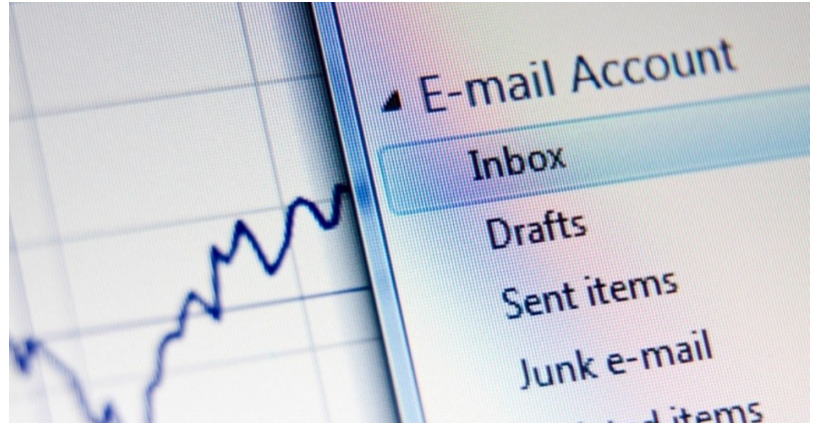




Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 5, 2013

Obama Admin. Won't Give Out Officials' Secret E-mail Addresses

The president who [promised](#) “an unprecedented level of openness” is in charge of an executive branch that communicates via secret e-mail accounts, making it difficult, if not impossible, for federal agencies to provide complete responses to document requests. What’s more, reports the [Associated Press](#), the Obama administration appears to be stonewalling requests for the addresses of the secret accounts and records related to their creation.



Until now, few of these nonpublic accounts were known to exist. The best-known was an account used by former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator Lisa Jackson. Using the alias Richard Windsor, Jackson “coordinate[d] propaganda and policy with media allies, ‘green’ groups, and policymakers to advance the Obama administration’s radical ‘environmental’ agenda,” [The New American](#) reported in February. On Monday the [Washington Free Beacon](#) revealed that “Richard Windsor” had been “awarded numerous certificates for ethics and records management” by the EPA, including being named a “scholar of ethical behavior.”

“The scope of using the secret accounts across government remains a mystery,” the AP writes. “Most U.S. agencies have failed to turn over lists of political appointees’ email addresses, which the AP sought under the Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] more than three months ago.”

One of the few agencies to respond to the AP’s request was the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The department provided the e-mail addresses of approximately 240 appointees, but none for HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius — not even the one published on the department’s own website. The AP pushed back and was finally given three addresses for Sebelius, including a secret one. HHS asked the AP not to publish the secret address, but the AP — perhaps still steamed over revelations that the Obama administration had [covertly obtained the news service’s telephone records](#) — printed it anyway, pointing out that Sebelius wields vast power, including that over the implementation of ObamaCare. In addition, the AP found that “at least two other senior HHS officials ... also have secret government email addresses.”

The Interior Department supplied a list of e-mail addresses for about 100 appointees but none for former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, telling the AP it would have to submit a separate FOIA request to obtain what the department claims was the one and only address Salazar used.

The Labor Department gave the AP the addresses for its Senate-confirmed appointees, but only after trying — and failing — to get over \$1.3 million from the news service to perform the task. The AP fought back, pointing out that the department’s own FOIA rules prohibit “charging news organizations any costs except for photocopies after the first 100 pages.” Among the addresses provided by the department were three for current Acting Labor Secretary Seth Harris, including one secret address,



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which the AP published with no objections from the administration.

Ten other agencies have yet to respond to the AP's request, among them the EPA.

The AP also tried to find out how the secret e-mail accounts were created. "But the FOIA director at HHS, Robert Eckert, said the agency couldn't provide such emails without undergoing 'an extensive and elongated department-wide search,'" the AP writes. "He also said there were 'no mechanisms in place to determine if such requests for the creation of secondary email accounts were submitted by the approximately 242 political appointees within HHS.'"

To the extent that they even admit to using nonpublic e-mail accounts, administration officials claim they do so strictly "to keep separate their internal messages with agency employees from emails they exchange with the public," says the AP. The news service, however, observes that whether or not that is the real reason for the use of the secret addresses, the tactic is not justified:

The secret email accounts complicate an agency's legal responsibilities to find and turn over emails in response to congressional or internal investigations, civil lawsuits or public records requests because employees assigned to compile such responses would necessarily need to know about the accounts to search them. Secret accounts also drive perceptions that government officials are trying to hide actions or decisions.

"What happens when that person doesn't work there anymore? He leaves and someone makes a request (to review emails) in two years," said Kel McClanahan, executive director of National Security Counselors, an open government group. "Who's going to know to search the other accounts? You would hope that agencies doing this would keep a list of aliases in a desk drawer, but you know that isn't happening."

Frankly, one would hope they're keeping them someplace a little more secure and easily searchable than a desk drawer, but McClanahan's point is well taken. Even if the intent of the secret addresses isn't to conceal communications from the public, they can still have that effect.

Another possible reason for secret accounts is to maintain deniability in the face of embarrassing revelations, suggests *Human Events'* [John Hayward](#):

Remember, the only reason Attorney General Eric Holder wasn't convicted of perjury in the Fast and Furious outrage is that he claimed he never reads his email, and has no idea what his subordinates are doing. A network of secret, untraceable email addresses is just the thing for preserving that kind of deniability. And of course, this secret correspondence is flying around an Administration that has proven very eager to snoop on the emails of people like reporter James Rosen of Fox News.

Another scandal defense commonly offered by top Obama Administration officials is that nobody talks to anyone else — there's no coordination between various agencies, even when they're supposed to be working under an operation like the Department of Homeland Security, which was specifically created to foster efficient inter-agency communication. Well, maybe one reason for that poor communication is that nobody's reading their official, public email. They think everything important will be coming into those special concealed inboxes, but they have so many alternate addresses that they can't keep them all straight.

The administration claims that both public and nonpublic accounts are searched whenever records are requested, but the AP says it "couldn't independently verify the practice," finding "only one instance of



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a published email with a secret address” among “hundreds of pages of government emails previously released under” FOIA. Hayward isn’t buying it either, noting that “the Administration says all this secret email correspondence is routinely searched in response to FOIA requests ... but their IT nerds can’t even cough up a list of alternate email addresses after *three months of effort?*”

Judicial Watch, a nonprofit government watchdog group, isn’t terribly surprised by the news of the secret e-mail accounts, [writing on its blog](#) that it “encounters these sorts of obstacles regularly in its never-ending work exposing government corruption, which goes hand in hand with secrecy and often forces litigation.” The nonpublic addresses, the organization argues, “should be public record, but clearly the administration is hiding something.”

In fact, between scandals involving Benghazi, Fast and Furious, and the Internal Revenue Service and politically charged day-to-day decisions such as the implementation of ObamaCare, the administration may wish to conceal more than it reveals. Under such circumstances, secret e-mail accounts are a boon to the executive branch. Under any circumstances, they are the bane of a representative Republic.



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