The International Program – Europe and Eurasia

At the invitation of Meridian International, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, representatives from Judicial Watch, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), the Government Accountability Project, and Public Citizen joined in a Roundtable discussion on "Transparency and Accountability in the U.S" at Meridian's International Center on January 25, 2012.

The roundtable was organized for the benefit of a "9-member group from Europe consisting of members of parliament and other government officials, jurists, NGO leaders, and journalists" from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey.

The professional objectives for this project were, in part:

- To enhance the understanding of ethical systems and accountability in government and business in the United States and to illustrate the principles underlying transparency and accountability;
- To explore the role of citizens, the media, and civil society in fostering transparency and accountability in government; and
- To highlight mechanisms that enable citizens to engage in fostering good governance at the local, state, and federal levels.

The four guest speakers at this roundtable were all representatives of non-profit organizations in the nation's capital, holding political philosophies running from left to right of the political spectrum, but whose mission and activities are singular in their dedication to the promotion of transparency and accountability in government.

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Anne L. Weismann, chief counsel for the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), told the delegates that regardless of party affiliation, CREW's mission is "to hold politicians accountable for their actions" using transparency laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain documents from federal agencies—and publicly available quarterly filings of the Federal Election Commission (FEC)—to "follow the money" and investigate allegations of misconduct by government officials. CREW's FOIA lawsuit against the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding the VA's discouragement of costly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnoses was one of the cases she cited to illustrate CREW's s pursuit of government transparency and accountability.

Tom Devine, legal director of the Government Accountability Project (GAP), another Washington, DC, transparency and accountability advocate, told the roundtable participants that GAP essentially protects people who exercise their free speech rights. GAP's mission, as stated on its Internet site is "to promote corporate and government accountability by protecting whistleblowers, advancing occupational free speech, and empowering citizen activists." GAP focuses primarily on the protection of government whistleblowers who, he stated, "commit the truth" in their exposure of waste, fraud, and other government misconduct. He cited GAP's efforts in protecting a FDA whistleblower, whose research exposed the dangers of the super pain killer, Vioxx, which was estimated to have killed over 50,000 Americans. Ultimately, however, because of the courage of this FDA scientist to blow the whistle, the drug was taken off the market and untold lives were saved as a result.

Public Citizen, another major transparency and accountability group, was represented at the roundtable by Dr. Craig Holman, currently serving as its government affairs lobbyist in the areas of campaign finance and governmental ethics. Similar to the caption on its Internet site, which states, "Defending democracy," and "Resisting corporate power," Dr. Holman described himself as a "lobbyist who lobbies for lobbyist reform." He discussed the drafting and implementation of the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, which "marked the first comprehensive reform of federal lobbying laws in 50 years" and included an injunction requiring lobbyists to file electronic reports every three months. He said this legislation has served as an important check against the corrupt influence peddling and pay-to-play politics so prevalent on Capitol Hill—and it was a major step forward in the fight for enhanced transparency legislation.

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Judicial Watch was the fourth and final major transparency and accountability organization to be represented at this roundtable event. Chris Farrell, who has served as Judicial Watch's director of investigations and research for more than a decade—and is very familiar with the work of the other transparency organizations represented at the roundtable—discussed the non-partisan aspect of the power struggle that ensues between any outside group and a presidential administration in the area of transparency. Mr. Farrell stated that once an administration gets into office and gains control, it typically refuses to cede power unless compelled to do so by law. In illustration, he said Judicial Watch has had to file lawsuits for White House visitor logs—records the American people are entitled to by law—against both the Bush administration in Judicial Watch's investigation of disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff and, today, against the Obama administration in fulfillment of its oversight and educational responsibilities. Each transparency group represented at the roundtable that day—whether to the left or right of the political spectrum—has encountered similar struggles in their exercise of the Freedom of Information Act vis-à-vis a presidential administration, whether Democratic or Republican.

As set forth in its Mission Statement, "through its educational endeavors, Judicial Watch advocates high standards of ethics and morality in the 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.