev’d, 331 F.3d 918, 932 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (declining to address privacy claims); Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Studies v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 331 F.3d 918, 946–47 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (Tatel, J., dissenting) (“The record includes hundreds of pages of newspaper articles, human rights reports, and congressional testimony reporting alleged governmental abuses . . . .”).}

After public controversy erupted concerning the existence of “no fly lists,” Judge Breyer rejected efforts to withhold the identity of policy makers involved in discussions of the “false positive problem”: “The public, however, has an interest in knowing who—and at what level of the government—is working on this significant problem that affects many Americans.”\footnote{Gordon v. FBI, 388 F.Supp.2d 1028, 1041 (N.D. Cal. 2005).}

In \textit{ACLU v. Department of Defense}, Judge Hellerstein ordered release of pictures of the Abu Ghraib abuses despite privacy claims because of “a substantial public interest in these pictures, evidenced by the active public debate engendered by the versions previously leaked to the press, or otherwise obtained by the media,” as well as the previously disclosed evidence of wrongful governmental conduct.\footnote{389 F. Supp. 2d 547, 573 (S.D.N.Y. 2005).} He similarly rejected claims under Exemption 7(F)\footnote{5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(F) (2000) (exempting disclosure of “records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes” where disclosure “could reasonably be expected to endanger the life or physical safety of any individual”).} that the release could incite violence against troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, conclud-
ing that the prior revelation of “flagrantly improper conduct by American soldiers” required disclosure of the pictures.\textsuperscript{80}

This structure of adjudication means that successful FOIA requesters will stand on the shoulders of prior revelation and public controversy, and the institutions that generate them.

iii. The Effect of the Zeitgeist on Bayesian Judges

The fate of the efforts of FOIA requesters depends on prerequisite revelations in a final, somewhat less crisply demonstrable, fashion. Judges in FOIA cases are called upon to make discretionary judgments regarding the reasonableness of timing, the adequacy of searches, the balance between privacy and public interests, and the plausibility of predictions of future impacts on government and private parties. Where no public information exists regarding government abuses, courts may be inclined to give the administration the benefit of the doubt in these matters. But once evidence emerges to prove an administration untrustworthy in one set of public controversies, it is likely to affect the credence granted in others.\textsuperscript{81} Enforcement of disclosure obligations will thus build on prior disclosures; it is often only once secrecy is breached by other institutions that courts will be emboldened to enforce FOIA obligations with rigor and skepticism.

\textsuperscript{80} ACLU v. Dep’t of Def., 389 F. Supp. 2d at 578. Litigation before Judge Hellerstein also highlighted the prerequisite of prior disclosure in seeking evidence from the CIA. Although CIA operational files are excluded from FOIA, the exemption disappears with respect to files that are the subject of investigation by the CIA’s Inspector General. See ACLU v. Dep’t of Def., 351 F. Supp. 2d 265, 272 (S.D.N.Y. 2005) (citing 50 U.S.C. § 431(c)(3) (2000)).


Judge Rakoff’s approach in Associated Press v. U.S. Department of Defense was also probably not unaffected by his prior experience with the administration’s efforts to bury its missteps in In re Material Witness Warrant, 214 F. Supp. 2d 356, 363 (S.D.N.Y. 2002).
2. The Struggle for Prerequisite Knowledge: Volatility of Information, Leaks and Legal Challenges

The current administration has—whether for reasons of operational necessity, or out of a desire to avoid opposition, or both—sought to minimize public knowledge concerning many of its more dubious initiatives. Indeed, in a policy that hamstrung internal deliberations as well as shielded the executive from public scrutiny, potential internal opponents were kept ignorant of dubious policies that would otherwise have fallen within their purview. Former Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) head Jack Goldsmith described a modus operandi which “made it a practice to limit readership of controversial legal opinions to a very small group of lawyers . . . ostensibly done to prevent leaks,” but actually “to minimize resistance to them.”

These efforts at concealment, if entirely effective, would not only have precluded knowledgeable contemporaneous discussion of the GWOT initiatives. They would have immunized the initiatives from subsequent FOIA inquiry, for prerequisite knowledge and public contention are preconditions to effective FOIA requests. The efforts were not, however, entirely effective because of institutions and legal practices beyond FOIA itself. Disclosures by the subjects of GWOT initiatives and officials in the ordinary course of business, along with revelations by dissident civil servants and the background of free expression guaranteed by the constitutional structure, brought the nature of the administration’s initiatives to light.

a. Technology and the Volatility of Information

GWOT concealment efforts ran aground in part on the phenomenon that, as the Internet adage puts it, “information wants to be free.” At a basic level, most actions leave informational spoor that

82 E.g., Mayer, The Memo, supra note 21, at 32 (describing promulgation of policy on “counter-resistance techniques” without notification of opposing participants in policy process); Eric Lichtblau & James Risen, Justice Deputy Resisted Parts of Spy Program, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 1, 2006 (late ed.), 1, at 15 (“At its outset in 2002, the surveillance operation was so highly classified that even Larry Thompson, the deputy attorney general to Mr. Ashcroft, who was active in most of the government’s most classified counterterrorism operations, was not given access to the program.”).

83 Jack Goldsmith, The Terror Presidency: Law and Judgment Inside the Bush Administration 167 (2007); see id. at 141–42 (describing secrecy surrounding “torture memorandums”); id. at 181–82 (describing “flimsy legal opinions . . . guarded closely so no one could question the legal basis for the operations . . . Addington angrily denied the NSA Inspector General’s request to see a copy of OLC’s legal analysis in support of the Terrorist Surveillance Program”).
can be discerned over time by sufficiently determined observers. Passers-by will notice forcible kidnappings on busy streets, family members will complain of disappearances, airport mechanics and observers will see unusual departure patterns, flight plans will be recorded in air traffic control databases. And of course, once the subjects of initiatives are allowed to communicate with the outside world, they will tell their own tales.\(^84\) The twenty-first century information environment has brought interested private researchers and reporters the capacity to gather and sift large volumes of information seeking patterns and collateral disclosures and to share those patterns or disclosures across continents. Further, the Internet has allowed researchers to leverage a previously unavailable cadre of interested amateurs. These trends converged when covert CIA involvement in “extraordinary rendition” flights was publicly established through the combination of corporate registration statements, routine disclosures of FAA flight data and the existence of a network of “plane spotter” hobbyists who track arrivals and departures at airports, all analyzed by a loose collaboration of news reporters and European prosecutors.\(^85\)

Partial concealment is insufficient to preserve “deep secrets,” and in an open society, total concealment is a challenging task. The American legal scene is not graced with an equivalent of the “Official Secrets Act”; the law does not purport to impose criminal punish-

\(^84\) One must be tacitly grateful for the broader institutional context that inhibits the administration from literally burying its mistakes. Cf. Dana Priest, Wrongful Imprisonment: Anatomy of a CIA Mistake: German Citizen Released After Months in 'Rendition,' WASH. POST, Dec. 4, 2005, at A1 ("The first night he said he was kicked and beaten and warned by an interrogator: 'You are here in a country where no one knows about you, in a country where there is no law. If you die, we will bury you, and no one will know.' . . . At the CIA, . . . someone suggested a reverse rendition: return Masri to Macedonia and release him. 'There wouldn’t be a trace. No airplane tickets. Nothing. No one would believe him,' one former official said . . . . Once the mistake reached Tenet, he laid out the options to his counterparts, including the idea of not telling the Germans. . . . [But] 'you couldn’t have the president lying to the German chancellor' . . . .")

ment on most who disclose, convey, or publish inconvenient information. 86 In the absence of a tradition and infrastructure of suppression, retrofitting a system of public justice and administration to assure total secrecy becomes a substantial, and often insuperable, challenge. 87 Thus, the existence of one sealed case was revealed by a listing of court records on a docket website. 88 The identity of the recipient of a secret national security letter in another was disclosed by an incomplete redaction. 89 Secrets concerning one surveillance program were revealed by inadvertent inclusion of classified contracts in routine FOIA disclosures. 90 The targets of a second program were


87 This may be one reason, in addition to a concern for substantive outcomes, that the current administration has sought to divert GWOT prosecutions into novel forums.

88 See Press Release, Soc’y of Prof’l Journalists, Miami Court Reporter Selected for Pulliam First Amendment Award (Aug. 26, 2004), available at http://www.spj.org/news.asp?ref=377 (describing the work of reporter Dan Christensen, who discovered the existence of the case of Mohamed K. Bellahouel, secretly held as a “material witness” for five months following September 11, and noting that Christensen “was tipped to the secret case with a clue in the daily calendar of the U.S. Court of Appeals in Miami”); see also People for the Am. Way Found. v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 451 F. Supp. 2d 6 (D.D.C. 2006) (adjudicating a FOIA request for list of sealed cases).

89 See Doe v. Gonzales, 127 S. Ct. 1, 9 (2005) (“Doe’s identity had been publicly available for several days on the District Court’s Web site and on PACER, the electronic docket system run by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. The parties also learned that the media had correctly reported Doe’s identity on at least one occasion.” (first citation omitted)) (citing Alison Leigh Cowan, Librarians Must Stay Silent in Patriot Act Suit, Court Says, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 21, 2005, at B2)); see also Barton Gellman, The FBI’s Secret Scrutiny: In Hunt for Terrorists, Bureau Examines Records of Ordinary Americans, WASH. POST, Nov. 6, 2005, at A1.

90 See Elec. Privacy Info. Ctr. v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, No. 02-0063 (CKK), 2004 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 28485, at *2 (D.D.C. Aug. 23, 2004) (“[I]t is January 31, 2003, release had mistakenly included documents regarding a classified contract with ChoicePoint. At the time, the very fact that this contract existed was classified. The FBI sought from Plaintiff all copies of the pages referencing this contract, and Plaintiff returned one copy of those pages promptly, but FBI subsequently learned that this information had been disseminated to the Associated Press. Deciding that ‘any attempted containment would be futile,’ the FBI returned that copy to Plaintiff on May 16, 2003.” (citations omitted)).
alerted in the course of legal maneuvering to freeze the assets of alleged terrorist financiers.91

Once information is disclosed, the Constitution constrains efforts to prevent publication of truthful information.92 These constraints combine with the protean capacities of the Internet93 to make its suppression unlikely.

The institutional context for these collateral disclosures varied, but one constant has been a reasonably open society embedded in an increasingly closely woven informational environment. The volatility of information is not a new phenomenon; Benjamin Franklin observed that “three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.”94 The exponential increase in the number of potential researchers, however, and their capacity to cooperate across time and space, combine with the burgeoning ability to gather and correlate information to magnify the impact of collateral breaches of deep secrecy.

91 See Al-Haramain Islamic Found., Inc. v. Bush, 451 F. Supp. 2d 1215, 1218–19 (D. Or. 2006) (“[The Office of Foreign Assets Control] inadvertently disclosed this document to counsel for Al-Haramain in late August 2004 as part of a production of unclassified documents relating to Al-Haramain’s potential status as a specially designated global terrorist. Lynne Bernabei, an attorney for Al-Haramain[,] . . . copied and disseminated the materials, including the pertinent document which was labeled ‘TOP SECRET,’ to Al-Haramain’s directors and Bernabei’s co-counsel. In August or September, a reporter from the Washington Post reviewed these documents for an article he was researching. . . . At the request of the FBI, Bernabei and her co-counsel returned their copies of the sensitive document to the FBI. The FBI did not pursue Al-Haramain’s directors, whom the government describes as ‘likely recipients’ of the document, to ask them to return their copies.”); see also Ryan Singel, NSA Snooped on Lawyers Knowing Spying Was Illegal, Suit Charges, W IRED, July 10, 2007, http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2007/07/haramain_appeal.


93 See, e.g., Universal City Studios, Inc. v. Corley, 273 F.3d 429, 441 (2d Cir. 2001) (describing “electronic civil disobedience” to avoid efforts to suppress a decryption program); Kristin R. Eschenfelder & Anuj C. Desai, Software as Protest: The Unexpected Resiliency of U.S.-Based DeCSS Posting and Linking, 20 INFO. SOC’Y 101 (2004) (demonstrating the proliferation of U.S.-based websites either posting or linking to the DeCSS program over the course of the Universal Studios lawsuit); Kristin R. Eschenfelder et al., The Limits of DeCSS Posting: A Comparison of Internet Posting of DVD Circumvention Devices in the European Union and China, 31 J. INFO. SCI. 317, 318 (2005) (surveying such posting and linking on a range of non-U.S.-based websites); cf. Online Policy Group v. Diebold, Inc., 337 F. Supp. 2d 1195, 1203–04 (N.D. Cal. 2004) (describing Sisyphean efforts by a voting-machine manufacturer to end the publication of its internal e-mail records on a series of websites).

94 BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, POOR RICHARD’S ALMANAC (1735), reprinted in THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS 211 (2d ed. 1953).
b. Whistleblowers and Civil Servants

Collateral disclosures by targets, observers, and record-keepers have been supplemented by intentional releases of information by civil servants. Sometimes the releases of information regarding GWOT initiatives followed from official action by conscientious civil servants carrying out their assigned tasks. Thus in January 2002, as the administration struggled to suppress the dimensions of its dragnet detentions of non-citizens, the Immigration and Naturalization Service effectively revealed the identity of detainees held in Pasaic and Hudson County jails on immigration charges when detainees were allowed to meet with advocacy groups for standard “know your rights” presentations.\(^95\) The Department of Justice Inspector General’s critical report on the treatment of those detainees, and the post-September 11 dragnet that had led to their incarceration was officially released on June 2, 2003.\(^96\)

GWOT secrecy has been breached more tellingly in unofficial disclosures by disaffected government employees. Internal disclosures catalyzed opposition within the government, and opponents in turn laid the basis for public disclosures. In January 2002, sources leaked a memorandum from Alberto Gonzales arguing that a “new paradigm renders obsolete Geneva’s strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions.”\(^97\) President Bush’s official response was to partially reverse his earlier decision to ignore the Geneva Convention.\(^98\) In June 2002, a whistleblower from the Department of Justice’s Professional Responsibility Advisory Office debunked administration claims that it had not been advised that

---


\(^98\) Fact Sheet: Status of Detainees at Guantanamo, 2002 Weekly Comp. Pres. Doc. 205 (Feb. 7, 2002), available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/print/20020207-13.html. Consistent with the disingenuous legalism that has characterized this administration, the announcement guaranteeing “humane” treatment applied only to detainees at Guantanamo, leaving open the possibility of treating Al Qaeda detainees elsewhere inhumanely, since Bush had “determined” that the Geneva Convention did not cover them. See Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* 4 (2004); accord Mayer, *supra* note 12.
its interrogation of John Walker Lindh violated criminal defense rights.\textsuperscript{99} The administration agreed to a plea bargain with Lindh in exchange for his silence.

In late 2002, Naval investigators repelled by the recorded abuse of suspects at Guantanamo notified sympathetic superiors.\textsuperscript{100} In December 2002, government sources provided the basis for a front-page article in the \textit{Washington Post} providing accounts of abusive interrogation techniques.\textsuperscript{101} As a result of the internal opposition and the external critique, techniques were temporarily suspended.\textsuperscript{102}

In April 2003, internal military dismay with the prospect of abandoning limits that had constrained abuse for two generations impelled military lawyers to approach civilian human rights advocates confidentially in an effort to spark external opposition.\textsuperscript{103} In May 2003, internal sources leaked the harsh criticism of the post-September 11 roundup contained in the Department of Justice In-


\textsuperscript{100} Mayer, \textit{The Memo}, supra note 21 (describing report to Alberto Mora, General Counsel to the Navy, by Naval Criminal Investigative Service head David Brant, relying on information obtained by N.C.I.S. psychologist Michael Gelles, who “had computer access to the Army’s interrogation logs at Guantánamo”); see also \textit{HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, GETTING AWAY WITH TORTURE? COMMAND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE U.S. ABUSE OF DETAINEE S, PART IV: IMPUNITY FOR THE ARCHITECTS OF ILLEGAL POLICY} (2005), http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/us0405/6.htm (giving a similar account).


\textsuperscript{102} See the discussion of the Mora memorandum in Kreimer, \textit{Strategy of Transparency}, supra note 19, at 1163 n.88, 1192 n.216.

spector General’s report. In November 2003, sources leaked an FBI memorandum encouraging law enforcement officials to surveil anti-war protestors.

In January 2004, after Specialist Joseph Darby submitted a complaint and a CD of Abu Ghraib pictures to a military investigator, reports of the nature of the abuse began to circulate. The administration sought to suppress the results of the investigation of that abuse by General Antonio Taguba, completed in early March, which set forth both the “sadistic, blatant, and wanton” prisoner abuse by guards and apparent collusion and acquiescence by superiors. But information continued to make its way to the media from outraged insiders; with the broadcast of some of the Abu Ghraib photos by 60 Minutes and the subsequent waves of disclosures and criticism, the effort largely collapsed. In May and June 2004, internal whistlebro-

---


The Taguba Report was classified “SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEMINATION.” The administration subsequently conceded that this classification was an error. See Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1199 n.252, 1204–05. But in the effort to suppress the report, the administration threatened prosecution on the basis of the spurious classification. See Rumsfeld Testifies Before Senate Armed Services Committee, WASH. POST, May 8, 2004, at A15; E-Mail from Information Services Customer Liaison, U.S. Dep’t of Def., to All ISD Customers (May 6, 2004, 12:45 EST), available at http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,634637,00.html (threatening prosecution for leaks of the Taguba report).

ers began to disseminate legal memoranda authorizing abusive interrogation, and the supporting documents of the Taguba Report.\(^{109}\)

In early 2005, a military lawyer leaked a list of names of prisoners at Guantanamo to civil rights attorneys.\(^{110}\) By the end of that year, whistleblowers had revealed the wide usage of secret National Security Letters,\(^{111}\) the existence of a secret warrantless program of illegal wiretapping by the NSA,\(^{112}\) the profile of a network of CIA “black sites” where suspects were seized and transported for brutal interrogation\(^{113}\) and the contents of a secret Pentagon surveillance database containing records of dozens of peaceful political protests.\(^{114}\)


\(^{110}\) See Brooks Egerton, Losing a Fight for Detainees, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, May 18, 2007, at 1A (describing the prosecution of the attorney, Matthew Diaz, beginning in 2005). The Department of Defense continued its court martial proceedings against Commander Diaz even after the names had been disclosed in response to FOIA litigation. Id. (“When asked why the government pressed on with its criminal case against Cmdr. Diaz, Navy spokeswoman Beth Baker said, ‘I can’t give you a philosophical answer.’”).

\(^{111}\) Gellman, supra note 89.

\(^{112}\) Risen & Lichtblau, supra note 58; see also Lichtblau & Risen, supra note 82, at 1; cf. Tim Grieve, What the Times Knew, and When It Knew It, SALON.COM, Aug. 14, 2006, http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/2006/08/14/times/index.html (noting that the New York Times had drafted its story in November 2004 but decided to hold it at the request of the administration on the “eve” of the 2004 presidential election). Subsequent leaks revealed the fact that telecommunications companies had cooperated in the illegal surveillance program. See Cauley & Diamond, supra note 58.

\(^{113}\) Priest, supra note 57, at A1; see also Priest, supra note 84. A more general account of the policy of “extraordinary renditions,” based in part on the disclosures of officials and former officials who believed that the CIA “had lost its way,” is provided in Mayer, supra note 12. See also GREY, supra note 85, at 114–20; PAGLEN & THOMPSON, supra note 85.

Many of these disclosures provided the prerequisite knowledge for subsequent invocations of transparency rules. Revelation of FBI surveillance programs against dissidents triggered FOIA requests by activists. Disclosure of Pentagon programs had a similar result. Leaks of the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the existence of legal authorities for prisoner abuse and coercive interrogation set the stage for FOIA requests by advocacy organizations seeking specific documents identified in the media, along with broader information on detainee abuse. By 2007, those inquiries had resulted in the release of over


117 Letter from Lawrence S. Lustberg et al., Gibbons, Del Deo, Dolan, Griffinger & Vecchione, P.C., to H.J. McIntyre, Director, Directorate for Freedom of Info. & Sec. Review, Dep’t of Def. (May 25, 2004), available at http://www.aclu.org/torturefoia/legal documents/jACLUSecondFOIArequest.pdf (requesting records regarding the treatment of post-September 11 detainees). Other NGOs also began to deploy FOIA to bring detainee abuses to light. See, e.g., Federation of American Scientists, Photos of Iraqi Prisoner

As with resistance to record destruction or sanitization, the crucial institutional context of these disclosures has been the permanent infrastructure of federal civil service. Just as a long-term civil service is likelier to harbor individuals who resist the destruction of records than is a system of political appointment, it is more prone to generate individuals who take the riskier step of affirmatively disclosing abuses to outsiders. As with recordkeeping, whistleblowing does not require broad participation by employees before it is effective. It takes only one individual willing to disseminate information to dispel the deep secrecy that hamstrings FOIA requesters. The digital environment, moreover, serves as a force multiplier for leakers: a single e-mail can include several lengthy documents, and a digital picture is worth a thousand e-mails.\footnote{\citename{White} 2007}\footnote{Cf.\citename{White} 2007.} Like collateral disclosures, once information is released into the public sphere, the combination of First Amendment protections and the resilience of the Internet makes it very hard to contain.

Long-term civil servants are not systematically tied to the current administration by bonds of either personal or ideological loyalty. Many will have been brought into government under prior administrations of contrasting commitments, and their long-term prospects depend on future administrations for advancement.\footnote{\citename{Pfiffner} 2006} They are more likely than temporary officials to have long-standing relations with journalists or other outsiders whom they can trust to retain the confidentiality of their disclosures.\footnote{\citename{Mendelson} 2007}

Civil servants are more inclined than political appointees to resent violations of internal norms of departments where they have spent their careers, and this inclination is prominent in GWOT disclosures. The JAGs who approached human rights advocates to spur them to
investigate a policy of abusive interrogation “said the U.S. military’s 50-year history of observing the demands of the Geneva Conventions was now being overturned.” The officials who disclosed the illegal NSA wiretaps came forward because they “felt that there was something going wrong in the government. They believed that there was illegal activity.” Military sources were brought to speak to reporters about abusive interrogation in Afghanistan “out of what they said was anger and disgust over the unit’s treatment of detainees and the failure of task force commanders to punish misconduct.” A CIA Deputy Inspector General who had filed reports decrying illegal interrogation techniques was impelled to turn to the press when she “was startled to hear what she considered an outright falsehood” in CIA presentations to Congress denying the use of certain techniques. Other CIA officials revealed details of abuses to Council of Europe investigators because they disapproved of methods “not consonant with the sort of intelligence work they normally do.”

To be sure, not all GWOT information has been leaked by principled internal critics. The last five years have been free neither of manipulations by insiders rushing to claim credit nor of selective leaks to punish critics. But the resolution of administration officials

125 Barry et al., supra note 103, at 26.
128 Smith, supra note 21, at A1 (referring also to McCarthy’s revulsion for efforts to "secure a secret Justice Department opinion in 2004 authorizing the agency’s creation of ‘ghost detainees’"); see also Robert Windrem & Andrea Mitchell, CIA Officers Fired After Leak, MSNBC.COM, Apr. 21, 2006, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12423825/ (claiming reactions were provoked in other officials. See, e.g., GREY, supra note 85, at 250 (“I’ve been astonished at how willing many of those with close knowledge of these secret U.S. agencies had been to share their concerns. None of what I wrote would be possible without those who felt there were certain stories that simply needed telling.”)).
130 E.g., N.Y. Times Co. v. Gonzales, 459 F.3d 160, 162 (2d Cir. 2006) (describing the leak of "a plan to freeze the assets and/or search the premises of two foundations" in the aftermath of September 11, and phone calls by reporters to the foundations seeking comments, which allowed the targets to destroy evidence).
to centralize dubious initiatives in the political Office of the Vice President gives testimony to the perceived dangers that civil servants pose to deep secrecy.  

**c. Legal Challenges**

In general, the government is constrained by the First Amendment from imposing gag orders on the subjects of its interventions. Some GWOT targets who were able to retain attorneys persuaded courts to invalidate efforts to restrain them from disclosing their treatment. Administration officials have been only intermittently successful in enlisting courts in the efforts to suppress information. And some targets have been willing to risk legal sanction by revealing their treatment to news media. As with the institutional infrastructure undergirding FOIA requesters, the combination of a strong civil

---


society sector, an independent bar, and a structure of constitutional doctrine protecting the ability to publicize concerns provided a seed-bed for prerequisite disclosure.

D. FOIA Administration, Adjudication and Institutional Structure

1. Administration, Organizational Dynamics, and the Rule of Law

Even where capable requesters have the information necessary to frame incisive requests, FOIA will fail without good faith and lawful exercise of discretion by recipient officials. When administrators are required to search their files to respond to FOIA requests, what guarantee do requesters have that members of the administration will not “forget” the location of embarrassing information? When FOIA officers are required to prepare indices of documents they seek to withhold, how can we be sure that inconvenient documents are not buried in a misleading characterization?

The scope of exemptions gives wide range for administrative predictions of dire consequences from disclosure, and courts will often defer to these predictions. Marking documents classified on grounds of national security, moreover, effectively immunizes them from disclosure. Satirist Tom Lehrer once observed, in the context of pornography, “when correctly viewed, everything is lewd.” When viewed through the prism of the possible assembly of a “mosaic” of information by a dangerous enemy of unknown capacities, everything is a dire threat to national security. Given the availability of “national

137 Congress directed that the national security exemption is available only for documents that are “in fact properly classified.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1)(B) (2000); see CIA v. Sims, 471 U.S. 159, 189 n.5 (1985) (Marshall, J., concurring) (noting that the language of the exemption was specifically designed by Congress to overrule prior precedent that gave the Executive sole discretion in Exemption 1 withholdings and that this amendment was adopted over a presidential veto). Nonetheless, courts have proved largely unwilling to second-guess claimed exemptions of classified documents. See Fuchs, supra note 11, at 166–67; Paul R. Verkuil, An Outcomes Analysis of Scope of Review Standards, 44 WM. & MARY L. REV. 679, 715 n.159 (“Cases decided under Exemption 1 during the 1990s were individually reviewed. No ultimately successful challenges were revealed.”) (citation omitted)); Wells, supra note 11, at 854; Pozen, supra note 11, at 632, 654. But cf. Associated Press v. U.S. Dep’t of Def., 498 F. Supp. 2d 707 (S.D.N.Y. 2007) (describing extensive in camera review of a representative sample of material redacted pursuant to Exemption 1 and concluding that the exemption was properly invoked).

138 See Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Studies v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 331 F.3d 918 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (upholding refusal to disclose the names of attorneys for detainees who had been determined to have no connection with terrorism); ACLU v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 265 F. Supp. 2d 20, 30 & n.11, 32 (D.D.C. 2003) (upholding refusal to disclose the number of times Section 215 of the Patriot Act had been deployed); Pozen, supra note 11; cf. N. Jersey Me-
security” concerns, why would an administration ever fail to classify damaging material?

Here, again, it turns out that FOIA’s efficacy depends on a law-abiding civil service. Many of the decisions regarding FOIA requests are made at a line level by career bureaucrats who have no political stake in disclosure or non-disclosure and who can do their jobs most easily by following regulations in good faith. Indeed, a culture of lawfulness is an asset at most levels of the federal government, and this culture is nurtured in the FOIA context by specific institutional structures.

The strengthened FOIA obligations of 1974 led to the establishment of the Office of Information and Privacy in the Department of Justice in 1981. That office, directed by the same attorneys for over a quarter-century, took as part of its institutional mission the quest to establish a culture of lawful response to FOIA requests. One of the founding attorneys described the dynamic:

[A] major part of any FOIA officer’s job, or the role of someone like me who works to lead them in the right direction, is to firmly grapple with this problem attitude—an attitude that can quickly become ingrained within the culture of any part of an agency, sometimes on four-year cycles as a new president (either Republican or Democrat) comes into office.

---

139 See Roberts, supra note 12, at 71. It is worth reflecting on whether one element of the administration strategy in promulgating an order directing each agency to appoint a FOIA officer is the prospect of moving politically reliable officials into FOIA choke points. One former government FOIA attorney has advised agencies to deploy a “rapid response team” to cover requests by aggressive civil society organizations. Scott A. Hodes, FOIA Facts: Rapid Response Team for FOIA, LLRX.COM, Dec. 17, 2006, http://www.llrx.com/columns/foia38.htm.


141 Silver Anniversary, supra note 140. Its founding attorneys have now retired, and have been replaced by another attorney who has been with the office since 1983. Id.
I think the best approach is to confront this attitude directly—to explicitly acknowledge it as an immutable aspect of both human and institutional nature and, in so doing, to attack it head-on. Someone who blatantly resists a legal requirement such as the FOIA is not unlike a bully, I’ve found, and the best response to that can be a verbal two-by-four across the bridge of the nose. This works more often than you might imagine, even with new political employees.  

Even discounting for the bravado of a lawyer defending his life’s work, this description rings true as a part of an explanation for the success of FOIA litigation in the context of GWOT.

Structural support for FOIA rests as well in the fact that the self-interest of career civil servants does not always cut against disclosure. In a multi-vocal bureaucracy, a faction that can show itself to have opposed a problematic policy as a matter of principle or prudence may be eager to expose abuses by its long-term rivals. The dynamic manifested itself in maneuvering over what the ACLU referred to as its “torture files” request for documents regarding Abu Ghrabi and coercive interrogation policies. The FBI, which had lodged objections to these tactics, affirmatively gathered a chronology of its objections, granted the ACLU’s request for expedited processing, and ultimately released revelatory documents. As one account puts the matter:

[After the initial Abu Ghrabi disclosures,] the FBI general counsel’s office began a more systematic effort to document the abuses that had been recorded by its agents in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo. The result was a flood of alarming reports that have now been turned over to the American Civil Liberties Union in its Freedom of Information lawsuit seeking the release of government documents on the treatment of prisoners.

The release of these documents has exacerbated tensions between the FBI and the Pentagon over the issue. Defense officials have privately complained that bureau officials affirmatively decided to turn over the documents in the lawsuit in order to protect itself from charges that it was complicit in the improper treatment of prisoners.

The interplay over the “torture files” FOIA requests highlights a final structural guarantee grounded in career civil service. Invocation of FOIA’s national security exemption requires that materials actually have been classified pursuant to valid executive order. The classification process has its own personnel and organizational dynamic.

---


These can resist efforts to over-classify in the interests of political gain, if for no other reason than the perception that over-classification diffuses the resources necessary to protect against real threats to security. As I have described elsewhere,\textsuperscript{144} the interventions of William Leonard, the Director of the Information Security Oversight Office, in the summer and fall of 2004 apparently limited the classification of Defense Department material regarding abuses of detainees. Because FOIA Exemption 1 can be invoked only where government officials certify that material is in fact classified, it appears that Mr. Leonard’s integrity and institutional clout precluded the “national security” gambit and facilitated the release of over 100,000 pages of revealing documents.\textsuperscript{145}

2. A Portfolio of Judges

FOIA gives requesters a right to de novo review in U.S. district court of outright refusals to disclose documents; it recognizes as well a right to seek preliminary relief imposing schedules upon dilatory agencies that seek to play rope-a-dope.\textsuperscript{146} Confrontations between requesters and a recalcitrant administration, however, often leave substantial room for the exercise of judicial judgment. The evaluation of FOIA exemption claims frequently turns on the judge’s perceptions regarding the “reasonableness” of expectations of privacy, the balance between disclosure and other public goods, the persuasiveness of predictions of harm, and the like. Equally important, judges in FOIA cases have broad equitable authority to grant or deny relief regarding the timing and scope of search and review efforts, as well as

\textsuperscript{144} Kreimer, \textit{Strategy of Transparency}, supra note 19, at 1204–05.

\textsuperscript{145} Mr. Leonard’s efficacy was in part a testament to the career civil service. He was a veteran of over a quarter century in the information security arms of the federal government, and had “served in the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Security and Information Operations) as both the Deputy Assistant Secretary as well as the Principal Director.” Nat’l Archives, Director, Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO), http://www.archives.gov/isoo/about/director.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).

Mr. Leonard, it subsequently emerged, had confronted overreaching by the administration on other turf. See, e.g., Bonnie Goldstein, \textit{Cheney vs. National Archives}, SLATE, June 27, 2007, http://www.slate.com/id/2169299/ (compiling documents from 2006 regarding Leonard’s claim that the Vice President’s office was in “willful[]” violation of executive order regarding classified materials, and Cheney’s claim that he was not bound by the order because he was not a member of the executive branch).

informal power to prod agencies toward disclosure. Much of the action in FOIA requests occurs in the shadow of litigation, or out of the range of effective appellate review. The efficacy of FOIA, therefore, depends in substantial measure on the rigor and skepticism with which trial judges exercise their offices.

All federal judges are, of course, life tenured; any particular FOIA request therefore has a chance of coming before a judge appointed not by the current administration, but by predecessors of different ideology. Moreover, under FOIA, venue for requesters’ lawsuits lies both in the location of the requested records, which is usually the District of Columbia, and in the district in which the claimant resides.\textsuperscript{147} For matters of national interest, an administration must potentially contend with a nationwide portfolio of litigation. That portfolio is likely to contain a spectrum of legal precedent and of judicial opinion more varied than the consensus in Washington, D.C., or the balance of power on the D.C. Circuit. Strategic litigants may seek pockets of judges and law skeptical to administration claims. This diversity manifested itself in the FOIA litigation over GWOT.

Efforts to withhold documents on prisoner abuse and the details of Guantanamo detention practices were challenged by requesters in New York, outside the precedential authority of the 2-1 majority in the D.C. Circuit that had proffered almost unqualified deference to the administration’s claims for exemption from disclosure on grounds of national security.\textsuperscript{148} The challenges succeeded before Clinton appointees Alvin Hellerstein, who had served in the Judge Advocate Corps of the U.S. Army from 1959 to 1960,\textsuperscript{149} and Jed Rakoff, who had spent seven years in the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York.\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{147} 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B).
\textsuperscript{148} Ctr. for Nat’l Sec. Studies v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice, 331 F.3d 918 (D.C. Cir. 2003).
\textsuperscript{149} See Fed. Judiciary Ctr., Judges of the U.S. Courts, Alvin K. Hellerstein, http://www.fjc.gov/servlet/tGetInfo?jid=2794 (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (stating that Clinton nominated Hellerstein in 1998); ACLU v. Dep’t of Def., 339 F. Supp. 2d 501, 503–04 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (ordering production or identification of documents regarding abuse of detainees); \textit{id.} at 502 (“Ours is a government of laws… No one is above the law….”); \textit{id.} at 504 (“Merely raising national security concerns can not justify unlimited delay.”); \textit{id.} (“[T]he glacial pace at which defendant agencies have been responding to plaintiffs’ requests shows an indifference to the commands of FOIA, and fails to afford accountability of government that the act requires.”). See further the discussion in Kreimer, \textit{Strategy of Transparency}, supra note 19, at 1203–08.
In California, Judge Charles Breyer, who had served as a Watergate special prosecutor, upbraided the government for tendering “frivolous claims of exemption” regarding documents relating to the “No-Fly list.”

Even within the District of Columbia, Clinton appointees Gladys Kessler and Ellen Segal Huvelle effected the release of documents debunking the administration’s positions con-

loquially, a motion for reconsideration is not a game of ‘gotcha’); id. at 157 (rebuffing substantive claim as “wholly conclusory and grossly speculative”); Associated Press v. U.S. Dep’t of Def., 395 F. Supp. 2d 17, 18 (S.D.N.Y. 2005) (describing the administration’s position as “strange, even hypocritical”). See further the discussion in Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1166–69.

Judge Rakoff had previously ordered an investigation of the administration’s misrepresentation of evidence in seeking a warrant to imprison an entirely innocent Egyptian visitor, and refused to seal the unflattering events leading up to that investigation. In re Material Witness Warrant, 214 F. Supp. 2d 356, 363 (S.D.N.Y. 2002). With forlorn fervor bordering on the providential, the administration’s 2006 effort to use a grand jury subpoena to suppress a leaked document was also delivered to Judge Rakoff’s skeptical hands. See Press Release, ACLU, Government Backs Down in Its Attempt To Seize “Secret” Document From ACLU (Dec. 18, 2006), available at http://www.aclu.org/safefree/general/27727prs20061218.html (discussing the government’s effort to subpoena “all copies” of a document regarding photographing of detainees, detailing the unsuccessful effort to seal proceedings before Judge Rakoff, and providing pleadings from the related litigation).


cerning deployment of the Patriot Act by exercising equitable authority regarding timing. Former Assistant U.S. Attorney and Clinton-appointed D.C. district judge Henry Kennedy, impatient with delays in processing a request for information regarding noncompliance with FISA, “easily rejected” an administration position that would give it “carte blanche to determine the time line for processing expedited requests.”

To be sure, judges across the country acquiesced to administration claims seeking to resist disclosures of information. But an administration seeking to maintain secrecy must contend with the prospect that a FOIA case would come before one of a portfolio of reasonably skeptical judges. And, as with the prospect of leaks, it requires only one success on a given subject to release information into public dialogue.

III. THE FORCE OF FOIA: THE QUESTION OF EFFICACY

In contrast to the FOIA critics who regard the statute as unnecessary, a second group of commentary casts FOIA as ineffective, particularly as a check on executive overreaching in GWOT. Without doubt, the current administration has sought to impede release of information under FOIA. Without doubt, as well, administration efforts to resist disclosure have met success in litigation, and the administration’s failures in FOIA litigation have not galvanized immediate public repudiation of overreaching initiatives in GWOT. Where they have been successful, moreover, FOIA requests have been predicated on prior disclosures, which raises the question of whether FOIA serves any independent function at all. If reasonably detailed public knowledge of abuses is a prerequisite to a successful FOIA request, what will the results of that request add to public dialogue?

The answers to these challenges come in two stages. First, it is important to assay the actual incidence of information disclosed pursuant to FOIA requests. This requires both a full account of the successful requests and an appreciation of the ways in which FOIA can trigger other disclosures and discussion.

As we will see, in the public consideration of GWOT initiatives, FOIA’s role in the ecology of transparency has been in part to au-

---


155 See critics cited supra notes 9–12 and accompanying text.
authenticate some prior disclosures, easing their way into public discourse. In addition, FOIA has potentiated other subsequent disclosures. The critical literature has failed to appreciate either role.

Full analysis requires a clear-eyed assessment of these dynamics as well as the ways in which FOIA disclosures have functioned to leverage the checking functions of other institutions, and the cumulative impact of disclosures over time. Critics inadequately appreciate the ecology of transparency.

A. FOIA and the Half-Full Glass: Assessing Contributions to Public Information

1. FOIA and the Partial Disclosures

While the current administration’s policy pronouncements encouraged agencies to withhold documents from FOIA requests whenever there was a “sound legal basis” to do so, the policy has fallen well short of establishing an impenetrable cone of silence. Early studies suggested that the policy memoranda resulted in relatively small changes in FOIA practice. More recently, it appears at the macro level that the period since the current administration’s accession to power has witnessed a discernible increase both in levels of FOIA withholding and delays accompanying the processing of FOIA requests. Yet amidst the increasing recalcitrance, the combined pro-

156 See discussion of Ashcroft and Card memoranda, supra notes 62, 64. The current administration has also encouraged classification of information, which in turn shields it from FOIA disclosure. See, e.g., Dana Milbank & Mike Allen, Release of Documents Is Delayed, WASH. POST, Mar. 26, 2003, at A15 (describing revocation of the requirement that material “not be classified if there is ‘significant doubt’” as to its danger to national security); Exec. Order No. 13,292, 68 Fed. Reg. 15,315 (Mar. 25, 2003).


158 COALITION OF JOURNALISTS FOR OPEN GOV’T, STILL WAITING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS: PART I at 12 tbl. (2007), http://www.cjog.net/documents/Still_Waiting_Narrative_and_Charts.pdf [hereinafter CJOG, STILL WAITING] (documenting over a 40% decrease in the number of requests granted in full by the Department of Defense between 1998 and 2006; a 90% decrease at the CIA; a 70% decrease at the Justice Department; and a 43% decrease overall); COALITION OF JOURNALISTS FOR OPEN GOV’T, WHEN EXEMPTIONS BECOME THE RULE (2005), http://www.cjog.net/documents/Exemptions_Study.pdf [hereinafter CJOG, EXEMPTIONS] (documenting a substantial increase in the invocation of a variety of FOIA exemptions); Minjeong Kim, Numbers Tell Part of the Story: A Compari-
portion of requests granted in whole or in part has declined only modestly. Aggregate data do not reveal the significance of the increase in partial withholding.

With regard to requests concerning GWOT, much of the commentary regarding the dullness of FOIA as a weapon against secrecy has focused on litigated cases. Critics highlight the degree to which these cases have accepted speculative, conclusory or overreaching rationales for withholding of information. There can be no dispute that courts have regularly upheld administration refusals of FOIA requests related to GWOT, and in the process have manifested deference bordering on abject abdication.

But FOIA requesters have also met with success. Critical commentary for the most part fails to account for cases—predominantly in the period following the Supreme Court’s rejection of uncontrolled executive authority in prosecuting the “GWOT” in June 2004—which rebuffed efforts to resist FOIA inquiries. In this period, FOIA requesters obtained important judgments regarding Guantanamo detainees, prisoner abuse, and surveillance. Critics often fail,
moreover, to acknowledge the instances where information has been revealed in the shadow of FOIA, but without authoritative judicial mandate. As I have discussed at greater length in *Strategy of Transparency*, such revelations emerged from FOIA requests regarding the post-September 11 dragnet, the MATRIX program, the Combatant Status Review Tribunals (CSRT) in Guantanamo, the implementation of the Patriot Act, other surveillance, and the physical abuse of prisoners detained overseas during the “war on terror.”

---


165 See id. at 1153 n.88.

166 See id. at 1165 (describing the release of Guantanamo CSRT transcripts in response to filing of FOIA action); id. at 1165–66, 1166 n.98 (describing successful FOIA requests by attorneys for detainees).


168 People for the Am. Way Found. v. NSA/Cent. Sec. Serv., 462 F. Supp. 2d 21 (D.D.C. 2006) (describing production of documents); Eggen & Pincus, supra note 120, (“[A] series of e-mails . . . . were released . . . by the Electronic Privacy Information Center, which obtained them as part of ongoing Freedom of Information Act litigation.”).

169 Kreimer, *Strategy of Transparency*, supra note 19, at 1202 (describing release of documents regarding coercive interrogation policy, after portions had been leaked); id. at 1205–06 (describing release of 100,000 pages of documents regarding coercive interrogation after order requiring processing of FOIA request); id. at 1205 (describing release by FBI of
Judged against a benchmark of full and open discussion of problematic initiatives, FOIA falls short. But, at a time when the political branches were largely trapped in stasis, FOIA initiatives cast important light onto the “dark side” of GWOT.

2. **FOIA and the Cascades of Transparency**

In assessing the efficacy of FOIA, analysis cannot end with the documents released in response to requests or litigation. For just as leaks of prerequisite knowledge can set the stage for successful FOIA requests, information disclosed by FOIA has laid the groundwork for inquiry and disclosure by other institutions. An evaluation of the efficacy of FOIA must account for the further information that cascades from the initial FOIA disclosures.

As the revelations of Watergate led Congress to strengthen FOIA, they also generated a network of other institutions within the government to audit the exercise of executive authority. FOIA disclosures regarding GWOT abuses in turn triggered inquiries by these watchdogs within the executive branch. Thus, the disclosure of FBI reports of detainee abuse in the ACLU’s FOIA litigation before Judge Hellerstein in late 2004 brought about internal investigations both by the Department of Justice Inspector General and a specially commissioned Army investigation team. The revelation of internal re-
ports concerning abuses of Patriot Act authority in FBI documents disclosed in the EPIC FOIA litigation before Judge Kessler in late 2005 precipitated an investigation by the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General.173

Once the internal watchdogs were prodded awake, the process became recursive in a number of instances. In response to references in the documents to reports of violations to the FBI Intelligence Oversight Board, EPIC filed a follow-on request for reports submitted by the Board, which resulted in the release of more documents.174 The Department of Justice Inspector General in turn obtained an unredacted set of the reports, which were used in its analysis.175

The FOIA disclosures of FBI documentation of torture in late 2004 galvanized hearings even by a Congress dominated by presidential allies.176 The weight of documents released in the Torture FOIA litigation provided leverage for further inquiry by skeptical members of Congress in confirmation hearings.177 Synergistically, congressional inquiry triggered by leaks and FOIA documents extracted materials which had been withheld from the initial Torture FOIA disclosures.178


175 2006 PATRIOT ACT REPORT, supra note 173, at 20–30.


FOIA disclosures of Patriot Act abuse, along with other disclosures of GWOT excesses, helped to persuade Congress to postpone renewal of sunsetted Patriot Act surveillance authorities in late 2005. When the expiring provisions were renewed in March 2006 for another three years, Congress imposed modifications. Among other things, the Patriot Act renewal imposed new obligations of transparency. In addition to requiring reports to congressional committees on the use of National Security Letters, Section 215, and data mining activities, the Reauthorization Act mandated that the Department of Justice’s Inspector General conduct a series of audits of “the effectiveness and use, including any improper or illegal use,” of national security letters and Section 215 orders issued and obtained by the Department. The first of those audits revealed a series of violations which triggered further debate and inquiry.

Perhaps most important, FOIA disclosures provided a means of authenticating—and allowing mainstream media to take cognizance of—the information that had emerged in bits and pieces from internal critics and targets of GWOT initiatives. Before the disclosures that began with Abu Ghraib, administration apologists shaped public discourse by touting disavowals of “torture,” portraying particular leaks as “rumor, innuendo, and assertions,” and denigrating critics

---

180 Id. § 106(h), 120 Stat. 192, 199–200 (Mar. 9, 2006) (enacting reporting requirements for Section 215 orders); id. § 108, 120 Stat. at 203–04 (enacting reporting requirements for “multipoint surveillance”); id. § 109, 120 Stat. at 204–05 (enacting reporting requirements for pen registers and physical searches); id. § 118, 120 Stat. at 217–18 (requiring that reports on National Security Letters be submitted to the Committee on the Judiciary, the Committee on Financial Services, and the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence of the House of Representatives, and the Committee on the Judiciary, the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, and the Select Committee on Intelligence of the Senate); id. § 126, 120 Stat. at 227–28 (requiring reports on data mining activities).
181 Id. § 106A, 120 Stat. at 200–02 (requiring audits of the use of Section 215); id. § 119, 120 Stat. at 219–21 (requiring audits of the use of NSLs). In addition to the fact that the Inspector General has proven willing to exercise independent judgment in other areas of the “War on Terror,” Congressional experience with unadorned reporting obligations has been decidedly mixed. See Gellman, supra note 89 (recounting the 2004 requirement of report on the “scope of” national security letters, and reporting that the “process and standards for approving” them “had gone” “[m]ore than a year . . . without a Justice Department reply.”).
182 See discussion in Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1183–85.
as “either uninformed, misinformed or poorly informed.” Reporters, well aware that leakers can be self-interested sources of varying levels of reliability, and dependent on administration sources for their flow of information on other matters, proved reluctant to openly accuse the administration of mendacity.

After October 2004, these ploys became less effective. FOIA had not served to reveal “deep secrets,” but rather to provide details and substantiation for the fragmentary reports that had disclosed the existence of the secrets. Crucially, established media reporting these details were not required to rely on accounts by administration opponents as their authenticating sources. FOIA disclosures provided official documents, allowing the media to adopt the stance of a neutral observer reporting on the memoranda of government officials. As material finally began to emerge in the ACLU coalition litigation before Judge Hellerstein, the patterns of abusive interrogation began to move from the realm of speculation to the realm of fact in public debate. With substantiation, it became less risky to report corroborating accounts from administration critics.

3. FOIA and the Network of Knowledge

Critical accounts which minimize FOIA’s impact also fail adequately to address a third effect, for the responses to FOIA requests often carry disclosures beyond the precise propositional content of the documents and data revealed. At the simplest level, as my colleague Cary Coglianese and his co-authors have observed in an analogous regulatory context, additional sources of information allow investigators to “triangulate” by using the consistency of observations to derive reliability.

We have seen that FOIA disclosures importantly substantiated information leaked by internal whistleblowers or uncovered by external investigations. The impact of information can be more than additive moreover, for it is often the case, as my colleague Polk Wagner has

185 See Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1299–11 (discussing reporting of FOIA disclosures).
186 Cary Coglianese, Richard Zeckhauser & Edward Parson, Seeking Truth for Power: Informational Strategy and Regulatory Policymaking, 89 MINN. L. REV. 277, 333 (2004). Coglianese et al. describe the situation of regulators seeking to control commercial activities, but the observation is equally apt for citizens or legislators seeking to control a potentially abusive executive.
noted in the context of intellectual property, that data, “once disclosed, convey[] more information than simply the . . . expression itself.”187 In the area of intellectual property, combining the latent information of disclosures with other background data generates innovation that could not be predicted from the propositional content of the information itself; in the sphere of GWOT, disclosures of particular abuses combined with other available information to provide a synergistic level of oversight. In judging the success or failure of FOIA requests, therefore, it is not adequate simply to address the disclosed documents standing alone.188

Again, without quarreling with the observation that the administration has successfully stymied many FOIA requests and falls orders of magnitude short of full transparency, it is important to observe that this meta-propositional effect has manifested itself in the GWOT cases. The ACLU’s early Patriot Act FOIAs, for example, resulted in the production of a document listing National Security Letters issued over a two-year period, with each entry carefully blacked out to obscure all information regarding the substance and purpose of those letters. But when the administration sought, in litigation, to maintain that the NSLs and the gag orders they contained were without coercive effect, the ACLU provided the court with the pages of blacked-out entries, which established the widespread use of those letters. Combined with prior public statements by the administration claiming that the letters had never been challenged, this data in turn persuaded the court that recipients viewed the letters as coercive interferences with their rights, rather than mere requests.189 Similarly, taken alone, any single transcript of the CSRT proceedings released in response to the Associated Press FOIA request in 2004190 has relatively little probative impact. But analyzed in the aggregate, and combined with information available from other sources, researchers


188 The administration seems fully aware of this effect, for it is the basis for the “mosaic” theory deployed to block even the most routine of GWOT disclosures. See discussion of mosaic theory, supra note 138 and accompanying text. One suspects that it is the prospect of “mosaic artisans” in the person of investigative reporters rather than astute terrorists that accounts for the enthusiasm with which the theory is deployed.


190 See Kreimer, Strategy of Transparency, supra note 19, at 1166–68.
generated persuasive evidence that the Guantanamo inmates were enormously far from the “worst of the worst.”

Investigative reporters who substantiated covert CIA involvement in “extraordinary rendition” flights began with FAA flight registration documents and a digital archive of flight plans made available by the FAA pursuant to FOIA. That rather anodyne information, however, fit together with other pieces of data: corporate registration statements, leaks by disaffected intelligence sources, reports by victims of rendition and human rights organizations, European prosecutors, and the data gathered by an online network of “plane spotter” hobbyists who track arrivals and departures at airports. The combination established the existence and nature of the program of CIA-sponsored disappearances. Two of those reporters described the process, “By accessing multiple sources of data, one can find bits and pieces of raw information, and these bits and pieces of information can provide the Holmesian drops of water that one might use to infer the existence of oceans.”

Unsurprisingly, the administration disputes these conclusions. See, e.g., William Glauberson, Pentagon Study Sees Threat in Guantánamo Detainees, N.Y. TIMES, July 26, 2007, at A16. But with the information in the public domain, the dispute is resolvable by reference to facts.

Grey, supra note 85, at 115, 117 (describing an archive of flight plans available “[b]ecause of the Freedom of Information Act,” and airplane ownership records obtained from the FAA); see also Paglen & Thompson, supra note 85, at 104, 108–09 (describing FOIA requests by “plane-spotter” hobbyist, followed by examination of published FAA and military databases).

Grey, supra note 85, at 114–20 (describing research combining “plane spotting” websites and listservs with FOIA-mandated live-feed aviation databases provided by the FAA along with investigative reporters around the world and European prosecutors); see also id. at 124–26 (describing the use of corporate disclosure statements to identify CIA ownership of flights).

Paglen & Thompson, supra note 85, at 103; see also id. at 95–121 (describing combination of “planespotting” websites and discussion lists by hobby enthusiasts and FAA data bases); id. at 45–74 (describing “paper trail” of corporate public disclosures and civilian aircraft registration that connected rendition flights to front companies).
B. FOIA and the “Frozen Scandal”: The Substantive Impact of Disclosure on Abuses

A number of critics have acknowledged the ultimate release of information regarding GWOT abuses, but have expressed concern that transparency successes have failed to impact the policies revealed. President Bush was reelected in November 2004, seven months after the Abu Ghraib disclosures began, after a campaign largely devoid of discussion of prisoner abuse; Alberto Gonzales, who had been demonstrably implicated in the prisoner treatment policy as White House Counsel, was confirmed as Attorney General three months later. Media coverage of the scandal appeared to recede, and congressional and military investigations languished. Taking the impact of the Watergate disclosures on the Nixon presidency as a benchmark, some commentators interpreted these developments to betoken the replacement of the model of “sunlight as a disinfectant” with the model of the “frozen scandal” of “revelation but not a true investigation or punishment: scandals we are forced to live with.”

There is undoubted merit in these concerns. But there is also an element of excessive expectation and a lack of historical perspective. It is true that President Nixon’s impeachment and resignation followed hard on the heels of the revelation of the tape-recorded evidence of his involvement in Watergate, pried loose by the Supreme Court’s order in United States v. Nixon. But even taking the Watergate break-in as a self-contained episode, the process of revelation had begun two years earlier with the apprehension of the Watergate burglars and disclosure of their ties with the Nixon campaign in June 1972. More important, the burglary itself was only one of a long chain of abuses that underlay the Nixon Articles of Impeachment.


198 Article of Impeachment III was based on the refusal to honor subpoenas in the Watergate investigation. Article I was based on the cover-up of the Watergate break-in, but also had the effect “to conceal the existence and scope of other unlawful covert activities.” ARTICLES OF IMPEACHMENT, H.R. Rep. No. 93-1503, reprinted in John W. Dean III, WATER
Revelations of those abuses had begun to appear by the beginning of 1970. By the time of the Watergate burglary, a pattern of domestic political harassment, warrantless electronic surveillance, and efforts to suppress revelations of misjudgments and falsehoods in the Vietnam War had been in evidence in the court of public opinion for a year and a half. Perhaps the starkest revelations resulted from what might be termed a self-help freedom of information action in March 1971 by an anonymous group which went by the name of the “Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI.” These activists burgled an FBI office in Media, PA, and removed over 1,000 documents which revealed the “COINTELPRO” efforts by the FBI to suppress domestic dissent. Political insiders were well aware of the use by Nixon partisans of federal regulatory and law enforcement mechanisms to coerce political contributions. Yet it was not until a year after the burglary that the Senate Watergate Committee began its hearings, and not until a year later that President Nixon resigned.


203 See Allan M. Jalon, A Break-In to End All Break-Ins, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 8, 2006, at B13 (describing theft “while much of the country was watching the Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight” of documents revealing “years of systematic wiretapping, infiltration and media manipulation designed to suppress dissent” and subsequent publication of the documents); see also Brandywine Peace Community, COINTELPRO History and Overview, http://www.brandywinepeace.com/FBI%20PDF%20COMPILATION%201.pdf (last visited Oct. 1, 2007) (reproducing the stolen documents).

204 See JIMMY BRESLIN, HOW THE GOOD GUYS FINALLY WON: NOTES FROM AN IMPEACHMENT SUMMER 13–15 (1975) (describing reports to Democratic fundraisers during the 1972 campaign by contributors who were being coerced by Nixon administration officials).
Observers of the Nixon reelection in November 1972 could have diagnosed a “frozen scandal,” but the accumulation of revelations resembled more closely a slow-moving glacier.  

So, if Watergate is indeed the benchmark, it is important to observe the ways in which FOIA revelations regarding GWOT have gathered gradual and cumulative momentum and have begun to catalyze responses in other institutions.

1. FOIA and Institutional Leverage

   a. Litigation

   For a generation of lawyers weaned on Brown v. Board of Education, the most obvious source of leverage against abuse lies in litigation. Without advancing the insupportable claim that federal courts have been eager to confront overreaching in GWOT, it is worth noting that the materials revealed by FOIA litigation have provided building blocks for litigation to curb abuses. The documents provided substance for actions in U.S. courts and foreign venues by former detainees seeking redress for abuse.  

   More strikingly, FOIA documents were deployed before the Supreme Court by advocates challenging the administration’s claim of unreviewable power over detainees. Again, it is important to appreciate the cumulative effect of transparency. The initial leaks of the Abu

---

205 To move the metaphor from ice cap to desert, political scientists have observed that the presence of friction in American government decision-making causes policy processes to move abruptly from one state to another in response to a continued accumulation of data, as a pile of sand subjected to a continued stream of sand grains generates occasional landslides rather than a uniform stream of run-off. BRYAN D. JONES & FRANK R. BAUMGARTNER, THE POLITICS OF ATTENTION: HOW GOVERNMENT PRIORITIZES PROBLEMS 148–50 (2005); see, e.g., Bryan D. Jones et al., Policy Punctuations in American Political Institutions, 97 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 151 (2003).


Ghraib abuses, the Taguba Report, and the legal memoranda authorizing “enhanced” interrogation set the stage for the initial rebuff of the administration’s claims of unreviewable authority over detainees in 2004. As documentary evidence of abuses continued to emerge from Judge Hellerstein’s FOIA orders in late 2005 and 2006, the Supreme Court considered the petition for certiorari and the merits of Hamdan v. Rumsfeld. Advocates for the detainees adduced both the Torture FOIA documents themselves and the resulting public commentary and investigation to argue that restraints on treatment of detainees were necessary to assure adherence to minimal requirements of human rights. In June 2006, the majority opinion in Hamdan not only granted relief to Mr. Hamdan and his compatriots in Guantanamo, but was crafted to impose legal restraints on abuse by American operatives overseas.

With looming congressional elections, the administration sought legislation that would reverse the legal restraints. The ensuing maneuvers before the still-Republican-controlled Congress resulted in legislation that disavows “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment,” but still withholds effective judicial relief from its victims. The Supreme Court will address Congress’ handiwork this Term. The

---


212 Boumediene v. Bush, 127 S. Ct. 3078 (2007) (granting certiorari), rev’d 127 S. Ct. 1478 (2007) (denying writ of certiorari). As this Article was going to print, the Supreme Court issued its opinion in Boumediene v. United States, invalidating the Congressional effort to
Court’s decision to reverse its denial of review in these cases, in turn, seems to have resulted from the disclosure by a whistleblower of the arbitrary and cursory nature of the CSRT process against the background of analyses of CSRT transcripts disclosed by earlier FOIA requests. Consideration will be shadowed as well by recent revelations of secret OLC opinions effectively authorizing the administration to ignore statutes constraining torture that have emerged from a combination of leaks and FOIA litigation.

The reversal of the Court’s decision not to review the current Guantanamo process followed the filing of a critical affidavit by a former officer at the Office for the Administrative Review of the Detention of Enemy Combatants. See infra note 213.

---


214 Scott Shane et al., Secret U.S. Endorsement of Severe Interrogations, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 4, 2007, at A1 (revealing existence of two opinions leaked by officials); Press Release, ACLU Learns of Third Secret Torture Memo by Gonzales Justice Department (Nov. 6, 2007), http://www.aclu.org/safefree/torture/32597prnt071106.html (commenting on the existence of a third legal opinion disclosed by responses to ongoing FOIA inquiries); see also
b. Political Redress of Specific Abuses

Congress, the political branch which might be expected to serve as a counterweight to executive abuse, has been less than aggressive in confronting the overreaching of GWOT. But that fact should not distract from the occasions on which political pressure has built effectively on specific revelations. Some programs regarding domestic surveillance have been withdrawn after disclosure of their excesses,\(^{215}\) others, which relied on cooperation of state governments outside the current administration’s coalition, have withered because of local opposition.\(^{216}\) FOIA disclosures impeached the credibility of administration spokespersons who campaigned for expansion of the Patriot Act,\(^{217}\) and a series of disclosures of GWOT abuses immediately preceded the December 16, 2005 decision in the Senate to block renewal of the Patriot Act.\(^{218}\) Evidence of abuse of National Security Letters triggered an internal FBI audit, which in turn revealed widespread abuses and generated programmatic changes to bring the agency into

---


\(^{216}\) A series of FOIA requests by the ACLU lent efficacy to a campaign to persuade states to withdraw from the MATRIX (Multistate Anti-Terrorism Information Exchange) surveillance network. See ACLU, THE ACLU IN THE COURTS SINCE 9/11, at 6, http://www.aclu.org/pdfs/safefree/since911pastcases_20061019.pdf (describing “simultaneous Freedom of Information Act requests in eight states concerning those states’ participation in the ‘MATRIX’ database surveillance system” following an October 2003 federal FOIA request, resulting in the ultimate abandonment of the program in 2005); ACLU, Feature on MATRIX (Mar. 8, 2005), http://www.aclu.org/privacy/spying/15701res20050308.html; ACLU, State-by-State Breakdown on Participation in MATRIX (Jan. 16, 2004), http://www.aclu.org/safefree/resources/16906res20040116.html (providing links to FOIA requests and withdrawals from the program).

\(^{217}\) See Gail Appleson, *FBI Asked for Secret Patriot Act Searches*, HOUSTON CHRON., June 18, 2004, at A6 ("Last September, at a time when the section was drawing widespread criticism from librarians, booksellers and civil rights groups, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft said the power had never been used. Records obtained by the ACLU show that the FBI asked for permission to use the law a few weeks later.").

line. Revelation of warrantless wiretapping programs generated substantial oversight, though apparently the program continued with short-term congressional sanction. Advocacy organizations have in turn sought access to FISA court decisions approving the surveillance program using court rules disclosed pursuant to prior FOIA requests.

The disclosure of the text of OLC opinions authorizing abusive interrogation techniques in April 2004 focused the attention of, and gave leverage to, internal critics of the memoranda; the official withdrawal of the OLC torture opinion followed a week later. The prospect of cross-examination of Alberto Gonzales on the basis of the ACLU’s torture FOIA materials contributed to the incentives to issue a public replacement for the earlier torture memo on December 30, 2004. In March 2005, under congressional scrutiny, the Defense Department General Counsel rescinded the 2003 Working Group

219 See John Solomon, FBI Finds It Frequently Overstepped in Collecting Data, WASH. POST, June 14, 2007, at A1 (describing internal audit undertaken in response to Inspector General’s report, which in turn was triggered by FOIA disclosures, and proposed remedies).


222 See GOLDSMITH, supra note 83, at 156–62 (describing incentives to “rectify” an “egregious and now-public error,” “precipitated” by “public outcry”); Jeffrey Rosen, Conscience of a Conservative, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 9, 2007, § 6 (Magazine), at 40 (“Goldsmith . . . says he didn’t have the time or resources to create a replacement opinion immediately . . . . In April 2004, however, Goldsmith’s priorities were reversed when the Abu Ghraib scandal broke. . . . [I]n June [2004] . . . Yoo’s August 2002 opinion was leaked to the media. . . . A week after the leak of Yoo’s August 2002 memo, Goldsmith withdrew the opinion. Goldsmith made the decision himself, in consultation with [Patrick] Philbin and Deputy Attorney General James B. Comey, both of whom, Goldsmith says, agreed it was the right thing to do.”).

223 See Memorandum from Daniel Levin, Acting Assistant Att’y Gen., Off. of Legal Counsel, Dep’t of Justice to Deputy Att’y Gen., Dep’t of Justice (Dec. 30, 2004), http://www.usdoj.gov/olc/18usc23402340a2.htm (regarding legal standards applicable under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340–2340A); see also Daniel Klaidman et al., Palace Revolt, NEWSWEEK, Feb. 6, 2006, at 34, 40 (describing the “fierce behind-the-scenes bureaucratic fight” leading up to the December 2004 memo).

2. \textit{Transparency and the Dynamics of Legitimacy}

Beyond the impact of FOIA disclosures on specific GWOT abuses, the disclosures catalyzed more diffuse effects. The ability of the administration to engage in initiatives unconstrained by opposing norms of legality and human rights depended in the early years of GWOT both on secrecy and on a cycle of acquiescence. Amidst the surge of fear and patriotism in the aftermath of September 11, public approval and trust of the federal executive soared to levels unheard of for two generations. Congressional opposition and inquiry were muted, and judges regularly extended extraordinary deference to the executive. News media credited administration claims of necessity and lawfulness, and proved reluctant to report discordant accounts.\footnote{See Umansky, \textit{supra} note 12.} Administration spokesmen, in turn, pointed to these approving accounts of their actions as proof of their legitimacy.\footnote{For one particularly egregious example, see Charles Layton, \textit{Miller Brouhaha}, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Aug./Sept. 2003, at 30 (quoting reporter Bob Simon on the events of September 8, 2002, shortly before the mid-term elections, saying, “You leak a story to the New York Times . . . and the New York Times prints it, and then you go on the Sunday shows quoting the New York Times and corroborating your own information. You’ve got to hand it to them. That takes, as we say here in New York, chutzpah”).}

As a mutually reinforcing series of leaks, successful FOIA requests, and investigations began to reveal a picture of both overreaching and mendacity, the cycle altered. On one front, public confirmation of dubious tactics allowed critics both inside and outside of government to mobilize and coordinate. Where tightly compartmentalized concealment prevented internal critics from objecting to problematic policies, disclosure began to empower and energize them. Within the executive branch, public disclosures began to pierce the mutually

\footnote{See Kreimer, \textit{Strategy of Transparency}, supra note 19, at 1212 n.302.}
reinforcing groupthink that had discounted costs of extra-legal tactics to American “soft power,” and had presumed the necessity and effectiveness of those tactics. In Congress, revelation allowed critics to draw on the insights of skeptics within the government, and to gather expertise sufficient to dispute claims of legality and efficacy. In the media, disclosures of internal evidence allowed reports of abuses without stepping outside of the frame of respectful discourse.

As a matter of practical politics, the administration was required to expend political capital in defending controversial practices, from “black sites” to torture to unchecked surveillance, rather than simply hiding them. This—along with other military and political debacles—depleted the administration’s stock of raw political power to press forward with other less easily concealed initiatives.

More diffusely, disclosures impeaching the administration’s credibility and claims of lawfulness in one area generated skepticism and emboldened critics more broadly. Efforts to suppress criticism in turn generated further inquiries. Judges, lawmakers, and journalists react negatively to being deceived, and once hard evidence of deception and abuse emerged in some areas of the GWOT, they became less inclined to extend comity in others. As dissonant notes sounded in the chorus of support for GWOT initiatives, public perceptions began to change as well, empowering critical interventions.

229 Compare this to the refusal to allow Intelligence Committee members to consult their staff when investigating the NSA wiretapping program. See Bipartisan Call for Wireswapping Probe, CNN.COM, Dec. 21, 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/12/20/wiretaps/index.html.


231 Thus, the effort to retaliate against Joseph Wilson for his revelations in 2003 led to the appointment of special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, and the efforts to mislead Fitzgerald’s investigation led to the perjury prosecution of the Vice President’s chief of staff Scooter Libby in 2005 and conviction in 2006, along with the revelation of the Vice President’s role in the affair. For one overview of the proceedings, see Max Frankel, The Washington Back Channel, N.Y. Times Mar. 25, 2007 § 6 (Magazine), at 40.

232 See, e.g., supra notes 149–54 (discussing the skepticism of judges deciding FOIA disputes); see also Goldsmith, supra note 83, at 136 (characterizing the Hamdan decision as “informed by the atmospherics of executive extravagance”); id. at 133 (noting the importance of “political support, credibility and reputation” as “determinants of presidential power”).
by political actors.\footnote{Cf. Entman, supra note 44, at 107 (noting the importance of unison of message in dominating news frames); Scott L. Althaus & Young Mie Kim, Priming Effects in Complex Information Environments: Reassessing the Impact of News Discourse on Presidential Approval, 68 J. Pol. 960, 973 (2006) (describing the cumulative effect of repeated news coverage); Entman, supra note 230, at 216 (describing a “spiral” of opposition triggered when criticism reaches a “critical mass”).} As one set of commentators receptive to claims of anti-terrorist executive authority describe the dynamic, “revelation of the deception damages the president’s credibility, making it more difficult for him [to] achieve his next set of goals.”\footnote{Eric A. Posner & Adrian Vermeule, The Credible Executive 5 (Univ. of Chi. Law Sch. Pub. Law & Legal Theory Working Paper Series, Working Paper No. 139, 2006), available at http://ssrn.com/abstract=931501. Posner and Vermeule refer to credibility among the public, though in some ways credibility among news media, opinion leaders, and the courts has been impacted more heavily by FOIA disclosures.} Or as Abraham Lincoln, who made his extra-constitutional assertions of authority in public, is said to have put the matter, “If you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow-citizens, . . . you can never regain their respect and esteem. It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.”\footnote{Alexander K. McClure, “Abe” Lincoln’s Yarns and Stories 184 (1904).}

C. FOIA and the Question of Proportionality

A final set of critics acknowledges the possibility that the disclosures mandated by FOIA and facilitated by the rest of the ecology of transparency occasionally contribute to public accountability. These commentators express skepticism, however, that the current regime is actually well shaped to accomplish that task. Some critics maintain that FOIA far more often contributes to private rent-seeking than to public oversight\footnote{Disclosure (and associated mechanisms) do have a marked disadvantage when compared to adjudication and legislative command. As the “Total Information Awareness” experience indicates, when one sprig of evil withers under the glare of publicity, the way is open for the impulse to sprout elsewhere under a different shelter of secrecy. See Matt Kelley, Feds Sharpen Secret Tools for Data Mining, USA Today, July 20, 2006, at 5A. In some sense, a level of honesty on the part of an executive cannot be foregone. But of course, the more times that an executive seeks to evade public norms, the more it erodes the trust that maintains it in office.} and suggest that resources devoted to private requests are misdirected. Others accuse the system of an inability to match public benefits with public costs and advocate a more targeted

\footnote{See supra notes 6–8 (discussing Justice Scalia’s characterization of FOIA as the “Sistine Chapel of Cost Benefit Analysis Ignored”).}
set of institutions to provide “optimal” levels of disclosure. While these concerns have some substance, the experience of the GWOT suggests that virtues of the current system reside precisely in the characteristics that generate critique. The breadth of the FOIA regime gives it robustness, and its situation in a resilient ecology of transparency provides a failsafe mechanism adapted to the task of bringing the popular conscience to bear against tyranny and barbarism.

1. The Robustness of a Broad FOIA Regime

Notwithstanding the service of FOIA in disclosing GWOT abuses, these instances hardly predominate in the functioning of FOIA. Skeptics are clearly correct in their observation that self-interested businesses and inquisitive private parties rather than investigative reporters or civil society organizations file most FOIA requests. A FOIA regime that responded only to requests from representatives of the “public interest” on matters of public governance could conceivably be considerably less expensive and less intrusive.

Leaving aside the rather considerable hurdles to identifying who represents the “public interest”—and one person’s crank or “special interest” can be another’s publicly virtuous crusader—such a system would sacrifice considerable protection for transparency in the case of politically contested issues like GWOT. As we have noted earlier, the existence of an infrastructure of career civil servants processing FOIA requests is the sine qua non of an effectively functioning FOIA

---

237 See, e.g., Fenster, supra note 11, at 940–49; Adam M. Samaha, Government Secrets, Constitutional Law, and Platforms for Judicial Intervention, 53 UCLA L. REV. 909, 948 (2006) (criticizing the existing regime as lacking “a normative standard for judging when disclosure is appropriate” that is “calibrated to a standard of socially desirable openness or secrecy”); Cass R. Sunstein, Government Control of Information, 74 CAL. L. REV. 889, 890, 902–03 (1986) (“[A] struggle between the press and the government is unlikely to produce an acceptable ‘equilibrium.’”).

238 See, e.g., COALITION OF JOURNALISTS FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT, FREQUENT FILERS: BUSINESSES MAKE FOIA THEIR BUSINESS, July 3, 2006, http://www.cjog.net/documents/Who_Uses_FOIA.pdf (reporting that the media filed 6% of FOIA requests on a government-wide basis, and nonprofits filed 3%); Tapscott & Taylor, supra note 13 (reporting, based on a study of major department requests, that 40% of requests came from corporations, 25% from lawyers, 16% from unidentified individuals, 8% from nonprofits, and 5% from journalists). The phenomenon has persisted for a generation. See Wald, supra note 17, at 665 (observing that 1 in 20 FOIA requests were filed by journalists or scholars, and 4 in 5 by businesses or their lawyers).

239 Regulations issued in response to the 1996 FOIA amendments identify certain filers as entitled to public interest fee waivers, and allow particular public interest requests expedited processing. See supra notes 34–35 and 65–67. But skeptics would presumably not only fast-track public interest requests, but also eliminate private requests.
system. At a mundane level, the capital expenditures establishing the bureaucracy to process “private” FOIA requests finance the same bureaucracy that processes “public” ones. Within the government, the broad availability of FOIA sets a tone of disclosure as a standard operating procedure in responding to proper requests. Requests are not by definition politically charged and confrontational; they are part of the way in which civil servants normally do business. Equally important, a continued flow of FOIA requests into the courts, financed by private litigation, establishes a case law that is available to “public interest” requesters.

At a structural level, a FOIA system that provides broad benefits to “special interests” establishes a level of robustness against political attack. Commentators have noted that transparency regimes are often established in the wake of particular scandals, but prove stable only where a sufficient constituency benefits from the regime to sustain it in the face of predictable claims of overreaching or costliness. The broader the constituencies that benefit from a regime of transparency, the more likely that regime is to prove sustainable; where the ACLU and the Associated Press can stand with the Business Roundtable, they are more likely to resist predictable pressures to curtail FOIA. Given plausible models of political economy, it seems that Congress is most likely to establish or expand FOIA entitlements where its interests diverge from those of the executive. The broader the scope of FOIA, the more such divergences are likely to appear. If the goal is not to calibrate the transparency regime precisely to the “public interest,” but to provide a failsafe against egregious abuses by a possible regime weakly constrained by the political forces of the moment, a broad inclusion of “private” requesters is not a FOIA bug but a feature.


The converse claim, namely that transparency is likely to be provided by government agents as a means of establishing their trustworthiness and inducing principals to grant them broader authority and resources, John Ferejohn, Accountability and Authority: Toward a Theory of Political Accountability, in DEMOCRACY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND REPRESENTATION 131, 132–33, 137–38 (Adam Przeworski et al. eds., 1999), seems less than fully persuasive in this setting.
2. FOIA and Optimality

a. Transparency and Pathology

Critics are of course correct that the structures of transparency examined here are not precisely calibrated to generating optimal decisions by federal officials. Some requests are denied or delayed past the time that they could allow the public to provide input into decisionmaking. Others are granted in a fashion that could allow small public benefit, but impose substantial costs on decisionmakers. But optimizing individual disclosure decisions is not the only—or the most important—goal a system of transparency serves. Just as the “checking value” in First Amendment theory focuses on keeping public opinion ready to check the worst excesses of government, transparency structures can serve not only to achieve the best of which government is capable, but also to avoid the worst.

The question should not be whether the system balances each tradeoff between “transparency” and “efficiency” optimally at the margin. Rather, the issue is whether at a reasonable cost, the system provides both checks against tyrannical or barbaric decisions and hedges against catastrophic government failures in the case of emergency. It is particularly where a sense of shame grounded on the actor’s own ideals (or at least those the actor attributes to the electorate) would be powerfully triggered that the possibility of disclosure itself is most important.

The pathologies of GWOT are not rooted in a secret effort to maximize the interests of one pressure group at the expense of the polity, but rather in an unwillingness to avow the moral costs of the means adopted to further what is allegedly a consensus goal. There are few interest groups that lobby actively for torture, domestic spying, and star chamber inquisitions for their own sakes. Rather, much post-September 11 secrecy was either an effort to further electoral chances of the incumbent administration by hiding the moral costs of the policies adopted, or was more generally part of a strategic pro-

---


gram to aggrandize the unrestricted authority of the national executive. In either case, the appropriate role for transparency mechanisms is not fulfilled by a static account of marginal cost-benefit optimization.

A judge asked to balance the costs and benefits of disclosing allegedly problematic GWOT initiatives would be all too likely to succumb to the enthusiasms that generated the initiatives themselves, along with the siren song of deference to “representative institutions” endowed with both legitimacy and the mystique of knowledge of hidden threats. The messier ecology of transparency, which relies on a loosely joined chain of leakers, investigators, and advocates, can be more robust in crises of fear and outrage.

b. Sunsets, Secrecy, and States of Exception

Does the ecology of transparency, of which FOIA is a part, meet this goal of limiting excesses of barbarism or tyranny at reasonable cost? In one view, the GWOT cases are studies in failure. Transparency mechanisms have generally not functioned well to provide occasions for public reflection at the inception of problematic antiterrorist policies. The secrecy in which initiatives were shrouded, combined with resistance to FOIA requests, the demands of prerequisite knowledge, the slow pace of FOIA processing and litigation, and the tendency of investigations and leaks to occur only after the fact, precluded meaningful ex ante impact. With a few exceptions, transparency mechanisms are reactive.

Yet to be reactive is not to be without effect, and the ecology of transparency has proved to be roughly tailored to the function of allowing the possibility of extra-legal constitutional action to avoid catastrophic failure, while providing temporal boundaries to those exercises of power. One recurring suggestion in dealing with the moral and constitutional challenges of the aftermath of September 11 has been a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the model of the European “state of exception,” which would allow otherwise illegal interventions by the executive for the duration of an emergency, but retain the underlying force of the legal regime for normal times.\footnote{See, e.g., Bruce Ackerman, \textit{The Emergency Constitution}, 113 YALE L.J. 1029, 1040 (2004); Oren Gross, \textit{Chaos and Rules: Should Responses to Violent Crises Always Be Constitutional?}, 112 YALE L.J. 1011, 1065 (2003) (describing emergency legislation suspending usual rules). The suggestions are not new. See, e.g., CLINTON L. ROSSITER, \textit{CONSTITUTIONAL}}
cern that the perpetual emergency of a “long war” may turn a temporary expedient into a permanent policy. Lincoln’s initial extralegal tactics were time-limited by the re-convening of Congress, and ultimately by the rule of Ex parte Milligan that militarized expedients could be adopted only where civil governance was unavailable. But the expansion of modern executive claims of unilateral prerogative authority makes these constraints less reliable. Particularly in a period of unified government, there seems little warrant to assume that extra-legal emergency power once invoked will be remitted in a timely fashion.

One plausible reading of the ecology of transparency in the aftermath of September 11 is that the system, proceeding from leaks to authentication to publicity to resistance, is more than simply a “contest” or “domesticated civil disobedience” justified in Burkean terms. It functions as a time-limited state of exception, with retrospective review. Executive officials may engage in constitutionally dubious action without contemporaneous check, because the action takes place in secret. But the ecology of transparency renders the period of secrecy self-limiting. Once disclosed, the existence of the veiled initiatives provides the basis for both critique and further releases of information.

The duration of secrecy will not be fixed, but is likely to respond to both the scope of the infringement and its justification. The

---

245 Ex parte Milligan, 71 U.S. (4 Wall.) 2, 127 (1866); Daniel Farber, Lincoln’s Constitution 194 (2003).
246 Alexander M. Bickel, The Morality of Consent 79–85 (1975); Stewart, supra note 5, at 636.
247 Cf. Gross, supra note 244, at 1099 (advocating a model in which “public officials . . . act outside the legal order” and “assume the risks involved in acting extralegally”).
rough magnitude of the September 11 roundups became apparent in a few months, and the use of torture began to reveal itself within two years; on the other hand, warrantless NSA wiretaps were disclosed only after a period of four years.\textsuperscript{249} The more immediate and broader the harm to the targets, the more likely a target is to effectively disclose her treatment. The more normatively dubious the action, the more likely some government actor is to view the secrecy as inappropriate, and to leak it to opponents inside or outside of government. Conversely, the more pressing and persuasive the justification for the breach of law, the more likely those with knowledge are to maintain secrecy. As a first approximation, the length of the period of secrecy will be correlated with the net justifiability of the exceptional action.

The cumulative judgment regarding net justifiability will determine the effectiveness of disclosure. A single outlying objector is less likely to make it through the screen of demands for authentication by media initially sympathetic to government actors than a continued series of objectors. But as others corroborate the leak, its penetrating power increases. Leaks provide the basis for FOIA requests, and FOIA requests in turn provide an occasion for courts to address the justifiability of continued secrecy. As the issues become matters of public contention, FOIA requests can achieve expedited processing.

The probability of effective disclosure will correlate inversely with the state of faith in the legitimacy of government action. Initial disclosures will be greeted with skepticism by the mechanisms of authentication in the media and the courts. If and as the justifiability of prior government actions becomes suspect, however, the screens will become more porous, and the time frame of effective secrecy will shrink. So too, the willingness of skeptics in the media or NGO communities to take the time to accumulate and piece together information will increase with the level of outrage associated with the particular practice.

\textsuperscript{249} See supra notes 37–41 and accompanying text (discussing the length of FOIA litigation). For a benchmark of the speed of whistleblowing in a business context, see Alexander Dyck et al., \textit{Who Blows the Whistle on Corporate Fraud?} 18–19 (Jan. 2007) (unpublished manuscript, available at http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/CBL/whistle.pdf), which describes a “web of monitors” in securities fraud cases that disclose fraud: “financial analysts and short sellers” (who reveal fraud in “a median duration of 9.1 months”), “external equity holders” (15.9 months), “suppliers, clients and competitors” (13.3 months), “[n]on financial market regulators” (13.3 months), “auditors” (14.7 months), “the media (21.0 months), the SEC (21.2 months), and professional service firms like plaintiff lawyers (31.4 months),” and “employee whistleblowers (20.9 months)."
From the point of view of an executive—or at least an executive that thinks ahead—this ecology imposes rough budget constraints on extralegal action. The larger the scope of initial extralegal action, the more individuals who will be privy to it, and the more quickly it will be disclosed. Conversely, the less justified an intervention appears, the harder it will be to invoke the state of exception in subsequent iterations, as court and media become more skeptical of the administration and open to the claims of critics. The effect of disclosure must be measured not only against the likelihood of reelection, but also against the stock of legitimacy. The willingness of other actors in the system to defer to the executive will be a function of the degree to which the executive is regarded as both legitimate and authoritative.

Whether the executive thinks ahead or not, review of the actions will take place not in the heat of the moment, but in retrospect, when the initial enthusiasm for force is likely to have waned. On one hand, this means that the system of transparency cannot prevent violations of constitutional norms. On the other hand, it also means that review of legally dubious initiatives will not be infected with the initial hysteria that gives rise to the violations themselves. Like the prior restraint doctrine, a delayed review allows valuation of alleged breaches of legality to take place in the somewhat more sober and concretely grounded light of history (or at least the instant history embedded in memoirs).

Time-shifted review has the virtue, as well, of deferring the policy costs associated with disclosure. Given the continued evolution of surveillance technology, a two-year delay in revelation of a technique is in most cases time enough for better techniques to develop; conversely, a surveillance technique effective enough to result in interdictions is likely to be discovered by the targets, as they are interdicted, and to become less pressing. In a related context, commentators have argued,

---

250 *Cf. Dan Reiter & Allan C. Stam, Democracies at War 164 (2002)* (describing on the basis of cross-national studies a predictable “dissipation” of consent for war in democracies); *id. at 170–71* (“Beyond eighteen months of fighting, democratic initiators become less and less willing to continue to fight, the probability dropping significantly [from 46% in the second year] to 29 percent in the fourth year [.30 at 40 months] and 22 percent by the fifth year [.22 at 55 mo.] of a war.”).


[T]ransparency operates to reduce principal-agent slack between organized interests and lawmakers more than it reduces slack between voters and their elected representatives. In principle, the solution would be to keep organized interests in the dark about legislative behavior while fully revealing it to voters. . . . [I]t may be possible, in some cases, to deprive transfer-seeking organized interests of the information while the deals are being struck and interest group influence is most problematic, while at the same time ensuring that voters have access to information before they cast their ballots.252

By analogy, a retrospective disclosure regime allows voters to discipline their “representatives,” while preventing terrorists from gaming control measures.

IV. CONCLUSION

The ecology of transparency will not prevent abuse. Those who would lobby for humanity or civil liberties will often be in no position to challenge barbaric policies before they take effect. Leaks may be strategic or premature, or they may be drowned out by chaff. News media, Congress, or the courts may be co-opted or intimidated. Executive actors may not worry about the future, may have high discount rates, or may seek to game the system by front-loading violations and embedding them in areas resistant to possible disclosure.253

Ultimately, the ecology of transparency will do no more and no less than require our constitutional conscience as a nation to finally confront the actions of our government. The public may be persuaded to define constitutional deviancy down; once violations of constitutional norms are disclosed, there is danger that the abuses rather than the norms they flout will be regarded as the baseline of acceptability. But the hope must be that, in the words of one sponsor of the original Freedom of Information Act who himself experienced the impact of cumulative disclosures, “While excesses and imbalances will inevitably exist for a time, fortunately they tend not to last. Ulti-

252 Elizabeth Garrett & Adrian Vermeule, Transparency in the Budget Process 15 (Univ. of S. Cal. Ctr. in Law, Econ. & Org., Research Paper No. CO6-2, 2006), available at http://ssrn.com/abstract=877951; cf. Fenster, supra note 11, at 942 (“Although the cost of information disclosure may outweigh its benefits at one moment—especially before the government’s decisional process or a particular government action is complete—the benefits of disclosure may outweigh the costs at a later moment.”).

253 See Hersh, supra note 24, at 54 (recounting discussion by Iran-Contra veterans within the administration which concluded that “even though the program was eventually exposed, it had been possible to execute it without telling Congress” and that disclosure could be delayed by limiting the role of the CIA and the uniformed military and establishing a program “run out of the Vice-President’s office”).
mately truth prevails. The American people seem to have inner gyroscopes that keep them centered and balanced.\textsuperscript{254}