

John Podesta, President Clinton's former Chief of Staff
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I thought I might start with the famous line by Admiral Stockdale: "Who am I; what am I doing here?" Or maybe I should start with who I am *not*: I've never been followed by a tractor beam; I've never been bathed in the glow of a white light coming from the sky; I *certainly* have never been taken; and while my obsession (which for some of you was well known while I was in the White House) with the X-Files earned me the title of First Fan, I think I always understood the difference between fact and fiction. So I guess you could call me a skeptic.

But I'm skeptical about many things, including the notion that government always knows best, and that the people can't be trusted with the truth. That's why I've dedicated three decades of my life, both in private practice on the Senate Judiciary Committee and in my work at the White House, to the fundamental principle of protecting openness in government. As Harold Cross, the father of the Freedom of Information Act and a well-known journalism professor at the University of Missouri, said, "The right to speak and the right to print, without the right to know, are pretty empty."

I believe that the notion of open government - the fundamental tenets of the Freedom of Information Act - are really part and parcel of our First Amendment rights. And I think it's worth going back and reminding you just exactly what those tenets really are that form the basis of that Act: that *disclosure* is the general rule, not the exception; that *all* individuals have equal right of access; that the burden is on the *government* to justify the withholding of a document, not on the person requesting it; and that individuals improperly denied access to documents have the right to seek injunctive relief in the courts. That's why I'm here today to add my voice to Bonnie, Leslie, and Lee's. I think it's time to open the books on questions that have remained in the dark; on the question of government investigations of UFOs. It's time to find out what the truth really *is* that's out there. We ought to do it because it's right; we ought to do it because the American people quite frankly *can* handle the truth; and we ought to do it because it's the *law*.

Let me explain what I mean by that: in 1995 President Clinton signed Executive Order 12958, which set tough standards for classifying documents, and led to an unprecedented effort to declassify millions of pages from our nations diplomatic and national security history. Before President Clinton signed that executive order, a tiny minority of classified documents—only 5%-- had a fixed classification date. Since the signing of that order, more than 50% of those documents are now marked for declassification in ten years or less. But even more significantly: during the five years that the executive order was in place, its policies resulted in the declassification of over 800 million pages of historically valuable records, with the prospect of many hundreds of millions more pages to be declassified in the next few years. To give you a bit of a comparison: in the previous fifteen years, the government had declassified a total of 188 million pages. So I think that was a singular accomplishment of the Clinton Administration. For future generations our history books will rely on the information contained in those declassified documents. Scholars, historians,

journalists, everyday researchers around the world (not just in the United States) will explore the past and help guide our future.

But the work is not done: that order requires the automatic declassification of records that are twenty-five years or older, subject to a very narrow set of exceptions. And I want to note two of those: one is that the automatic declassification rule doesn't apply if it reveals the identity of a confidential *human* source—and I underline the word *human*. And I think that we're not talking about that in the cases that ought to be looked at, reviewed and declassified. The other is that they would seriously or demonstrably undermine ongoing diplomatic activities of the United States. And unless we have ongoing diplomatic activities with people who are extraterrestrials that I am unaware of, I think *that* exception doesn't apply either. So, there are these cases in which documents *haven't* been made available to the American public. The American public is quite skeptical about the fact that the government *won't* make them available for public inspection. These are records that are *more* than twenty-five years old. They ought to be declassified; they ought to be released; and we ought to be able to see for ourselves what's included in them.

This morning, Dana Millbank's story in the Washington Post notes that our government does not *always* reveal the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and that even the highest leaders of our government don't always tell the facts just as they are. That's why freedom of information is so important, and the information that is included in the requests that we are discussing is so critical to be put in front of the American public, so that they can make their own judgements about the conduct of the program of investigation as well as the facts there that the Air Force and others have discovered.