



July 23, 2020

**VIA EMAIL**

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

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officers:

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

Public reporting suggests President Trump is escalating efforts to purge independent political appointees in the DOD and is appointing loyalists and far-right activists in their places.<sup>1</sup> The appointment of Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen) to the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict is reportedly one example of the president's efforts.<sup>2</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with potential to shed light on Mr. Cohen-Watnick (Mr. Cohen)'s activities in light of his appointment.

**Requested Records**

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

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Detsch & Robbie Gramer, *Trump Taps Point Man to Remove Pentagon Officials Seen as Disloyal*, Foreign Policy (May 6, 2020, 12:53 PM),

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/06/trump-pence-pentagon-point-man-disloyal/>.

<sup>2</sup> Missy Ryan, et al., *White House Intensifies Effort to Install Pentagon Personnel Seen as Loyal to Trump*, Wash. Post (June 25, 2020, 11:16 PM),

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/white-house-intensifies-effort-to-install-pentagon-personnel-seen-as-loyal-to-trump/2020/06/25/1bfeee3a-9f86-11ea-9d96-c3f7c755fd6e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/white-house-intensifies-effort-to-install-pentagon-personnel-seen-as-loyal-to-trump/2020/06/25/1bfeee3a-9f86-11ea-9d96-c3f7c755fd6e_story.html).



- 1) All email communications (including emails, complete email chains, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) sent by Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen), Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict, to any email address ending in .com, .net, .org, .mail, .edu.

In an effort to accommodate the DOD and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by Ezra Cohen-Watnick. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both Ezra Watkins-Cohen's response to an email from a .com email and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

This request includes all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto.

Please provide all responsive records from the date Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen) entered on duty at the Pentagon through the date the search is conducted

- 2) All email communications (including emails, complete email chains, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) between Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen), Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict, and:
  - a. Former ODNI Senior Advisor and NSC official Kash Patel
  - b. Stephen Miller (including but not limited to the email address [Stephen.Miller@who.eop.gov](mailto:Stephen.Miller@who.eop.gov))
  - c. Rep. Devin Nunes
  - d. Jilian Plank (including but not limited to the email address [jilian.plank@mail.house.gov](mailto:jilian.plank@mail.house.gov))
  - e. Derek Harvey (including but not limited to the email address [derek.harvey@mail.house.gov](mailto:derek.harvey@mail.house.gov))
  - f. Jennifer Morrow (including but not limited to the email address [Jennifer.morrow@mail.house.gov](mailto:Jennifer.morrow@mail.house.gov))
  - g. Jack Langer (including but not limited to the email address [jack.langer@mail.house.gov](mailto:jack.langer@mail.house.gov))
  - h. Ian Foley (including but not limited to the email address [ian.foley@mail.house.gov](mailto:ian.foley@mail.house.gov))
  - i. Anyone else communicating on behalf of Rep. Devin Nunes, including on both his personal staff and his staff for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI), and staff for his campaign

This request includes all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in the responsive correspondence and any attachments thereto.

Please provide all responsive records from the date Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen) entered on duty at the Pentagon through the date the search is conducted.

- 3) All calendars or calendar entries for Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen) including any calendars maintained on behalf of Ezra Cohen-Watnick (Ezra Cohen), from the date he entered on duty at the Pentagon to the date the search is conducted.

American Oversight requests that the calendars be produced in a format that includes all invitees, any notes, and all attachments. Please do not limit your search to Outlook calendars; we request the production of any calendar—paper or electronic, whether on government-issued or personal devices—used to track or coordinate how Mr. Cohen-Watnick allocates his time on agency business.

The search would include any calendars associated with his individual email account, as well as any official calendars maintained for him, including by his administrative assistant or scheduler.

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's 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 a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. 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 operations or activities of the government.”<sup>3</sup> The public has a significant interest in understanding whether and to what extent external individuals or entities communicate with or potentially influence agency officials regarding policy around counternarcotics and global threats, as well as DOD's other activities. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including understanding which actors play a role in the handling of counter-narcotics and global threats. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public's understanding of the government's activities would be enhanced through American Oversight's analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>4</sup> As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the

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<sup>3</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>4</sup> *See id.*

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>5</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>6</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records demonstrated regarding the Department's process for issuing such waivers;<sup>7</sup> posting records received as part of American Oversight's "Audit the Wall" project to gather and analyze information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;<sup>8</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>9</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government's efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>10</sup> and posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice's decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and

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<sup>5</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,500 page likes on Facebook and 104,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited July 1, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 1, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>7</sup> *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco's Recusal*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *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>8</sup> *See generally Audit the Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *see, e.g., Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>9</sup> *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.'s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

<sup>10</sup> *Investigating the Trump Administration's Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President's political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have 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 for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>12</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

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<sup>11</sup> *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

<sup>12</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).

even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>13</sup>

- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>14</sup> and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.
- 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 a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

## Conclusion

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or

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<sup>13</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).

<sup>14</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>.

duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF 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.

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, 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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight