

The International Program

A Multi-Regional Project



September 26, 2006

Guests: Government officials and representatives from Bhutan, Cambodia, Cyprus, Djibouti, Dominica, Ghana, India, Jordan, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Czech Republic, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro

Judicial Watch president Tom Fitton was invited to participate in the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program to discuss Judicial Watch's mission in monitoring "government activities to ensure ethical standards, accountability, transparency and fairness in government." The multi-regional project was administered by the Institute of International Education.

Mr. Fitton informed the visiting delegation that Judicial Watch is a nonprofit organization—"a charity"—among many others in Washington, DC, involved in public policy. It is unique in that, as a nonprofit watchdog group, it holds corrupt officials accountable in a court of law.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), as a tool for investigation and litigation, was discussed. Mr. Fitton explained to the visiting officials that government agencies are allowed 20 days to respond to FOIA requests. When deadlines are not met and appropriate responses are not forthcoming, a lawsuit may be filed against the government agency in federal court. And once in litigation, there are other bureaucratic hurdles that are often encountered, including protracted delays in litigation, which would be daunting for any ordinary citizen. This is where Judicial Watch has found its niche. It has honed the skills necessary to counter these obstacles—and it has the time and financial resources—thanks to its supporters—to

pursue such cases to their conclusion. The [Commerce Department lawsuit](#), which commenced in 1994 and is still ongoing—was cited as one example of Judicial Watch’s extraordinary ability to stay the course.

Mr. Fitton also discussed the impact FOIA investigations can have on public policy. From the documents received from Clinton’s Commerce Department in response to Judicial Watch’s FOIA request, the scheme to sell seats on publicly funded trade missions in exchange for campaign contributions to the DNC was discovered. Not only was this “cash for access” illegal and in direct violation of campaign finance law, it was highly unethical. In essence, it was the selling of access to the highest bidder. As a result of Judicial Watch’s findings, there was a fundamental public policy change for the selection of candidates on trade missions. Today, selection is made strictly on the basis of merit.

Mr. Fitton also discussed Judicial Watch’s conservatism with respect to its nonpartisanship in rooting out corruption in government and the judiciary. He stated that, in general, conservatives believe in limited government. The larger the federal budget, the greater the temptation and, hence, the greater incidence of corruption. Corruption is a failure of ethics—and it is non-partisan.

And Judicial Watch pursues both liberal and conservative administrations in cases involving public corruption. The [Cheney Energy Task Force](#) lawsuit is one of the most recent examples of an action JW filed against a conservative administration for allegedly violating a federal open meetings law—a lawsuit that was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. At issue in the lawsuit were meetings held by the task force with top energy officials and the privileged influence these individuals may have had on the development of national energy policy.

At the close of the briefing, Mr. Fitton acknowledged the difficulty many of the visiting officials face in tackling government corruption. Mr. Fitton nevertheless urged the officials to be creative—and to not underestimate the power of the media. The mere threat of exposure can be a very powerful deterrent for public figures if they know they will be held accountable in the court of public opinion.