

John Podesta: Clinton's X-Files Man

Written by Grant Cameron

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"A popular government without popular information, or means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." **Words written by President James Madison in 1822 and inscribed outside the Library of Congress Madison Building In Washington D.C.**

Most men, when they turn 50, have some sort of birthday party to celebrate their declining state of affairs. John Podesta, President Clinton's Chief of Staff from 1998 to 2001, was no exception. He had a party despite the fact that Podesta rarely attended any parties or Washington social events. "I'm into the cult of nonpersonality," he once told the Washington Post.



The difference between the average man's 50th birthday party, and Podesta's, is that Bill and Hillary Clinton hosted Podesta's party. The theme of the party was extraterrestrials, or more accurately "The X-Files" a TV fictional drama about the government conspiracy to cover up the existence of extraterrestrial life.

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Bill and Hillary, also both reportedly intrigued by the UFO phenomena, performed an X-Files skit. Moreover, the President arranged to have the actual X-Files cast produce a video where they sang happy Birthday for Podesta.

The reason for the X-Files theme was that John Podesta was a man openly obsessed with the show. Reporters referred to Podesta as "the unofficial leader of the X-files Club in the West Wing of the White House."

Podesta told U.S. News about the Sunday night show which he never missed. "When the show about the aliens comes on," said Podesta, "I get glued to the tube and try and figure out which government agencies to call to determine if the show's story is real or not." U.S. News further reported that Podesta had even mailed one of the show characters, FBI agent Dana Scully."

The Washington Post also referenced Podesta "fanatical devotion to the X-Files." They quoted Clinton Press Secretary Mike McCurry who stated, "John can get totally maniacal and phobic on certain subjects. He's been known to pick up the phone and call the Air Force and ask them what's going on in Area 51."

Podesta spoke about his X-files obsession at a June 1998 Commencement Address he gave at his Alma Mater, Knox University. He began by describing the upcoming X-File movie as the biggest event of the year, and then described his White House office.

"Some people at the White House have coffee tables full of White House trinkets. Others have what are known as "me walls" filled with candid shots of them and the President. In my office at the White House I have a little table that I've converted into an X-Files shrine, with copies of books, fan magazines, CD-Roms, photos of David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson."

Despite his apparent yen for things extraterrestrial, in public Podesta has taken a much more conservative political stance when talking about extraterrestrials. The Las Vegas Review Journal, for example quoted Podesta as being "skeptical that there is extraterrestrial life."

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Podesta's public position on UFOs is also conservative. In speaking with the Las Vegas Journal he simply stated, "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."

When asked about Area 51, Podesta stated, "My tendency is to try and err on the side of openness rather than on the side of secrecy, and I think a thorough review about whether more information could be brought to light (about Area 51) would be a worthwhile enterprise." Asked if "Area 51 harbors government information about UFOs," Podesta said, "I can answer that, no."

On October 22 Sci-Fi Channel hosted a Washington UFO news conference. Podesta appeared as a member of the public relations firm hired by Sci-Fi to help get the government to open up documents on the subject. In reporting on the news conference, CNN.com quoted Podesta as saying "It is time for the government to declassify records that are more than 25 years old and to provide scientists with data that will assist in determining the true nature of the phenomena."

The 25-year concept was a tenet of a Clinton administration policy embodied in the Clinton 1995 Executive Order 12958. This policy of classification and declassification was set up to deal with a concern shared by Podesta and President Clinton. They sought a proper balance of "openness in government" vs. what Podesta coined as "unthinking secrecy." In short the Clinton EO set up a policy that all government documents would be declassified after 25 years except in exception circumstances.

The 12958 Executive Order had exceptional success in moving government documents into public view. Between 1995 and 2000, 800 million pages of documents were declassified, compared to 188 million documents in the 15 years previous.

Despite some claims to the contrary, Podesta has always held "openness in government" as one of his key beliefs. It was one of the items noted about Podesta by the Washington Post in a biographical article they wrote on him. They listed "encryption technology, the declassification of government documents, agricultural policy, and the impact of the Internet as Podesta's main focuses at the White House. Other evidences of the Podesta commitment to "openness in government" include:

- He served as a member of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy chaired by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

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- He was a member of the board of The James Madison Project, a non-profit organization established in 1998, committed to "promoting government accountability and reduction of secrecy."
- He announced on Clinton's behalf the rejection of appeals made by President Clinton the day before the end of his final term. The appeals rejected were those of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and the Secret Service. Both groups were attempting to block the release of "assassination records" related to the death of former President John Kennedy.
- Appearing in front of a group of intelligence officers at the National Reconnaissance Headquarters, Podesta made a major speech on classification and declassification, as it related to the Clinton EO. He reminded the agents of the words Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis that, "Sunshine is the best of disinfectants." He also pointed out to them that, "our founders knew that democracy cannot function in the absence of public information." Finally he noted the importance of "balancing the vital interests of national security with the genuine claims of public openness . . . For over two centuries, we have prospered and won because -- at our best -- we have found ways to do both."
- Appearing in front of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Technology Subcommittee on Science Technology and Space, in May 2002, Podesta testified that he had been "deeply involved in the development of budget and policy priorities in this area" within in the Clinton White House. He spoke out against the Bush administration policy of renewed scientific secrecy, and for encouraging scientific research to be done by the Defense Department and black programs. He encouraged "public knowledge, public scrutiny with free exchange of scientific information" which would "not only provide the basis to make the breakthroughs necessary to stay ahead of our adversaries, but may provide a better long-term security paradigm as well."

The Sci-Fi strategy of employing the high-powered John Podesta is part of an effort by the Sci-Fi Channel to gain release of secret government records on unidentified flying objects. According to Ed Rothschild, the coordinator of the new group formed by Sci-Fi to help achieve that end, 'The Sci-Fi channel has had an interest in (UFOs) for some time. The difference here is that they are focusing attention to the serious, factual side of the issue, and that scientists have not had a chance to thoroughly examine it.'

The strategy, however, comes with a few drawbacks. Firstly, Podesta is from a democratic administration, which appeared to have been cut out of the world of people who control the UFO secret. There are many stories told of how the Clinton administration attempted to initiate disclosure on UFOs but failed.

Now with a Republican administration holding the reins of power, Podesta is an outsider looking in. If he couldn't get the answer while the right-handed man to President Clinton, chances are

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he will achieve much less now. He does, however, bring a lot of skill and experience about how to operate behind the scenes of power in Washington where all the big decisions are made.

Another problem facing Podesta and the new Coalition for Freedom Information group, formed by Podesta's public relations firm to free-up government UFO documents, is the secrecy minded Bush White House.

The day after Sci-Fi held their news conference seeking information and study of UFOs by the government, George W. Bush's White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales spoke in front of the Associated Press Managing Editors. He warned that secrecy would continue to be the order of the day. He stated that the Bush administration would continue to follow the FOIA laws but that if deemed necessary, information would be withheld. Gonzales stated,

"You have the right to know what is going on in government, but we also believe that such rights are not absolute. Our policy is that we expect agencies to follow the law," but "if (they) decide to withhold information that is permissible under law, (they) may do so."

Podesta and the new CFI group will have their work cut out. Perhaps their best chance for success will be another democratic administration, which is at least two years away. Then Podesta will be among politically like-minded friends who share his values of open government, and unclassified scientific investigation.

Then again, Podesta did most of the scandal management in the Clinton White House. He gave himself the title "Secretary of (expletive)." Senator Tom Daschle stated, "I've never seen John lose it . . . He's also able to take disparate people and groups and find common threads and common ideas."

Perhaps Podesta has some tricks up his sleeve. The Washington Post spoke highly of Podesta's ability in handling the Monica Lewinsky affair. "The lawyer in him can gather the facts," they wrote, "and the political hand knows how to spin them." Only time will tell.