

Podesta urges airing of Area 51 Former White House chief of staff supports openness

Written by Tony Batt Stephens
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The federal government should conduct a review of what information could be made public about the top-secret Area 51 air base in Nevada, former White House chief of staff John Podesta said Tuesday.

Podesta, who served as President Clinton's chief of staff from October 1998 through January 2001, said he was not at liberty to discuss all he knows about Area 51 because of a lawsuit by former workers who say they were injured when they inhaled toxic chemicals burned at the secret base.

Other than confirming the existence of a classified installation, the government refuses to disclose details about Area 51, which is located in the dry Groom Lake bed 90 miles north of Las Vegas. Information about the base is withheld under presidential orders citing national security concerns.

"My tendency is to try to err on the side of openness rather than on the side of secrecy, and I think that a thorough review about whether more information could be brought to light (about Area 51) would be a worthwhile enterprise," Podesta said.

Podesta appeared at a news conference to support efforts by a group including the SCI FI cable television channel to obtain government records on unidentified flying objects. SCI FI Channel President Bonnie Hammer said credible scientists have concluded that 5 to 10 percent of UFO reports cannot be explained by natural or artificial causes.

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Although skeptical that there is extra terrestrial life, Podesta said the government should be willing to disclose information about UFOs so the public can draw its own conclusions. "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," he said.

Asked if he was aware of any information to suggest Area 51 harbors government information about UFOs, Podesta said, "I can answer that, no." Podesta noted Clinton signed an executive order in 1995 that led to the declassification of 800 million pages of government documents over the next five years. In the 15 years prior to Clinton's order, 188 million pages of government documents were declassified, Podesta said. Podesta acknowledged Clinton also signed executive orders to prevent the release of information about Area 51.

A law professor at Georgetown University, Podesta worked earlier this year as a lobbyist for Nevada in its unsuccessful effort to persuade Congress to reject Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, as the site for a nuclear waste repository. Podesta defended his work on Yucca Mountain even though President Bush's recommendation to store nuclear waste there passed the House 306-117 and the Senate 60-39.

"I think before that effort, most members of the Congress and most members of the public saw this really being an issue that didn't affect them as long as it could only affect Nevada," Podesta said. "By the end of the process, they understood that this was a matter that affected citizens all around the country."