

Opening Statement of the Honorable Cliff Stearns
Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
“White House Transparency, Visitor Logs, and Lobbyists”

May 3, 2011

We convene this hearing of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations today to gather information concerning the Obama Administration’s commitment to transparency. While candidate for President, Obama repeatedly promised that his Administration would be the most open and transparent in history. He said he would make contacts between the Administration and lobbyists more open and that he would televise health care negotiations on C-SPAN “so that people can see who is making arguments on behalf of their constituents and who are making arguments on behalf of the drug companies or the insurance companies.” The American people were made a lot of promises that quite frankly do not seem to have been kept. We are here today to examine the Administration’s policies on transparency and see what else can be done to ensure the White House follows through on these commitments.

Take the White House visitor logs as an example. In September 2009, President Obama announced a new policy of releasing White House visitor logs to the public. He did this because, as he stated, “Americans have a right to know whose voices are being heard in the policymaking process.” What the President has failed to mention is that according to an April 18th report by the Center for Public Integrity:

- the new policy was forced upon the Administration in relation to a settlement of four protracted lawsuits against the government seeking such records;
- a federal judge ruled that those records are subject to release under the FOIA law;
- only 1% of the 500,000 meetings from President Obama’s first eight months in office have been released;
- many of the entries do not reflect who actually took part in the meetings;
- two-thirds of the one million names released are people on guided group tours; and
- thousands of known visitors to the White House, including numerous lobbyists, are missing from the logs.

Since he announced this policy, news reports have uncovered that administration officials go to great lengths to avoid disclosing their meetings with lobbyists. White House staff apparently purposely schedule meetings at the Caribou Coffee around the corner from the White House so that those meetings won’t show up on the White House logs. And one executive branch agency even went so far as to require lobbyists to sign confidentiality agreements about their discussions with the administration.

This is not the only area we’ve seen the Administration give lip service to transparency. We’ve seen a lack of transparency in the Administration’s response to FOIA requests; their

secrecy about the work done by key czars, such as the Climate Change Czar and the Health Reform Czar; and, more recently, they've tried to require selective disclosure of the political contributions of government contractors, but not unions. And our own investigation into the secret health care negotiations has been delayed by the Administration for more than a year.

I understand that my Democratic colleagues may want to relitigate the past and compare this administration with previous ones but the bottom line is that the American people were promised a new era of openness and accountability and they haven't gotten it.

To learn more about White House policies, we had hoped to hear testimony from a White House witness. Unfortunately, the White House did not accept our invitation to send a witness. This failure to send any witness to a hearing about White House transparency, while depriving the public of the Administration's perspective, is revealing in its own way about the Administration's true attitudes. Even without a witness from the White House, this hearing will be of great value in pulling together facts and reports from non-partisan, independent sources like the ones represented by our witnesses and legitimate concerns arising out of lawsuits brought by groups of different ideologies. From large gaps in the White House logs, to secret meetings with lobbyists, to waivers for lobbyists to serve in the Administration, to broken promises to broadcast all of the health care negotiations on C-Span, to the appointment of numerous unaccountable czars, to confidentiality agreements, to a political litmus test for government contractors - for the first time, a coherent picture of the Administration's pattern and record on transparency issues will begin to emerge.