



United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

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October 21, 2005

The Honorable Trent Lott  
Chairman  
Committee on Rules and Administration  
United States Senate

The Honorable Gordon H. Smith  
United States Senate

Subject: *Official U.S. Representation at Government-Sponsored Public Policy Forums*

The U.S. government annually sponsors thousands of conferences, symposiums, seminars, and other policy-related forums that involve individuals and organizations from outside the U.S. government. These forums present opportunities for U.S. and foreign audiences to discuss public policy issues and are designed to advance U.S. government interests. For example, some forums are intended to educate participants about official U.S. government positions and policies on issues of public concern, such as the war in Iraq, development of alternative energy sources, human trafficking, and protection of endangered species. Other forums serve as venues for soliciting input on policy issues from the public and from selected external experts, including academics, scientists, journalists, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations.

You requested information on these forums, noting that official U.S. representation at the forums is important for ensuring that they achieve their objectives. This letter provides information on forums sponsored by the Departments of State, Defense, Energy, and Interior from 2001 through 2004.<sup>1</sup> For the policy-related forums sponsored by these four departments, we (1) determined the extent to which U.S. government officials participated in the forums, and (2) identified the departmental policies and procedures governing participation by U.S. officials at these events.

To meet these objectives, we distributed questionnaires, tailored to each department, requesting specific information about the policy forums they funded or hosted from 2001 through 2004. We collected information on the title, date, location, and purpose of each forum as well as an indication of whether a U.S. official participated in the event. We did not implement the questionnaire at the Department of Energy as this department routinely collects the information we were seeking in a central database. We also interviewed key officials throughout the departments about their policies and

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, years cited in this report refer to calendar years.

informal practices governing policy forums and compared them with actual practices, as reported to us through the questionnaires. Because the questionnaires we used reflected each department's unique organizational structure, mission, and operations, the data are not comparable across departments. For increased assurance that the data the departments reported to us were reliable, we obtained additional documentation on selected forums and conducted independent research using publicly available data sources. For each department, we determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for assessing the overall extent of participation by U.S. officials at policy forums. A more detailed description of our scope and methodology is included in Enclosure I. We conducted our work between January 2005 and September 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

## **Summary**

The Departments of State, Defense, Energy, and Interior sponsored a wide variety of policy forums from 2001 through 2004 as part of their programs and missions within the United States and throughout the world. The four departments' data showed that U.S. officials participated in virtually all of these events. For example, of the approximately 8,800 policy forums the Department of State (State) reported sponsoring during this period, about 97 percent were attended by U.S. government officials from State or another federal agency; the remaining forums did not include a U.S. government official, primarily due to personnel and resource constraints. According to the public affairs officer at the U.S. embassy in France, for instance, the increased demand for speakers to discuss U.S. policies on terrorism had been particularly heavy, precluding embassy officials from accompanying some guest experts before French audiences. In these cases, the public affairs officers determined that the objectives of the forum could be met without official U.S. government representation. State public diplomacy officials do not believe that the relatively small number of events held without official U.S. participation posed an undue risk to State's foreign policy goals. The Departments of Defense, Energy, and Interior, which sponsored thousands of forums during this period, each reported fewer than five instances in which no U.S. official participated in policy forums they sponsored. While official representation at policy forums does not guarantee that government policies and positions were presented, each of the four departments reported that U.S. officials were nearly always on hand to speak on behalf of the government if it was necessary and appropriate.

None of the four departments had written policies requiring U.S. officials to attend or actively promote U.S. policies and positions at government-sponsored forums. However, departmental policies and practices were designed to ensure that such forums did not undermine the departments' missions. For example, State has rules and operating guidance in place that are intended to prevent department-sponsored speakers from misrepresenting U.S. policies and positions, such as requiring many guest speakers to be vetted by the department's International Information Programs office. Also, the Department of Defense (DOD) requires its agencies to ensure that all forums co-sponsored with nonfederal entities are closely related to DOD's missions.

Existing policies and procedures at the departments were aimed at limiting the costs—particularly travel costs—associated with larger forums rather than ensuring a minimum level of U.S. participation at all forums. Specifically, three of the four agencies required special high-level management review for events involving the travel of 25 to 30 or more attendees.

## **Background**

Conferences, symposiums, seminars, and other policy forums are convened and funded under the four departments' many different programs and missions. Their management is thus highly diffused across the agencies and offices of the departments we reviewed. Of the four departments, only the Department of Energy maintains a central database with management information on the forums the department sponsors.

The extent to which the departments sponsor these forums varies. Sometimes departments host forums in their entirety, providing the venue and hospitality, setting the agenda, inviting the speakers and participants, and even funding participants' travel expenses. Departments also co-sponsor forums with other organizations, providing partial funding or in-kind logistical support. In planning a conference, federal travel regulations require agencies to establish internal policies to ensure that they minimize administrative, travel, and staff time costs.

In addition, each department in our review sponsors Federal Advisory Committees, whose meetings provide a formal and ongoing venue for a selected group of external experts to share their views on national policy issues with department officials. By law, a designated federal official must convene and chair (or attend) all Federal Advisory Committee meetings and approve the agenda.<sup>2</sup>

## **Department of State Policy Forums**

State sponsored a wide variety of policy forums and federal advisory committee meetings, and about 97 percent of the nearly 8,800 forums we identified were attended by an official U.S. representative from State or another federal agency. Most forums also included a federal official on the agenda of the event. State has no written policies requiring U.S. officials to attend or actively promote U.S. policies. However, according to agency officials we interviewed, operating guidance, rules, and informal practices help mitigate the risk that speakers might misrepresent U.S. policies and positions. Also, a specific and higher-level approval process is prescribed for forums that require 25 or more people to travel.

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<sup>2</sup>5 U.S.C. app. 2 §10.

## Official U.S. Representation at State Department Forums

From 2001 through 2004, State reported sponsoring 8,772 conferences, seminars, and other forums designed to allow people and organizations from outside the U.S. government to exchange views on foreign affairs and other public policy issues. Policy forums constitute a major component of State's public diplomacy and public affairs efforts. Embassies and other overseas posts frequently sponsor policy forums designed to help meet their objectives for furthering U.S. interests within the host country. For example, posts sponsor U.S. government officials, private U.S. citizens such as academics and commentators, and others to participate in conferences and other forums. Sponsored guests make speeches and share their expertise and opinions about current events and policy issues. For example, the U.S. embassy in Algeria sponsored a senior judge from the U.S. Court of Appeals 9th Circuit to speak on judicial reform; the embassy in Brazil sponsored a U.S. journalist and commentator to speak on the U.S. elections in 2004; and the embassy in Guatemala hosted an International Conference on Drug Abuse Prevention attended by seven U.S. drug experts. The Bureau of Public Affairs also sponsors and arranges forums within the United States at which State officials speak to local audiences on U.S. foreign policies concerning certain countries or geographic regions of the world, and on specific topics such as arms control, counterterrorism, and demining.

In addition, State sponsors many forums, primarily in Washington, to seek input from nongovernmental experts when formulating policies, positions, and approaches. For example, State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research frequently convenes experts to provide ambassadors, State officials, and other government officials with a variety of viewpoints on a certain issue or country situation. Such forums have included a conference on organized crime in Latin America, a seminar on the Israeli elections and coalition prospects, and a workshop on international oceanographic research. In addition, at meetings of State's 21 Federal Advisory Committees, outside experts provide input to the department on a host of foreign policy and foreign affairs management issues, such as international economic policy, overseas schools, and cultural diplomacy. Also, the Secretary's Open Forum provides a venue for individuals from outside the department or the U.S. government to make presentations on foreign policy topics, primarily to State Department staff. The Open Forum was established in 1967 during U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict to strengthen the American foreign policy process by encouraging creative thinking on vital policy issues, including presentations of differing visions and viewpoints. Both critics and supporters of U.S. policy have made speeches through this forum.

U.S. government officials participated in virtually all State-sponsored policy forums. According to data provided by the State Department, State and other federal officials attended about 97 percent of these events and were thus on hand to discuss official U.S. policies and positions if necessary and appropriate. Furthermore, State reported that a U.S. official was included formally on the agenda as a speaker, participant, or chair for about 72 percent of all the policy forums we identified.

According to the data provided by State, attendance by State officials differed somewhat depending on whether the forum was sponsored by a Washington-based office or by embassy or other overseas post. For all but two of the 3,028 policy forums sponsored by a Washington-based office, at least one State or other U.S. government official attended the event. This includes all 420 meetings of State's Federal Advisory Committees. Of the 5,744 forums sponsored by the overseas posts and their corresponding geographic bureaus<sup>3</sup> from 2001 through 2004, about 95 percent were attended by a State official or other U.S. government official with authority to speak on behalf of the U.S. government.

State officials we spoke to at posts overseas cited various reasons for not including U.S. official participation in about 5 percent of the forums they sponsored. Public affairs officers at several posts told us that their posts did not always have enough foreign service officers, travel funds, or other resources necessary to attend the events. For example, the public affairs officer in France indicated that in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the embassy experienced a surge in its speaker programs, leaving it shorthanded in trying to attend all of its sponsored events. As a result, in some instances the embassy sponsored guest speakers to participate in various policy forums throughout the country without a foreign service officer in attendance. The press officer in Kazakhstan noted that in many cases forums were held in regional cities outside the capital, where travel was difficult and usually required 2 to 3 days. Thus, the extended absence of a foreign service officer from the embassy would adversely impact a small post's operations.

Some State officials emphasized that, depending on a forum's purpose, official U.S. positions and policies may not always be explicitly presented or discussed, even if U.S. officials participated. One public affairs officer explained that embassy representatives may want to maintain a low profile to avoid the appearance of U.S. influence on the discussion. This might be true, for example, if the event's purpose was to highlight the importance of free speech. Similarly, a Bureau of Intelligence and Research official indicated that the Bureau's events are more productive in gathering information when participating U.S. officials encourage diverse viewpoints, rather than debating or challenging viewpoints if they conflict with official U.S. positions. At events attended primarily by State officials, such as the Secretary's Open Forum events, active promotion of U.S. policies is usually unnecessary, according to officials responsible for arranging these events. Attendees are assumed to be well versed in U.S. foreign policy by virtue of their positions within the Department.

#### Policies and Practices Governing Participation by U.S. Officials in State Department Policy Forums

We found no written policies that require State officials to attend or actively promote U.S. policy and positions at department-sponsored policy forums. According to senior officials throughout State, the forums are key instruments in advancing U.S.

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<sup>3</sup>This includes the bureaus for African Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, Western Hemispheric Affairs, and South Asian Affairs.

foreign policy, both domestically and overseas. As such, these officials indicated that it is important that these events be managed effectively by State officials. Although State does not have written policies stating how this management is to be carried out, other existing guidance and practices we observed are designed to ensure that the events meet the department's overall mission and objectives.

State's written policies governing the sponsorship of policy forums are aimed at controlling the cost of conferences and do not require the attendance of a minimum number of U.S. officials. As of July 2004, State requires conferences, workshops, and meetings that require the travel of 25 or more persons to be specifically approved by the Under Secretary of Management. The sponsoring office must justify the event, specifying the benefits to the department, anticipated outcomes, cost, timing, and security considerations. According to the officials responsible for managing this approval process, the Under Secretary for Management would usually not comment on the content of the conference, the agenda, or the choice of speakers or official attendees, as these decisions are delegated to Assistant Secretaries for the bureaus and offices arranging the event.

While State does not have a written policy mandating the promotion of U.S. policy at policy forums, State directives are designed to help ensure that department officials do not contradict official U.S. policies and positions at department-sponsored policy forums. State's Foreign Affairs Manual includes procedures requiring employees' public comments and writings to be pre-cleared by appropriate State officials. Although extemporaneous remarks made at conferences do not require formal pre-clearance according to the Manual, department officials are expected not to make remarks that are inconsistent with official U.S. policy. One senior State official we spoke to indicated that the department selects its representatives for international conferences carefully to help ensure that these directives are followed.

With regard to State-sponsored guest speakers overseas, departmental practices are designed to help ensure that these speakers do not misrepresent U.S. policies and undermine public diplomacy and public affairs objectives. According to an official from the International Information Programs Office, it is common practice for that office to research the writings and public statements of speaker candidates to verify that they hold views generally "sympathetic" to official U.S. policy. In addition, State's training materials for public affairs officers state that "[w]hen a speaker departs from [U.S. government] policy, he or she should, without question, acknowledge this divergence to the audience. If such a distinction is not made in the course of a speaker's presentation, the [public affairs officer] should clarify this point to the audience." Senior public diplomacy officers indicated that this practice is particularly important when sensitive foreign policy topics are discussed.

State officials agreed that not sending a foreign service officer to a policy forum may increase the risk that U.S. policies will be misrepresented. However, the public diplomacy officers at State's geographic bureaus indicated that this risk was acceptable to them, given the infrequency with which this occurs, the limited staffing

and resources at overseas posts to attend all events, and the confidence they have in the speakers they invite.

Several public affairs officers at overseas posts stated that there are other means at their disposal—short of participating in events with guest speakers—for mitigating the risk that the speakers will undermine U.S. public diplomacy objectives. Officials at some posts indicated that speakers are often selected or recommended by the posts based on a proven track record of effective presentations that are well received and that support the posts' objectives. Also, when speakers are scheduled to participate in a series of forums, a foreign service officer or other post staff member may attend an initial speech to ascertain the nature of the speaker's future remarks. Furthermore, public affairs officers said that the ambassador and other foreign service officers may brief the speaker upon arrival in-country on the posts' objectives, priorities, and sensitive subjects. Finally, several public affairs officers we consulted indicated that when they could not send a foreign service officer to accompany a guest speaker, they would frequently send a locally employed foreign national staff member to observe the event and report on it to embassy and departmental management.

### **Department of Defense Policy Forums**

Almost all of the more than 2,500 DOD-sponsored forums we identified involved the direct participation of U.S. government officials. The 57 DOD organizations we surveyed reported three forums that did not include a federal official on the agenda. DOD has a directive stating that forums co-sponsored with nonfederal entities should be relevant to agency missions, as well as additional defense agency directives that say agencies should manage events appropriately. However, these directives do not require DOD officials to be included on conference agendas or to actively promote U.S. policies and positions.

#### **Official U.S. Representation at DOD Forums**

DOD sponsors a range of conferences, symposiums, and other forums designed to share ideas with people and organizations outside the U.S. government. A number of DOD officials stated that the forums the department sponsors do not usually involve a direct debate of U.S. government policy, but are sessions held to discuss the implementation of U.S. policies. From calendar year 2001 through 2004, DOD reported sponsoring over 2,500 events addressing a range of environmental, economic, medical, political, technological, and security-related issues. Some forums—such as the Defense Environmental Forum, the Defense Procurement Conference, and the Navy Occupational Health and Preventive Medicine Conference—addressed specific DOD operational policies and issues. Other forums—such as the South Asia Stability Seminar and the International Rivals Conference—addressed broader international security issues. DOD also sponsored meetings of 71 Federal Advisory Committees to obtain input from external experts on a variety of defense-related subjects, such as military compensation and nuclear weapons surety.

In response to our survey, 57 DOD organizations reported that U.S. government officials participated in virtually all of the 1,349 forums that they sponsored from 2001 through 2004. (See encl. II for a list of the DOD organizations we surveyed.) Three forums (less than 0.5 percent) did not include a federal government official on the agenda as a chair, moderator, speaker, or panelist. Two of these three forums were related to U.S. policy. The first forum was a workshop titled “U.S. Assessments of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Economy: Lessons Learned and Not Learned.” The second event was a workshop titled “The Middle East Youth Culture Project.” Both events were the final presentations of researchers who were under contract with a sponsoring DOD organization. According to a DOD official, these workshops were designed to generate input for the Secretary of Defense’s long-term planning efforts. According to officials we interviewed, DOD officials were not on the agenda when these events took place because DOD officials did not conduct the research and attended only to hear the results. The only other forum DOD reported that did not have a U.S. government representative on the agenda was a retirement training seminar for government employees, which did not involve a discussion of U.S. government policy. In addition to the forums the DOD organizations we surveyed reported to us, the department hosted 1,159 meetings of its Federal Advisory Committees in this time period, which by law requires U.S. official participation.<sup>4</sup>

#### Policies and Practices Governing Participation by U.S. Officials in DOD Forums

None of the DOD organizations we surveyed reported any written requirements for including U.S. officials on the agenda of government-sponsored forums or promoting U.S. policies and positions at these events. We did, however, identify a DOD regulation<sup>5</sup> that requires DOD organizations co-sponsoring a conference with non-federal entities to ensure that the forum is relevant to the mission of the sponsoring DOD organization. Other defense agency directives we identified address such issues as how information should be released to the public and an organization’s fiscal responsibility for organizing or attending conferences. However, none of these directives included requirements for agenda content or prior approval of planned presentations.

In addition to the written directives, several DOD organizations we surveyed indicated that they have practices in place whereby high-level management officials review and approve conference agendas. For example, one DOD organization indicated that agendas are approved by the office’s director when event funding is required. Another DOD office reported that its forums are subject to a legal review and a review by a six-member committee that oversees conference planning and agenda development. An Army organization stated that all event plans and agendas are reviewed and approved by a senior official.

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<sup>4</sup>5 U.S.C. app. 2 §10.

<sup>5</sup>Joint Ethics Regulation, DOD 5500.7-R, §3.206(b).



## Department of Energy Policy Forums

The Department of Energy (DOE) sponsors an array of forums that addressed many scientific, technical, and public policy topics. Of the nearly 1,300 forums we identified, three did not include a DOE or other federal official and directly addressed policy issues. DOE has written policies and procedures governing its sponsorship of conferences, particularly those involving the travel of 30 or more department officials. However, none of the directives relating to department-sponsored forums require attendance by DOE officials or the promotion of U.S. policies and positions.

### Official U.S. Representation at DOE Policy Forums

Based on data compiled in DOE's conference management database and other public sources, DOE sponsored nearly 1,300 forums (including conferences, symposiums, workshops, meetings, and retreats) during fiscal years 2001 through 2004.<sup>6</sup> Many of these forums addressed highly scientific and technical issues, such as the High Efficiency Thermoelectric Workshop and the Carbon Sequestration Conference. Some forums addressed the policy implications of energy technologies. Other forums explored international energy issues, such as the conferences on International Partnership for the Hydrogen Economy and on U.S.-Norwegian Bilateral Cooperation in Carbon Sequestration, Hydrogen, and New Energy Technologies. In addition, DOE sponsored 23 Federal Advisory Committees, which held 491 meetings in this period on a range of topics, including fusion energy and nonproliferation.

The U.S. government was officially represented at almost all the DOE-sponsored forums we identified. According to information we obtained from DOE and other public sources, four of the forums we identified were not attended by at least one U.S. government official. Three of the four forums were workshops sponsored by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's Center for Global Security Research.<sup>7</sup> Attendance at all three forums—two "Living with Risk" workshops and an "Agro-Terrorism: What Is the Threat?" workshop—was restricted to invited guests. Although Lawrence Livermore employees attended the workshops, no DOE or other federal agency official was identified on the agenda as a speaker or participant during the regular sessions. (A Department of Agriculture official did participate as a dinner speaker at the Agro-Terrorism workshop.) The Center sponsored the two "Living with Risk" workshops to develop a methodology for evaluating risk; the findings of the workshops are expected to be published in early 2006. Center officials stated that they plan to hold a conference to present the findings to decision makers, including DOE officials, following publication. The remaining forum with no official U.S.

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<sup>6</sup>DOE's conference management database collects data on DOE-sponsored conferences on a fiscal year basis.

<sup>7</sup>The University of California operates Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under contract with DOE. Laboratory personnel are University of California employees. The Center for Global Security Research was formed in 1996 to study ways that technology can improve national security by bringing technology and policy experts together.

representation was not focused on policy issues; it was a meeting between DOE contractor employees and industry representatives to discuss technical issues related to the development of advanced vehicle technology.

### Policies and Practices Governing Participation by U.S. Officials in DOE Forums

DOE policies and procedures do not require U.S. officials to be included on the agenda or to actively promote U.S. policies and positions at government-sponsored forums. However, a DOE order on conference management establishes requirements to minimize costs and attendance at conferences sponsored by DOE or its contractors. Under this order, each conference must be approved in advance by the head or Principal Deputy within the sponsoring organization or by a higher-level manager if the forum involves travel by 30 or more DOE or contractor employees. The order also requires that DOE units establish points of contact and submit a list of all sponsored conferences held in the prior calendar year to the DOE Executive Secretariat for inclusion in its conference management database.

### **Department of the Interior Policy Forums**

U.S. officials participated in virtually all of the more than 1,200 policy forums we identified that were sponsored by the nine bureaus and offices of the Department of Interior. Interior reported only four policy forums where it could not document the involvement of a federal official. Departmental policies and procedures relating to the sponsorship of forums do not address U.S. official representation or the promotion of U.S. policies and positions. However, if more than 30 employees are expected to travel to attend the forum, departmental policy requires higher-level management scrutiny.

### Official U.S. Representation at Interior Policy Forums

Interior's nine bureaus and offices reported sponsoring more than 1,200 policy forums relating to their respective missions. For example, the Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored such conferences as the Annual North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, the Wildlife Society's Annual Meeting, and the Wildlife Habitat Council Annual Symposium. Forums sponsored by the Minerals Management Service addressed issues such as the management of offshore oil drilling, transport, equipment, and facilities. The Office of Surface Mining sponsored technical forums on the use and disposal of coal combustion by-products, bat conservation in coal mines, and reclamation and reforestation of mined land. Interior also sponsored meetings of 108 Federal Advisory Committees to discuss issues such as invasive species control and the protection of Native American graves.

Interior reported that four of the forums we identified for 2001 through 2004 did not involve participation by a U.S. government official. These included a U.S. Geological Survey workshop of Gulf Coast state geological surveys. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, this was a workshop for officials from different states to develop a framework for cooperative studies for subsequent discussion with U.S. Geological

Survey officials. In addition, the National Park Service cosponsored a conference of the Preservation Alliances of West Virginia, but Interior officials did not attend because travel funds were not available. The conference discussed economic development prospects for restoring downtown commerce in Lewisburg, West Virginia. In addition, National Park Service officials had not documented, and thus could not verify, whether federal officials had attended two other conferences it sponsored. A U.S. official was included formally on the agenda as a speaker, participant, or chair for about 94 percent of the policy forums Interior reported to us. Participation by an Interior official was required by law for all 1,029 of the Federal Advisory Committee meetings the department sponsored from 2001 through 2004.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these forums, officials from Interior and its bureaus participated in more than a thousand other public meetings, for which we did not gather specific information, which were held throughout the United States from 2001 through 2004. These public meetings included permit reviews, regulatory proceedings relating to the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, and the National Park Service's management planning and partnership meetings. Many of these public meetings were held with local residents and other members of the public to obtain their views or explain the department's policies and actions regarding public land use. The active involvement of Interior officials is required for official public meetings or public hearings held as part of the regulatory or policy actions of the department, according to senior Interior officials.

#### Policies and Practices Governing Participation by U.S. Officials in Interior Forums

Interior does not have any written policies relating to the attendance by U.S. officials or the promotion of U.S. policies and positions at department-sponsored policy forums. However, departmental regulations establish a formal approval process for funding conferences and other forums and specify that the Program Assistant Secretary or the Deputy Assistant Secretary must approve forums to be attended by 30 or more federal government employees in travel status.

Some of Interior's bureaus reported other policies and practices to help ensure that the forums they sponsor support the department's missions. For example, according to the National Park Service, informal criteria require that a sponsored forum be mission-related, cost effective, and not perceived by the public as inappropriate or wasteful. The Bureau of Reclamation's recently issued directives and standards state that the conference's executive sponsor is responsible for all content and logistics and require the Director of the Office of Program and Policy Services to maintain an inventory of conferences and prepare a summary of conferences held in the past year.

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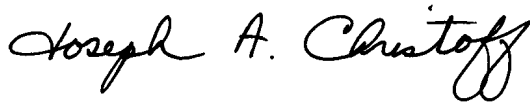
<sup>8</sup>5 U.S.C. app. 2 §10.

## Agency Comments


We provided a draft of this letter to the Departments of State, Defense, Energy, and Interior for their comment. They provided technical corrections, which we incorporated into the letter as appropriate, but they had no further comments.

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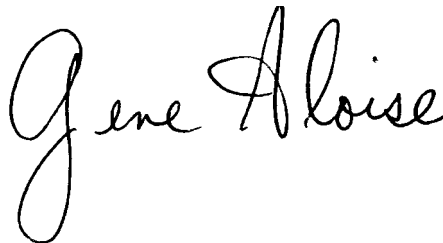
We are sending copies of this letter to the Secretaries of State, Defense, Energy, and Interior. In addition, the letter will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Joseph Christoff at (202) 512-8979 or [christoffj@gao.gov](mailto:christoffj@gao.gov). Key contributors to this report are listed in Enclosure III.



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Enclosures

## Enclosure I

### Scope and Methodology

To identify policy-related forums sponsored by these four departments and determine the extent to which U.S. government officials participated, we undertook a data collection approach specific to each department, given their differences in organization, mission, and operations.

- To obtain data on the Department of State (State), we designed a questionnaire to collect information on the policy forums sponsored by the 30 bureaus and offices involved primarily in foreign policy issues. We consulted with State officials familiar with the department's organizational structure and missions, in particular its public diplomacy and public affairs missions. Our questionnaire addressed events hosted or funded by the departments that involved an open discussion of policy issues with participants from outside the U.S. government. We specifically excluded many routine contacts between departmental officials and external audiences, such as speeches, public hearings, and diplomatic contacts. In February 2005, we pre-tested the questionnaire at selected offices and then fully distributed it, with minor revisions, throughout the department in March 2005. To obtain information on overseas events, the department queried all embassies and overseas posts using our questionnaire and reported the information to us. We received responses to our questionnaire from 26 bureaus. We relied on the department to report specific information about each forum, including the purpose of the event, the nature of government sponsorship, and attendance by U.S. officials. We determined that, given the large number of policy forums sponsored throughout the time period under review and the highly decentralized recordkeeping for many of these forums, collection and review of the agendas from all of these forums would not be feasible. Instead, we obtained the name and contact information for one official associated with each forum. We analyzed the questionnaire results to obtain a listing of events at which no U.S. official participated and obtained additional information on these events, including an agenda when possible, from the designated contact. We also interviewed, in oral and in written form, officials knowledgeable with these events to obtain further descriptions or clarifications, as needed.
- To obtain data on the Department of Defense (DOD), we revised the questionnaire that had been distributed at State and pre-tested it at selected DOD organizations in March and April 2005. Through our pre-testing, we determined that DOD officials consistently found our use of the term "policy forum" and our instruction to report information about sponsored events that "discussed or debated U.S. government policies" as not applicable to their operations. They thus provided no information in response to the questionnaire. Therefore, we revised our reporting criteria by eliminating the "policy forum" and the "policy debate" requirement, thereby widening the scope of forums DOD officials could report on the questionnaire. We made

those revisions to the questionnaire before distributing it to 57 selected DOD organizations in May 2005. Given DOD's size, we determined that it would not be feasible to distribute the questionnaire, particularly with its widened scope, to all organizations within the department. Based on our professional judgment, we identified a non-probability sample of 57 DOD organizations that we believed would be more likely to sponsor events that could be interpreted as policy related, and we distributed the questionnaire only to those organizations. We also limited distribution of the questionnaire to organizations headed by officials at the Assistant Secretary level or above because we had determined in pre-testing that operational field units and other similarly decentralized DOD organizations were unlikely to sponsor events where policy was debated. (See encl. II for a listing of the DOD organizations we surveyed for this review.) Additionally, we eliminated routine and professional training of U.S. agency and military personnel. National Defense University courses were specifically excluded due to this organization's focus on academic freedom and the practice of non-attribution to encourage multiple viewpoints and not to discourage controversy. We analyzed the information provided on the questionnaires and obtained additional information on those events that DOD reported as unattended by a U.S. government official.

- The Department of Energy (DOE) maintains a centralized database of conferences and other forums that contained the data we needed to meet our objectives. We therefore did not use a questionnaire. In addition to clearly policy-related forums, this database contained information on internal meetings involving only DOE and DOE contractor personnel, highly technical conferences, and events targeted to the DOE laboratories' client community to discuss, for example, small business or technology transfer opportunities. For those DOE-sponsored forums that appeared to be policy related and for which the database showed that no DOE official attended, we obtained an agenda and used a questionnaire to get supplementary information.
- To obtain data on the Department of the Interior (Interior), we revised the questionnaire previously distributed at State and pre-tested it with all nine Interior bureaus in March and April 2005. Based on our pre-testing, we determined that it would not be feasible to collect specific information on the wide range of hearings and public meetings the department sponsors in its regulatory capacity because records generally are kept at local offices with no centralized reporting. We therefore excluded this category of policy forum from our review and distributed our questionnaire to all bureaus in June 2005. We analyzed the results of the questionnaire and obtained additional information on those events reported as unattended by a U.S. government official.

For all four departments, we also obtained information on Federal Advisory Committee meetings from the General Services Administration's online database pertaining to these events, which we determined was reliable for the purposes of our

review. Since participation by federal officials is required by law for these meetings, we did not obtain documentation from the departments about U.S. representation at each of these events.<sup>9</sup>

For increased assurance that the data the departments reported to us were sufficiently reliable, we conducted independent research using Internet resources, including the Washington Daybook, published by Federal Information and News Dispatch, Inc., which reports publicly available information on government-sponsored policy forums and other events held in the Washington, D.C., area. We requested additional information on those forums we identified that the departments had not reported to us. Because of the different methodological approaches we used at the four departments, data on policy forums were not necessarily comparable among the departments. Furthermore, given the decentralized and sometimes informal nature of recordkeeping on policy forums, the completeness of the information we obtained from some offices was limited. Agencies reported potential gaps in the data and, thus, could not guarantee that all government-sponsored forums were captured in the data they reported. In particular, our validation of the DOE database suggested that some underreporting may have occurred for this department. However, in our analysis of the data we collected we found a very high degree of consistency regarding the participation by U.S. officials at the government-sponsored forums reported. This analysis suggested that the potential underreporting at DOE and the other departments would not materially affect our findings on official attendance at the conferences. Therefore, we judged that for the purpose of determining the overall extent of participation by U.S. government officials in these events, the information we obtained from all four departments was sufficiently reliable.

To identify the departmental policies governing participation by U.S. government officials at these events, we interviewed officials throughout the four departments in our review. We obtained descriptions, in either written or oral form, from a wide variety of officials responsible for organizing policy forums, of the formal policies and procedures and the informal practices that they typically employ. We analyzed the questionnaire responses to identify those forums that did not comply with departmental policies or practices regarding participation by U.S. officials. We found this to be the case only with some State-sponsored forums held at overseas posts without official attendance by a State official. We then conducted further interviews with State officials at the geographic bureaus and posts that sponsored those forums to identify and understand variance with stated policy or common practice. We did not test departments' compliance with policies relating to other aspects of managing forums, such as requirements for obtaining special approval for forums involving the travel of 25 people or more.

We conducted our work between January 2005 and September 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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<sup>9</sup>5 U.S.C. App. 2 §10.

## **Enclosure II**

### **DOD Offices and Agencies Contacted**

#### **Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics**

- Director, Defense Research and Engineering
- Director, Acquisition Resource and Analysis
- Director, Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization
- Director, Defense Systems
- Director, Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy
- Director, International Cooperation
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (International Technology Security)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Laboratories and Basic Sciences)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Logistics Materiel Readiness)
- Assistant to the Secretary of Defense (Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Advanced Systems and Concepts)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Industrial Policy)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Installations and Environment)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Science and Technology)

#### **Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)**

- Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness)
- Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs)
- Assistant Secretary of Defense (Reserve Affairs)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Readiness)
- Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Program Integration)

#### **Under Secretary of Defense for Policy**

- Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs)
- Assistant Secretary of Defense (Homeland Defense)
- Assistant Secretary of Defense (Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict)
- Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Policy)

#### **Under Secretary of Defense Intelligence**

Assistant Secretary of Defense (Network and Information Integration)

Assistant Secretary of Defense (Legislative Affairs)

Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

Director, Force Transformation

Director, Net Assessment



## Defense Agencies

- Defense Security Cooperation Agency
- Defense Threat Reduction Agency
- Defense Logistics Agency
- Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency

## DOD Field Activities

- Office of Economic Adjustment
- TRICARE Management Activity

## Office of the Secretary of the Army

- Chief of Public Affairs
- Deputy Under Secretary of the Army
- Chief of Staff, Army
- Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management
- Assistant Secretary of the Army (Installations and Environment)
- Assistant Secretary of the Army (Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology)
- Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works)
- Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs)
- Chief, Army Reserve
- Chief, National Guard Bureau

## Secretary of the Air Force

- Office of Public Affairs
- Under Secretary of the Air Force
- Office of the Assistant Secretary (Acquisition)
- Deputy Under Secretary (International Affairs)
- Office of the Assistant Secretary (Manpower and Reserve Affairs)
- Office of the Assistant Secretary (Installations, Environment, and Logistics)

## Office of the Secretary of the Navy

- Under Secretary of the Navy
- Chief of Naval Operations
- Chief of Information
- Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Installations and Environment)
- Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Manpower and Reserve Affairs)
- Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development, and Acquisition)

## **Enclosure III**

### **GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments**

#### **GAO Contact**

Joseph Christoff, (202) 512-8979

#### **Acknowledgments**

Key contributors to this correspondence include Rebecca Beale, Richard Boudreau, Renee Brown, Lynn Cothern, Richard Cheston, Martin De Alteriis, Lynn Johnson, Stephen Lord, Grace Lui, James Michels, David Moser, Donald Pless, and Clifton Spruill.

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