



May 2, 2019

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

U.S. Department of State
Office of Information Programs and Services
A/GIS/IPS/RL
SA-2, Suite 8100
Washington, DC 20522-0208
FOIArequest@state.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 the implementing regulations of the Department of State (State), 22 C.F.R. Part 171, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The U.S. State Department approved the leases of at least seven foreign governments for units in New York's Trump World Tower in 2017, according to press reporting.¹ These transactions reflect potential violations of the Emoluments Clause, which generally prohibits U.S. officials from receiving foreign gifts or payments absent the consent of Congress. These transactions at Trump World Tower have reportedly not been approved by Congress.²

American Oversight seeks records to shed light on whether and to what extent foreign governments are continuing to rent, lease, purchase, or otherwise use units at the Trump World Tower in New York City.

Requested Records

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

- 1) All diplomatic notes, letters, or other correspondence submitted by foreign missions to State's Office of Foreign Missions regarding any unit or units in any properties owned or operated by the Trump Organization (or by any of its affiliates, subsidiaries, or other related entities), pursuant to the requirement that foreign missions notify the Office

¹ Julia Harte, *Exclusive: Foreign Government Leases at Trump World Tower Stir More Emoluments Concerns*, REUTERS (May 2, 2019, 6:09 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-emoluments-exclusive-idUSKCN1S80PP>.

² *Id.*



before “any acquisition, lease, change in use, sale, or other disposition, by or on behalf of the foreign mission, of real property which is located in the United States.”³

- 2) All diplomatic notes, letters, or other correspondence from State’s Office of Foreign Missions to any foreign missions indicating approval, disapproval, or any other disposition of a request for foreign diplomats or missions to lease, purchase, rent, sell, or otherwise make any change in use of any unit or units in any properties owned or operated by the Trump Organization (or by any of its affiliates, subsidiaries, or other related entities).⁴
- 3) All diplomatic notes, letters, or other correspondence from State’s Office of Foreign Missions to the Trump Organization (and/or any of its affiliates, subsidiaries, or other related entities) indicating approval, disapproval, or any other disposition of a request for foreign diplomats or missions to lease, purchase, rent, sell, or otherwise make any change in use of any unit or units in any properties owned or operated by the Trump Organization (or by any of its affiliates, subsidiaries, or other related entities).⁵

American Oversight believes State is best positioned to determine where records responsive to this request may exist. However, American Oversight requests that State search, *at a minimum*, the Office of Foreign Missions.

Please provide all responsive records from January 20, 2017, through the date of the search.

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

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or

³ *Purchase or Lease of Foreign Mission Property*, U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, <https://www.state.gov/ofm/property/purchase/index.htm>.

⁴ Please note that American Oversight submitted a request to State on March 5, 2019, seeking records overlapping in part to those sought in item 2 and 3 of this request. To the extent records responsive to items 2 or 3 of this request have already been released to American Oversight in response to its March 5, 2019 FOIA request, American Oversight does not seek additional copies of those records and there is no need to reprocess them for release.

⁵ See note 4, *supra*.

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 are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁶ **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.**⁷

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 State’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.**⁸ 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 State’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that State use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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)).

⁸ 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>.

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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.’”¹²

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.¹³ 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, State is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

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

⁹ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

¹⁰ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

¹¹ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphases in original).

¹² *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)).

¹³ *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 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. First, the subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.¹⁴ Second, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁵

Under the public interest requirement, FOIA requesters must satisfy four factors.¹⁶ American Oversight has met these four factors for the reasons set forth below. The subject matter of the requested records specifically relates to the operations or activities of the government, because it concerns the Office of Foreign Missions' statutory obligation to manage all acquisitions of U.S. properties (including those owned by the Trump Organization or related entities) by foreign missions for consistency with national security interests and applicable law.¹⁷ The public has a significant interest in whether and to what extent the president has violated the Constitution—and in particular the foreign emoluments clause—by refusing to divest from his financial holdings since taking office.¹⁸ And where at least one federal agency has ignored its obligations to consider that

¹⁴ 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(1).

¹⁵ 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(2).

¹⁶ *D.C. Technical Assistance Org. Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Hous. and Urban Dev. (D.C. Technical Assistance)*, 85 F.Supp.2d 46, 48–49 (D.D.C. 2000) (requested documents will contribute to “greater understanding of government activities”).

¹⁷ See 22 U.S.C. § 4301 *et seq.*; U.S. Dep't of State, *Diplomatic Property Program*, <https://www.state.gov/ofm/property/> (last visited Mar. 4, 2019).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Harte, *supra* note 1; Harry Jaffe, *Meet the Man Curbing Trump's Power Without Anyone Noticing*, POLITICO MAGAZINE, Feb. 23, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/02/23/karl-racine-profile-attorney-general-emoluments-lawsuit-trump-2020-225200>; Steve Benen, *Trump Just Can't Shake His Emoluments Case Headache*, MSNBC (Nov. 5, 2018, 10:00 AM), <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trump-just-cant-shake-his-emoluments-case-headache>; Chris Cillizza, *A Court Case You've Probably Never Heard of Could Become a Major Problem for President Trump*, CNN (July 27, 2018, 3:20 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/27/politics/emoluments-trump-trump-hotel/index.html>; Ann E. Marimow et al., *Federal Judge Allows Emoluments Case Against Trump to Proceed*, WASH. POST, July 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal-judge-allows-emoluments-case-against-trump-to-proceed/2018/07/25/c8070206-8fa4-11e8-8322-b5482bf5e0f5_story.html?utm_term=.a35d73408950; Andy Sullivan *et al.*, *Trump Says He Won't*

question,¹⁹ records related to State's statutory obligation to assess the legality of foreign acquisitions of Trump properties have the potential to shed light on whether State has assessed this important issue and would contribute significantly to public understanding of the matter.

Increasing the likelihood that disclosure of these records will contribute significantly to public understanding, American Oversight's objective is to reveal to the public at large any information it receives related to this FOIA request. American Oversight has the capacity to disseminate this information as it posts all records to its public websites and publishes analyses of its records. In the past, the organization has successfully informed the public of specific government activities and operations. As an example, American Oversight obtained Education Secretary DeVos's calendar entries, which revealed Secretary DeVos's frequent absences from office and the influence of charter schools and for-profit colleges on the Education Department.²⁰ The *New York Times* and CNN relied on American Oversight's analyses to report on Secretary DeVos's priorities within the Department of Education.²¹

Disclosure will contribute to a greater understanding on the part of the public at large about whether the State Department is fulfilling its legal obligations to ensure all foreign missions' domestic property acquisitions comply with applicable law. Disclosure will "significantly" contribute to the public's understanding of government activities or operations related to State's determinations concerning foreign lease, purchases, and sales of Trump Organization properties. The subject of this request is a matter of public interest, and the public's understanding of the government's activities would be enhanced through American Oversight's analysis and publication of these records.

American Oversight's request is also primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.²² 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

Divest from His Business While President, REUTERS (Jan. 11, 2017, 11:33 AM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-finance-idUSKBN14V211>.

¹⁹ See John Bowden, *Inspector General: GSA Ignored Constitution by Letting Trump Lease Old Post Office for DC Hotel*, THE HILL (Jan. 16, 2019, 3:42 PM), <https://thehill.com/regulation/administration/425699-inspector-general-gsa-ignored-constitution-by-letting-trump-lease>.

²⁰ See *Influence & Access at the Department of Education*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT (Oct. 27, 2017), <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/influence-access-at-the-department-of-education>; *Unexcused Absences: DeVos Calendars Show Frequent Days Off*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT (Oct. 27, 2017), <https://www.americanoversight.org/unexcused-absences-devos>.

²¹ Eric Lipton, *Betsy DeVos's School Schedule Shows Focus on Religious and Nontraditional Schools*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/us/politics/betsy-devos-work-schedule-education.html>; Gregory Wallace et. al., *What Betsy DeVos's Schedule Tells Us About Her Agenda*, CNN (Oct. 29, 2017, 12:22 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/28/politics/devos-schedules-education/index.html>.

²² 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(2)(i)-(iii).

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 our public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.²³ American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney, American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website²⁴ and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²⁵ As an additional 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.²⁶

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 State 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 Katherine Anthony at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.897.3918. Also, if American Oversight's

²³ 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 May 1, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited May 1, 2019).

²⁴ *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco's Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

²⁵ *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>.

²⁶ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.

request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'MS', is positioned above the typed name.

Melanie Sloan
Senior Advisor
American Oversight