



March 12, 2019

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Tink Cooper  
Acting Chief, FOI/PA Branch,  
Civil Rights Division  
U.S. Department of Justice  
BICN Bldg., Room 3234  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20530  
[CRT.FOIArequests@usdoj.gov](mailto:CRT.FOIArequests@usdoj.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Freedom of Information Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and your agency's implementing regulations, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

American Oversight seeks the following records in an effort to shed light on the communications of a high-ranking government official in your agency with external individuals and entities. The requested records have the potential to shed light on the priorities of a high-ranking agency official and the external entities and individuals who exert influence on agency actions and policies.

**Requested Records**

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

All email communications between 1) John Gore (currently Principal Deputy Attorney General, formerly Acting Assistant Attorney General and Deputy Assistant Attorney General), and 2) any email addresses ending in .com/.net/.org/.edu/.mail.

American Oversight seeks all records from January 20, 2017, to the date of the search.

In an effort to accommodate the Department of Justice and reduce the number of potentially responsive records, American Oversight agrees that the search for responsive email communications may be limited to emails sent by Mr. Gore. Despite this search accommodation, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms "record," "document," and



“information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>1</sup> **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; American Oversight has a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**<sup>2</sup>

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered your agency’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists

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<sup>1</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work-related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

<sup>3</sup> Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

that your agency use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”<sup>4</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”<sup>6</sup> Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”<sup>7</sup>

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.<sup>8</sup> Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

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

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

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's implementing regulations, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to public understanding of those operations. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of activities of the government. The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the operations of the federal government, including how a high-ranking agency official communicates with external individuals and entities. As described in detail above, the records requested will show whether, and to what extent, external individuals and entities influence the official actions and policy decisions of a high-ranking official.

As the head of the entire Civil Rights Division (CRT), former Acting Assistant Attorney General Gore held sway over many issues of importance to the public. Civil rights groups and other members of the public have expressed concern over civil rights enforcement policies at the Department of Justice (DOJ) generally under Mr. Gore, as well as having criticized specific actions across an array of different subject areas.<sup>9</sup> As reporting in *The New York Times* has illustrated, the CRT, under Mr. Gore, broadly shifted its policy and enforcement focus in a manner not limited to any specific subject area.<sup>10</sup> The division has reportedly shifted its priorities toward protecting large new classes of people of entities—including people of faith, police officers, local government

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<sup>9</sup> Katie Benner, *Trump's Justice Department Redefines Whose Civil Rights to Protect*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/us/politics/civil-rights-justice-department.html>; Carrie Johnson, *Justice Department Signals Change in Approach to Civil Rights Cases*, NPR (Jan. 25, 2017, 4:27 PM), <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/25/511655797/justice-department-signals-change-in-approach-to-civil-rights-cases>; Aaron Sankin, *DOJ's Civil Rights Workers Have Lost Faith in Leaders' Integrity*, REVEAL (Apr. 3, 2018), <https://www.revealnews.org/blog/dojs-civil-rights-workers-have-lost-faith-in-leaders-integrity/> (detailing DOJ civil rights staff concerns with overall approach of leadership to civil rights).

<sup>10</sup> See Benner, *id* (noting “the focus has shifted to people of faith, police officers and local government officials who maintain they have been trampled by the federal government. The department has supported state voting laws that could wind up removing thousands of people from voter rolls. And it has pulled back on robust oversight of police departments found to have violated the rights of citizens in their jurisdictions.”)

officials, and states with restrictive voting laws—and away from the protection of groups the division has traditionally sought to protect—including African-Americans, gays, lesbians, transgender people, immigrants, and other minorities.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Mr. Gore has been involved in myriad controversial issues concerning civil rights enforcement, including protection of transgender persons from hate crimes, inclusion of a citizenship question on the census, civil rights enforcement over police departments, the exclusion of LGBT categories from the census, a shift in DOJ’s policies regarding affirmative action, and a host of other issues.<sup>12</sup> The public deserves to know how external entities and individuals have influenced the division’s policies and shifting focus, and the public deserves to see which external entities the CRT’s leader has prioritized in his official email communications. Mr. Gore’s communications with external entities and individuals are plainly identifiable government operations. The disclosure of this information will also reveal the extent of influence external groups have over federal government activities. And, as described below, American Oversight has the intention and ability to disseminate the records it received to a broad audience.

This request is primarily and fundamentally not for commercial purposes, but rather the primary interest is in public disclosure of responsive records. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight’s financial interest. American Oversight’s mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>13</sup> American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> Cristian Farias, *Baltimore’s Lonely Fight for Police Reform*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Feb. 20, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/147113/baltimores-lonely-fight-police-reform>; Charlie Savage, *Justice Dept. to Take On Affirmative Action in College Admissions*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/us/politics/trump-affirmative-action-universities.html>; Josh Gerstein, *Trump Administration Has ‘Grave Concerns’ About Baltimore Police-Abuse Settlement*, POLITICO (Apr. 6, 2017, 4:01 PM), <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/trump-baltimore-police-abuse-settlement-236955>; David Crary, *Transgender Teen’s Murder Case Raises Question, Do LGBT Hate Crime Laws Work?*, DES MOINES REGISTER (Sept. 29, 2017, 11:40 AM), <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/crime-and-courts/2017/09/29/transgender-teens-murder-case-raises-question-do-lgbt-hate-crime-laws-work/716701001/>; *Emails Prove DOJ Halted LGBTQ Inclusion in the Census, Task Force Responds*, WINDY CITY TIMES (Mar. 8, 2018), <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/Emails-prove-DOJ-halted-LGBTQ-inclusion-in-census-Task-Force-responds/62179.html>.

<sup>13</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 12,200 page likes on Facebook and 54,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Mar. 11, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Mar. 11, 2019).

receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,<sup>14</sup> American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.<sup>15</sup> As another example, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Conclusion**

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Dan McGrath at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or (202) 897-4213. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,



Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight

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<sup>14</sup> *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>15</sup> *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

<sup>16</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.