AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT

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Supplementary Material

Chapter 11: The Contemporary Era – Separation of Powers/Legislative Investigation Powers

*Robert Raben*, **Letter to John Linder on Congressional Oversight** (2000)

*In the summer of 1999, the House Subcommittee on Rules and Organization chaired by Republican Representative John Linder held a set of hearings on congressional oversight of the executive branch. The hearings mostly provided an opportunity for members of the Republican House majority to complain that the Clinton administration had been stonewalling their oversight efforts and to discuss efforts to make congressional oversight more productive. The Republicans were particularly concerned that the Department of Justice was unwilling to share information about ongoing legal investigations, thought executive-branch officials were selectively unresponsive to Republican members of Congress, and complained that Congress had little ability to examine maladministration of the law and the impartial administration of justice if the executive branch hid behind claims of privilege. Democrats on the committee, in turn, complained that congressional oversight of the executive branch as it was being conducted was overly partisan.*

*Members of the executive branch were not asked to testify at those hearings. A few months later, Assistant Attorney General Robert Raben sent a letter to the chair and to the ranking minority member of the subcommittee setting out the administration’s views about appropriate congressional oversight.*

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The oversight process is, of course, an important underpinning of the legislative process. Congressional committees need to gather information about how statutes are applied and funds are spent so that they can assess whether additional legislation is necessary either to rectify practical problems in current law or to address problems not covered by current law. By helping Congress be better informed when it makes legislative decisions, oversight promotes the accountability of government. The information that committees gather in this oversight capacity is also important for the Executive Branch in the future implementation of the law and its participation in the legislative process. We have found that the oversight process can shed valuable light on Department operations and assist our leadership in addressing problems that might not otherwise have been clear.

President Reagan's November 4, 1982 Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on "Procedures Governing Responses to Congressional Requests for Information" sets forth the longstanding Executive Branch policy on cooperating with Congressional oversight:

The policy of this Administration is to comply with Congressional requests for information to the fullest extent consistent with the constitutional and statutory obligations of the Executive Branch . . . [E]xecutive privilege will be asserted only in the most compelling circumstances, and only after careful review demonstrates that assertion of the privilege is necessary. Historically, good faith negotiations between Congress and the Executive Branch have minimized the need for invoking executive privilege, and this tradition of accommodation should continue as the primary means of resolving conflicts between the Branches.

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In implementing the longstanding policy of the Executive Branch to comply with Congressional requests for information to the fullest extent consistent with the constitutional and statutory obligations of the Executive Branch, the Department's goal in all cases is to satisfy legitimate legislative interests while protecting Executive Branch confidentiality interests. Examples of confidential information include national security information, materials that are protected by law (such as grand jury information pursuant to Rule 6(c) of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure and taxpayer information pursuant to 26 U.S.C. § 6103); information the disclosure of which might compromise open criminal investigations or prosecutions or civil cases or constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy; and predecisional deliberative communications (such as internal advice and preliminary positions and recommendations).

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Much of the testimony at the hearing addressed oversight of ongoing Department investigations and litigation. Although Congress has a clearly legitimate interest in determining how the Department enforces statutes, Congressional inquiries during the pendency of a matter pose an inherent threat to the integrity of the Department's law enforcement and litigation functions. Such inquiries inescapably create the risk that the public and the courts will perceive undue political and Congressional influence over law enforcement and litigation decisions. Such inquiries also often seek records and other information that our responsibilities for these matters preclude us from disclosing. Consequently, we have sought whenever possible to provide information about closed, rather than open, matters. This enables Congress to analyze and evaluate how statutory programs are handled and the Department conducts its business, while avoiding the potential interference that inquiries into open matters entail.

The open matters concern is especially significant with respect to ongoing law enforcement investigations. The Department's longstanding policy is to decline to provide Congressional committees with access to open law enforcement files. Almost 60 years ago, Attorney General Robert H Jackson informed Congress that:

It is the position of the Department, restated now with the approval of and at the direction of the President, that all investigative reports are confidential documents of the executive department of the Government, to aid in the duty laid upon the President by the Constitution to "take care that the Laws be faithfully executed," and that congressional or public access to them would not be in the public interest. . . .

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The rationale for this policy is set forth in a published opinion of the Office of Legal

Counsel issued by Charles J. Cooper, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Legal Counsel during part of the Reagan Administration. Mr. Cooper noted that providing a Congressional committee with confidential information about active criminal investigations would place the Congress in a position to exert pressure or attempt to influence the prosecution of criminal cases. Congress would become, "in a sense, a partner in the investigation," and could thereby attempt to second-guess tactical and strategic decisions, question witness interview schedules, debate conflicting internal recommendations, and generally attempt to influence the outcome of the criminal investigation. Such a practice would significantly damage law enforcement efforts and shake public and judicial confidence in the criminal justice system.

Decisions about the course of an investigation must be made without reference to political considerations. As one Justice Department official noted 30 years ago, "the Executive cannot effectively investigate if Congress is, in a sense, a partner in the investigation. If a congressional committee is fully apprised of all details of an investigation as the investigation proceeds, there is a substantial danger that congressional pressures will influence the course of the investigation."

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With respect to oversight on closed matters, the Department has a broad confidentiality interest in materials that reflect its internal deliberative process. In particular, we have sought to ensure that all law enforcement and litigation decisions are products of open, frank and independent assessments of the pertinent law and facts – uninhibited by political and improper influences that may be present outside the Department. We have long been concerned about the chilling effect that would ripple throughout government if prosecutors, policy advisors at all levels and line attorneys believed that their honest opinion – be it "good" or "bad" – may be the topic of debate in Congressional hearings or floor debates. These include assessments of evidence and law, candid advice on strengths and weaknesses of legal arguments, and recommendations to take or not to take legal action against individuals and corporate entities.

The Department must seek to protect this give-and-take process so that the participants in the process can vigorously debate issues before them and remain able to provide decisionmakers with complete and honest counsel regarding the conduct of the Department's business. If each participant's contribution can be dissected by Congress in a public forum, then the free and candid flow of ideas and recommendations would certainly be jeopardized. . . .

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In addition to these concerns, disclosure of declination memoranda would implicate significant individual privacy interests as well. Such documents discuss the possibility of bringing charges against individuals who are investigated but not prosecuted, and often contain unflattering personal information as well as assessments of witness credibility and legal positions. The disclosure of the contents of these documents could be devastating to the individuals they discuss. . . .

The Department also has a strong institutional interest in ensuring that appropriate supervisory personnel, rather than line attorneys and agents, answer Congressional questions about Department actions. This is based in part upon our view that supervisory personnel, not line employees, make the decisions that are the subjects of congressional review, and therefore they should be the ones to explain the decisions. More fundamentally, however, we need to ensure that our attorneys and agents can exercise the independent judgment essential to the integrity of law enforcement and litigation functions and to public confidence in those decisions. . . .

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