

The International Program – Vietnam



Judicial Watch attorney Jim Peterson and international liaison, Janice Rurup, met with the Vietnamese delegation of legal professionals in its offices on January 8, 2010. The meeting was arranged by World Learning, under the auspices of the Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program.

The program's objectives for this delegation were, in part, to:

- Study the mechanism of public supervision and assessment in the United States;
- Obtain an overview of the U.S. judicial system, particularly the tasks and authorities of judges and jurors; and
- Examine the U.S. experience of building and implementing the law or legal provisions on public access to information.

Mr. Peterson was asked to "discuss methods by which Judicial Watch promotes transparency, accountability and integrity in the law." As set forth in its Mission Statement, "through its educational endeavors, Judicial Watch advocates high standards of ethics and morality in our nation's public life and seeks to ensure that political and judicial officials do not abuse the powers entrusted to them by the American people. Judicial Watch fulfills its educational mission through litigation, investigations, and public outreach." [The International Program](#) is an integral part of its educational program.

Mr. Peterson provided an overview of Judicial Watch's primary mission to promote openness and integrity in government, as well as its role as an educational foundation. In contrasting Vietnamese and American legal systems, he remarked that the right of Americans to bring suit against their government is one of the key differences. And it was, in fact, a [lawsuit](#) brought against the Commerce Department—a federal agency of the U.S. government—that ushered Judicial Watch into the national spotlight and elevated its standing as a formidable government

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watchdog. It was a clear case of corruption, “cash for access,” that was unveiled through the Freedom of Information Act and subsequent litigation. It was discovered that taxpayer funded seats on trade missions were being sold in return for campaign contributions.

Mr. Peterson stated that the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) remains Judicial Watch’s primary means of investigation, but it is Judicial Watch’s known ability and tenaciousness to force the release of documents into the public domain through litigation that sets it apart from other public policy organizations in the nation’s capital.

When the meeting was opened to questions, one of the delegates asked if Judicial Watch had ever been pressured by the government to take a case. The delegates were surprised to learn that the government, in the Commerce case discussed, had offered a substantial [settlement sum](#) to “make the case go away.” Judicial Watch refused to settle and instead exposed their offer. (This case highlighted the fact that no society is exempt from corruption and further underscored the need for legal mechanisms, such as sunshine laws, to keep governments open and accountable to the people.)

The U.S. Department of State’s current [country profile](#) for Vietnam reports that “relations between the United States and Vietnam have become increasingly cooperative and broad-based in the years since political normalization (July 11, 1995). . . . In January 2007, Congress approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for Vietnam. In October 2008, the U.S. and Vietnam inaugurated annual political-military talks and policy planning talks to consult on regional security and strategic issues.”

However, there has been a recent downturn in relations between the U.S. and Vietnam due to suppression of political dissent. The country study reveals that “over the past year, two journalists were arrested and convicted in connection with their reporting on high-level corruption, and several journalists and editors at leading newspapers have been fired.” On the other hand, the report also notes that “significant progress” has been and continues to be made in Vietnam on expanding religious freedom.