



July 10, 2020

VIA ONLINE PORTAL, EMAIL, AND FOIA ONLINE

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Re: Expedited Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), 28 C.F.R. Part 16, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On June 20, 2020, President Trump officially removed Geoffrey Berman from his position as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York (SDNY).¹ This came after Attorney

¹ Alan Feuer, et al., *Trump Fires Attorney in New York Who Investigated His Inner Circle*, N.Y. Times (June 20, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/20/nyregion/trump-geoffrey-berman-fired-sdny.html>.



General William Barr announced Mr. Berman’s resignation and Mr. Berman’s subsequent statement that he had not agreed to resign from his post.² Mr. Berman’s office has been involved in investigating a number of the President’s close associates, including Michael Cohen and Rudolph Giuliani³—raising questions about the motivation for the removal.⁴

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on whether and to what extent Mr. Berman was removed for political or personal reasons.

Requested Records

American Oversight seeks expedited review of this request for the reasons identified below and requests that DOJ produce the following records as soon as practicable, and at least within twenty business days:

All records reflecting communications (including emails, email attachments, text messages, messages on messaging platforms (such as Slack, GChat or Google Hangouts, Lync, Skype, Jabber, or WhatsApp), telephone call logs, calendar invitations, calendar entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, talking points, any handwritten or electronic notes taken during any oral communications, summaries of any oral communications, final guidance, directives, instructions or other materials) between (i) any of the specified SDNY officials listed below, and (ii) any of the DOJ officials listed thereafter, regarding any investigation or case involving: Rudolph Giuliani; Lev Parnas; Igor Fruman; Deutsche Bank; Michael Cohen; the 2017 Presidential Inaugural Committee; any individuals associated with the Trump Organization, including but not limited to Alan Weisselberg; former Rep. Chris Collins; Halkbank; or President Trump’s tax returns.

SDNY Officials

- i. Geoffrey Berman, former U.S. Attorney for SDNY
- ii. Audrey Strauss, former Deputy U.S. Attorney for SDNY (now Acting U.S. Attorney for SDNY)
- iii. Craig Stewart, former Chief Counsel to the U.S. Attorney for SDNY (now Chief Counsel to the Acting U.S. Attorney for SDNY)
- iv. Ilan Graff, former Counsel to the U.S. Attorney for SDNY (now Counsel to the Acting U.S. Attorney for SDNY)
- v. Laura Grossfield Birger, Chief of the Criminal Division for SDNY

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ See, e.g., Quinta Jurecic & Benjamin Wittes, *Three Plausible—And Troubling—Reasons Why Barr Tried to Force Berman Out*, The Atlantic (June 22, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/question-berman-saga-why/613345/>.

- vi. Anyone with responsibility or with prior responsibility for the above-listed investigations

DOJ Officials

- i. Bill Barr, Attorney General, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler
- ii. Anyone serving as Chief of Staff for the Attorney General, including in an acting capacity
- iii. Anyone serving as Counselor to the Attorney General, including in an acting capacity
- iv. Anyone serving as White House Liaison, including in an acting capacity
- v. Anyone serving in the position of Deputy Attorney General, including in an acting capacity
- vi. Anyone serving as Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General, including in an acting capacity
- vii. Anyone serving as Chief of Staff to the Deputy Attorney General, including in an acting capacity
- viii. Brian Benczkowski, Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division, including anyone communicating on his behalf
- ix. Anyone serving as Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division, including in an acting capacity
- x. Anyone serving as Chief of Staff to the Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division, including in an acting capacity

Please provide all responsive records from February 1, 2019, through June 30, 2020.

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."⁵ The public has a significant interest in the reasons behind Mr. Berman's firing. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including the potential politicization of the

⁵ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

Department of Justice and U.S. Attorneys' Offices under President Trump.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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;¹⁰ 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;¹¹ posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing &

⁶ See Jurecic & Wittes, *supra* note 4.

⁷ See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁸ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 104,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited July 9, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 9, 2020).

⁹ News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

¹⁰ *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>.

¹¹ 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>.

Urban Development and related analysis;¹² posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;¹³ 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 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.¹⁴

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Application for Expedited Processing

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(1) and 28 C.F.R. § 16.5(e)(1)(ii), American Oversight requests that your agency expedite the processing of this request.

I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that the information requested is urgently needed in order to inform the public concerning actual or alleged government activity. There is significant public interest in Mr. Berman’s removal from his position. The lack of clarity on why he was fired, in addition to the events leading up to the firing itself, have prompted concern regarding the Trump administration’s motivations for firing Mr. Berman.¹⁵ There has also been a public outcry against the move. The Hill reported that, “[m]ore than 100 former Manhattan prosecutors condemned” Mr. Berman’s removal in an open letter.¹⁶

Moreover, I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that there is an urgent need to inform the public about the reasons behind Mr. Berman’s firing. Attorney General Barr has announced that the Trump Administration plans to nominate current Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Jay Clayton to the position of U.S. Attorney for SDNY.¹⁷ Mr. Clayton has also refused to give an answer on “whether he

¹² *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>.

¹³ *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>.

¹⁴ *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

¹⁵ See Jurecic & Wittes, *supra* note 4.

¹⁶ Justine Coleman, *More Than 100 Former Manhattan Prosecutors Condemn Berman Firing*, The Hill (June 6, 2020), <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/503802-more-than-100-former-manhattan-prosecutors-condemn-berman-firing>.

¹⁷ Shayna Jacobs, *Trump’s Pick for Manhattan U.S. Attorney Refuses to Say He Would Recuse From Probes of President’s Associates*, Wash. Post (June 25, 2020),

would recuse himself from pending investigations involving Trump’s interests and associates if confirmed for the post.”¹⁸ The public must know if the Trump administration intends to install Mr. Clayton in the position for the political or personal benefit of the president before Mr. Clayton is potentially confirmed.

I also certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that there is widespread and exceptional media interest and there exist possible questions concerning the government’s integrity, which affect public confidence. There is widespread and exceptional media interest in Mr. Berman’s firing. The media has devoted significant attention to this issue, across a variety of major news outlets.¹⁹ Additionally, dramatic media headlines highlight the interest in this issue.²⁰

Moreover, I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that there exist possible questions concerning the government’s integrity regarding Mr. Berman’s firing and the potential politicization of DOJ investigations. Time Magazine reported that Mr. Berman’s removal, “has raised acute concerns given both the nature of Berman’s work at SDNY and Trump’s own history of statements and actions eroding the independence of the DOJ — or at the very least, the appearance of it.”²¹ Consequently, records that shed light on why the Trump Administration fired Mr. Berman would help clarify these issues.

I further certify that American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating information to the public. 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. Similar to other organizations that have been found

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/jay-clayton-us-attorney-geoffrey-berman/2020/06/25/1063c1fa-b6ff-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ See *id.*; see also, e.g., Barbara Campbell et al., *President Trump Fires Top U.S. Prosecutor Who Investigated His Allies, Barr Says*, NPR (June 20, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/20/881148365/geoffrey-berman-u-s-attorney-who-prosecuted-trump-allies-says-he-wont-quit>; Katherine Faulders et al., *Berman Relents, Leaves Post as US Attorney After Taking Stand Against Firing*, ABC News (June 20, 2020), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/im-involved-trump-claims-barr-president-removed-us/story?id=71357518>; Martin Pengelly & Richard Luscombe, *Geoffrey Berman, US Attorney Behind Inquiries into Trump Allies, Resigns After Barr Announces Firing*, The Guardian (June 20, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/20/geoffrey-berman-donald-trump-william-barr-fires>.

²⁰ See *supra* note 19; see also, e.g., Niall Stanage, “*The Memo: Storm Brewing After Chaotic Berman Firing*,” The Hill (June 23, 2020), <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/503994-the-memo-storm-brewing-after-chaotic-berman-firing>.

²¹ Tessa Berenson, *Geoffrey Berman’s Investigations into Trump Associates Raise Concerns over His Firing*, Time (June 22, 2020), <https://time.com/5857204/berman-trump-firing-questions/>.

to satisfy the criteria necessary to qualify for expedition,²² American Oversight “gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw material into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience.”²³ American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, and 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.²⁴ As discussed previously, American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content.²⁵

Accordingly, American Oversight’s request satisfies the criteria for expedition.

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.

²² See *ACLU v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 321 F. Supp. 2d 24, 30–31 (D.D.C. 2004); *EPIC v. Dep’t of Defense*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5, 15 (D.D.C. 2003).

²³ *ACLU*, 321 F. Supp. 2d at 29 n.5 (quoting *EPIC*, 241 F. Supp. 2d at 11).

²⁴ See *supra* note 8.

²⁵ See generally *News*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>; see, e.g., *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, 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>; *Audit the Wall*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *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>; *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>; *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>; *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted On Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

- 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.²⁶ 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, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.²⁷
- 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,²⁸ 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

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

²⁸ 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>.

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 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 or 202.897.4213. Also, if American Oversight's request for expedition is not granted or its 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