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SCHAKOWSKY: "PRESIDENT BUSH HAS MADE AN UNPRECEDENTED ASSAULT ON THE PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO KNOW"

WASHINGTON, D.C. - {WASHINGTON, D.C. - At a Government Efficiency Subcommittee hearing today, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) said that by limiting access to Presidential documents, "President Bush is challenging Congress and is attempting to keep the public in the dark." Schakowsky called for immediate passage of bipartisan legislation that would rescind President Bush's Executive Order, which greatly limits the public's access to Presidential records.

"Vice President Cheney refused to tell the GAO who he met with in developing the Administration's energy policy. He claimed that to do so would make it difficult for the President to get unvarnished advice. However, the President's executive order on presidential records makes it clear that the goal is to try to keep these documents from the public, forever," said Schakowsky, who is the ranking member on the Government Efficiency Subcommittee.

She added, "In reality, the legislation we are discussing today is a gift to President Bush. It is a way out. He and his Administration should support it. I don't think the President and his men want to have a Papergate on their hands."

Below is Schakowsky's full committee statement

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this legislative hearing. I look forward to working with you to move this bill quickly through the committee process, and convincing the Republican leadership of the House to allow a vote on the bill.

President Bush has made an unprecedented assault on the public's right to know. In doing so, the President has challenged Congress and is attempting to keep the public in the dark. The intent of the Presidential Records Act is clear - deliberative documents are to become public after 12 years. President Bush's intent is equally clear - he intends to do everything in his power to keep deliberative Presidential documents out of public hands.

Vice President Cheney refused to tell the GAO who he met with in developing the Administration's energy policy. He claimed that to do so would make it difficult for the President to get unvarnished advice. However, the President's executive order on presidential records makes it clear that the goal is to try to keep these documents from the public, forever.

The President's men do not fear that the advice will be tarnished, their fear is that the public will discover their real motivations for drilling in Alaska, for the tax cut, and for

privatizing Social Security

In reality, the legislation we are discussing today is a gift to President Bush. It is a way out. He and his Administration should support it. I don't think the President and his men want to have a Papergate on their hands.

Secretary Evans is fighting Congress and the public over releasing corrected census counts. The courts have been clear that these numbers should be public, not deliberative, and should be released. Still the administration persists. When the Attorney General learned that the court had ordered the census data released, he called in a new team of lawyers to plead for reconsideration. They too failed, but in doing so, they laid the groundwork for the Administration's defense of not releasing the energy information.

The list of secret activities goes on and on -- energy, census, tobacco, health, and environment, to name just a few.

The Executive Order that led to the bill before us today is particularly outrageous. First, it makes it easier for presidential records to be withheld from the public - just the opposite of the reason Congress passed the Act in the first place. Second, the order tries to extend that protection into the grave, by giving the President's family or representatives the right to assert executive privilege. If that weren't enough, the order then tries to give executive privilege to the Vice President.

We should not have been surprised at the goal of this order. Just before the President left Austin he made a deal to move his papers from being governor out of the State Archive to his father's library where no one can gain access to them. Those are public records that do not belong to President Bush, Senior or Junior.

The Presidential Records Act was a high water mark for Congress. It asserted the public's right to know how the Administration does business in an unprecedented way. For the first time in the country's 200-year history, the public was granted access to the documents that guided policy at the highest levels. Now, just as the Act is beginning to have an effect, President Bush wants to undo it.

Again, I have to ask: What is he trying to hide? Is there something in his father's papers about the Iran-Contra scandal that would embarrass the family? Or did the President's advisors know that the Reagan tax cut would drive the government into deficit, just as the Bush tax cut has? Reagan's Interior Secretary James Watt was convicted of withholding documents from a grand jury investigating the scandals at HUD. Do these papers tell more of that story? Just what is it they are trying to hide?