

Group Protests Secret Government Records

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Each year, Americans fill out hundreds of employment, tax and health forms. Many will be kept on record; others will be forgotten.

But one group, American Citizens for Honesty in Government, conducted a demonstration last week in front of Detroit's Federal Building to encourage people to be more aware of what's

kept on record about them.

Charging that Americans don't know anything about the thousands of secret files kept by government agencies that they have rightful access to, 12 of the group's members marched, carried signs, and distributed literature in front of the McNamara Building Monday as part of what they called a "Freedom of Information Supermarket."

staff photo-jenny miller



American Citizens for Honesty in Government outside McNamara Building.

The purpose of the event, according to spokesman Rudolf Riefstahl, was to encourage people to use the Freedom of Information Act in an attempt to make government records more accessible to the public.

The act was passed in 1966 and amended in 1974. It enables United States citizens to obtain information about themselves or a group to which they belong which may be kept on file by a government agency.

"We're urging everyone to learn how to use the Freedom of Information Act," Riefstahl said. "Only by being fully aware of what the government is doing can we insure that our officials and government agencies remain or become honest."

He suggested Americans write to agencies like the FBI, CIA, IRS, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Social Security Administration, and HEW to see whether or not files are being kept on them.

Riefstahl said it's important for Americans to use the act because "the government has miles and miles of files, many of which are false reports and lies."

More specifically, he charged that the FBI and CIA maintain extensive surveillance and investigative files on people, and spread false reports about them.

The Church of Scientology, a California-based religious organization, has been particularly afflicted by such government tactics, Riefstahl

said. According to him, the government began harassing the church when it criticized above-ground testing of atomic bombs in the 1950's.

After passage of the Freedom of Information Act by Congress, the church discovered that inaccurate records were being kept about it by agencies such as the FBI and CIA.

Awareness of the act, and how to use it, can lead to the correction of governmental errors on a political as well as a personal level, Riefstahl said.

"The best way for us all to see that we have an honest government is to help uncover illegalities in any federal agency, and the FOIA is a powerful tool to do just that," said Riefstahl.

But can that tool be used effectively by the average citizen? Very much so according to representatives of some major government agencies in Washington who said they have worked hard to comply with thousands of requests for information and will continue to do so.

Charles Savage, Deputy Chief of Information for the CIA said in 1978 alone, his agency processed 2,136 requests for personal information and 1,608 requests for documents and information on CIA activities.

The total number of requests, according to Savage has been dropping for the past two years. He added however that records and documents are requested

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Citizens have right to records

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sporadically, saying, "any time a story appears about the CIA, we can count on a flood of requests."

Much care is taken to ensure that an individual's privacy is safeguarded. Savage said that federal law makes it a criminal act to give personal information to an outside party. In order to obtain data from a personal file, the person must send identification to the agency to which he is writing.

Savage emphasized, however that the CIA keeps fewer files

Savage also acknowledged Riefstahl's claim that the Church of Scientology is the largest user of the Freedom of Information act but denied that his agency is pursuing them.

"The Church of Scientology is of no interest to us, but other government agencies have investigated them to see if they are a legitimate religion. The FBI, for example, raided their headquarters for some classified material they had."

The FBI also makes a big effort to comply with the Act, according to Michael Hanigan, a special agent in the division of Freedom of Information.

In 1978, the Bureau processed 1,8084 requests, about 74 percent Hanigan said were for personal files.

Hanigan said files are kept on applicants for government jobs, Presidential appointees, persons suspected of committing Federal crimes, and those convicted of such offenses. The records are kept according to the attorney general's guidelines, and an investigation can only be conducted if there is probable cause to

suspect the person.

The Drug Enforcement Administration also receives a large number of requests for data under the Act. Todd Stevenson, a Freedom of Information Act specialist said the agency processed 1,600 requests during 1978 and the number of requests for 1979 has already passed 900. Of these, he said about 60 percent are for personal information.

Stevenson said the Administration does an effective job of maintaining files on drug law offenders--their records are kept with the Administration for 10 years and are held on file in the National Archives for at least

another 45 years.

"Once you get a record, it sticks with you," said Stevenson.

But it may not always be easy for an individual to find out everything about his record. Stevenson said that if an investigation is being conducted at the time of the person's request he will be denied access to his file. In addition, he said that on past files, the names of the informants or even the fact that there was an informant is withheld unless the informant testified.

Information about the Administration itself and its activities is "fairly accessible,"

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Agencies must make records available

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though, according to Stevenson.

Some of the material, he said, such as information about foreign offices, classified material, and information important to national security is withheld, but specific unclassified documents are available to the public.

He added, however, that when the Administration receives a request for a classified document it tries to have it declassified.

Although government agencies have complied with the act and express a willingness to continue to do so, Riefstahl said that many people don't know how to take advantage of it.

At the American Citizens for Honesty in Government "Freedom of Information Supermarket," Riefstahl and the other demonstrators distributed copies of a Scientology journal with an article on the act, copies of the Church's booklet "Dosier

Disease," a booklet detailing how to use the Act and Freedom of Information Act request forms.

Probably the simplest way of obtaining personal files or information about a given government agency is to write to the bureau itself. In many cases, a fee, which varies depending upon the nature of the request is assessed.

An appeal procedure is guaranteed by the Act in the event that a mistake has been made on a personal record. Spokesmen for the government agencies surveyed said they receive very few requests for corrections.

Each spokesman said his agency would include a letter by the individual in his own file, and all except the Drug Enforcement Administration said the records could be amended easily. Stevenson explained that his Administration is exempt from the usual amendment procedures but records could be expunged or changed by court order.