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US Department of D'oh!

Thu, 06/23/2011 - 11:54am | posted by Jeremy Kolassa

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Personally, I wouldn't trust government officials to lock a barn door (unless the horses already got out, that is.) There's a good reason for that. [From the Washington Times' front page:](#)

Federal authorities responsible for granting security clearances to government employees and contractors are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars investigating the investigators.

Government inspectors say they have undertaken a broader campaign in recent years to root out fraud in background checks as more national security clearances are being sought than ever before.

Overall, court records reviewed by The Washington Times show at least 170 confirmed falsifications of interviews or record checks and more than 1,000 others that couldn't be verified. The background investigators, whose work helps determine who gets top-secret security clearance, were submitting forms saying they conducted interviews or verified official documents when they never did.

"The monetary loss sustained by the government does not, nor cannot, represent the cost associated with potential compromise of our nation's security and the trust of the American people in its government's workforce," Kathy L. Dillaman, associate director in charge of investigations at the Office of Personnel Management, wrote in a victim-impact statement for a recent court case involving a convicted investigator.

So let me get this straight. Our national security apparatus, all those alphabet agencies and secret offices and guys toting big guns so they can feel more like Duke Nukem, whose mission is to protect us from the Bad Guys™ by investigating and uncovering lies and deception and then blowing holes in their heads, are somehow incapable of doing simple background checks on government employees requiring security clearances? What is this, Keystone Kops?

Oh:

*Douglas Shontz, a national security researcher at the Rand Corp. who had conducted background checks at the Defense Department, said background investigations used to be the purview of retired FBI agents and police detectives. That has changed as more and more contractors and employees require security clearances. **Many of the background checks are now outsourced.***

"You have a huge push to get people in the door," he said.

Emphasis mine.

There's two issues here that need to be addressed. One is outsourcing government functions, and the other is government transparency and classified information protocols.

First, outsourcing. There are a great many government functions that could be outsourced: the FCC could be given to the Electronic Frontier Federation, the EPA could be outsourced to Greenpeace, food inspectors could be paid for by Consumer Reports, and you could probably hand over every state's Department of Motor Vehicles to my uncle, who is a used-car salesman par excellence. But there are some functions that are necessary for a state. Maintaining institutions that permit voluntary associations in the marketplace—namely, contract, property, and the rule of law—are one. But the thing we usually point to

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is national defense. No matter which way you slice it, national defense is a legitimate function of government (which is why it can go so astray if we're not vigilant.)

As an outgrowth of national defense, background checks and investigations are one thing that *shouldn't* be outsourced. When we're entrusting our nation's security, the lives and freedoms of American citizens, to a group of individuals, we can't cut any corners. Those investigating them must be directly accountable to the American public, paid directly by our taxes. If the government is going to outsource something like that, what else are they going to outsource? Our citizenship?

The other issue is on classifying information itself, and I really must ask: "Do we seriously need to classify all this stuff?" There are literally reams and reams of classified material around Washington DC and the rest of the federal government, yet there doesn't seem to be any purpose to it. Does it make us safer? About as safe as a TSA "enhanced pat-down" session, I bet. After the WikiLeaks bruhaha last year, many suggested that the classified information morass actually made the US *less* safer, with [Cato's Jim Harper having written](#) "Secrecy should be treated as a weakness, to be avoided whenever possible." Steven Aftergood, a research analyst at the Federation of American Scientists, said in [an interview with Scientific American that he hoped](#) "a critical review of the classification system in order to reduce or eliminate unnecessary secrecy will be part of the government's response."

How much information does the US government classify? I couldn't lock down a hard number, but according to a 2010 *Christian Science Monitor* article, [the US government classifies approximately 560 million pages a year](#):

How big is the trove of US data that we're not supposed to see? Sorry, that's classified. But we can produce an educated guess using numbers from the US Information Security Oversight Office.

Last year, the US government made 183,244 original classification decisions, according to the ISOO annual report. That doesn't sound like a lot, considering what WikiLeaks has. But here's the kicker – the government also classifies stuff that refers to or discusses or uses parts of original classified information. They call this "derivative classification." How many derivative classification actions did the United States take in 2009? Oh, only about 55 million.

Plus, each classification action or decision typically involves about 10 pages of stuff, according to experts. Do the math – the US is producing some 560 million pages of classified information a year.

By way of comparison, the Library of Congress and other big document depositories such as Harvard's library system each add about 60 million pages a year to their holdings.

And those 560 million pages of new secrets represent the work of only 12 months. Peter Galison, a Harvard professor of the history of science and physics, has calculated that since the late 1970s the US may have produced a trillion pages of classified info. That's an amount of paper equal to the entire holdings of the Library of Congress, times 220.

Man, we must *really* be having some intense trade negotiations with the folks over on Zeta Reticuli. And now its biting us in the rear, because the load is so high we need to outsource background investigations to folks who don't actually do their jobs and bill us anyways, a case of fraud and putting national security in jeopardy (and not to mention, adding to the already unacceptable public debt.)

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Here's a great idea: why don't we throttle back on classified information? Maybe all this secrecy, as Jim Harper put it, really is a weakness. We're leaving ourselves open for all sorts of blackmail and facepalms and problems. If we don't have so much classified, we won't be sticking our necks out so much. Let's institute a classification audit across the board and determine what really is being stamped with "Top Secret" and the *X-Files* theme music (including "pseudosecret" documents.) Only that which is truly, really, genuinely, super-duper *absolutely* vital to national security should be classified, with the rest open. Less targets, more safety.

Then, maybe, we won't have to worry about costly and security-threatening background investigation errors like these.

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

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