

Published: March 7, 2007

LETTER

Education Dept. Security Procedures Questioned

To the Editor:

It was good to see the issue of contractor-employee security screening at the U.S. Department of Education receive attention ("[Education Dept.'s Stricter Background Checks Questioned](#)," Feb. 21, 2007).

But your article, which in part discusses my refusal to comply with these new rules, leaves many basic questions unanswered.

What is the reason for requiring invasive "security clearances" for *all* contractor employees? The article cites an Education Department spokeswoman in reporting that these background checks "are now standard procedure for federal agencies hiring contractors who will have access to federal buildings or databases." Yet the majority of contractor employees don't access federal buildings, computers, or databases.

In that case, what is being made more secure by requiring invasive security clearances of thousands of ordinary people? The Education Department's wholesale security-screening policy is not in the long list of recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, regardless of what Karen Evans of the White House Office of Management and Budget, also referenced in your article, suggests. Indeed, the 9/11 Commission is deeply concerned about people's civil liberties and recommended that the burden of proof be on the executive branch to show that the power it exercises "materially enhances security" and also protects civil liberties.

Other unanswered questions: How are people screened, and who makes those decisions? An Education Department document states that its investigative information "regards individuals' character, conduct, and loyalty to the United States as relevant to their association with the department." Should we feel better knowing that a group of bureaucrats is judging the character, conduct, and loyalty of thousands of contractor employees—people who pose no material security risk in the first place—using criteria that the public and Congress have not seen to make those judgments?

Rather, let us reaffirm, with the 9/11 Commission, that government needs to very carefully strike a balance between security and America's precious civil liberties.

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