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Justice Department wins secrecy prize

By [Al Kamen](#), Published: February 14

The Justice Department, beating fierce competition from the CIA, the Department of Homeland Security and others, has won this year's coveted Rosemary Award, named for President **Richard M. Nixon**'s secretary [Rose Mary Woods](#), who somehow erased 18¹ / 2 minutes of a crucial [Watergate](#) tape.

The seventh annual award, presented by the George Washington University-based [National Security Archive](#), honors the agency that has done the very most in the previous year to enhance government secrecy and keep the public in the dark.

The agency's actions "seem in practical rebellion against **President Obama**'s 2009 open-government orders," said **Tom Blanton**, director of the Archive.

The Archive said the department, among other things, engaged in "selective and abusive prosecutions of espionage laws against whistleblowers as ostensible 'leakers' of classified information" and conducted "more 'leaks' prosecutions in the last three years than in all previous years combined," while experts say "over-classification" of government documents is endemic.

There were a number of positive moves by Justice, the Archive said, but these were "outweighed by backsliding in the key indicator" of increased use of the exemption in the [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\)](#) for documents that might reveal too much of the "deliberative process" — that is, who actually advocated or opposed a policy — before it was announced. Justice used it to withhold information 1,500 times in 2011, up from 1,231 in 2010.

(Well, maybe they're deliberating more these days?)

The Archive also cited what it called a "pit bull" lawyer at the department (isn't this usually a compliment?) for doggedly pursuing New York Times reporter **James Risen** and a CIA whistleblower.

Another Justice lawyer argued at the Supreme Court last year that claims of an exemption from FOIA should be given a broad reading.

[Justice Antonin Scalia](#) ventured that the high court's prior opinions "assert, do they not, that exceptions to FOIA should be narrowly construed?"

"We do not embrace that principle," the lawyer replied.

And [Sen. Charles Grassley](#) (R-Iowa), at a hearing, told another department official that "if we're doing the same thing after 2¹ / 2 years of this administration, the same as we've been doing for 20 years, the

president's benchmark isn't being followed by the people he appoints."

The Archive cited "other worthy finalists," such as the [U.S. Central Command](#), which "took an unclassified report, [reported](#) by the Wall Street Journal," about Afghan army soldiers attacking U.S. troops and "classified the document at the SECRET level (serious damage to national security)."

This, the Archive said, drew even more attention to the report, which stayed on the Internet in its original, unclassified form.

The award, a framed photo of the wondrous Woods Stretch, will be sent to [Attorney General Eric Holder](#) and other individual department winners.

A passport to fun

Who can forget the [Great Passport Debacle of 2007](#) — when it was taking more than three months to get a passport, ruining many summer vacations and causing near-riots?

Well, the [State Department's consular affairs bureau](#), which took the hit for that disaster, has just held its annual team-building day at embassies around the world under the theme "Follow Courageously."

The theme, which is a little reminiscent of that much-attacked "lead from behind" motif, is explained over two full pages in an announcement of the event — a sure sign that the motto means everything and, well, nothing. Obey, but confront politely, or something. But the Foggy Bottom folks take these things seriously.

In Lima, Peru, for example, the consular affairs team spent a half-day at what was referred to as "a popular park for group activities." Not sure, but one quite popular park in Lima is the "[Love Park](#)," Parque del Amor, overlooking the Pacific and named for the statue "El Beso" by Peru's most famous sculptor, [Victor Delfin](#). Like many Lima parks, this is where people go to make out.

They had an "ice-breaker activity" in which they discovered that one staffer played the bagpipes and another "had a pet crocodile as a child." They held a scavenger hunt that included "taking a picture of a dog in a sweater." (Remember, it's summer down there.) So they put a sweater on a passerby's pooch and snapped a photo.

In London, members of the consular team started their celebration in the visa waiting room with a potluck breakfast of pastries and fruit while listening to "Follow the Yellow Brick Road."

The excitement surely built when, on their name tags, they finished the sentence: "When I was a kid I . . . " with things like "wanted to be a nun." That "set the tone for a fun day," they reported, which ended at a " 'Drink Courageously' Happy Hour."

Hey, if it will speed up passport and visa processing . . .

Bush isn't shifting gears

Republicans continue to blast **President Obama** for that auto bailout three years ago. **Mitt Romney** says he would have — as he [argued back in 2008](#) when the issue was being debated — let the automakers go through a structured bankruptcy: sell off some stuff, downsize and so forth.

But **George W. Bush**, most annoyingly, keeps coming to Obama's defense, saying the bailout was essential to stave off complete disaster.

The former president defended the move in his [memoir](#) and he popped up again [last week](#) at the Las Vegas convention of the National Automobile Dealers Association, saying he would "do it again."

"I didn't want there to be 21 percent unemployment," Bush told the 22,000 attendees. "Sometimes circumstances get in the way of philosophy."

"I said, 'No depression.' "

In his memoir he said the move was "the only option" to avert immediate bankruptcy of Chrysler and General Motors and the loss of a million jobs and \$150 billion in tax revenue.

So Bush, who might be able to beat Romney in Michigan's Feb. 28 primary — **Rick Santorum** [leads by seven](#) in a CNN poll — forked over a cool \$25 billion. Obama, who's been criticized by Washington Post [Fact Checker Glenn Kessler](#) for overstating the success of the effort (the White House [differs](#)), forked over an additional \$55 billion.

It's unclear what the auto dealers forked over to get Bush to appear. Ex-presidents usually get six figures for these appearances. And W got a standing ovation.

Mr. Severity

How conservative is Mitt Romney? Let us count the ways.

The Republican presidential candidate, who has struggled to convince the party base of his bona fides, uttered the word "conservative" or some variation thereof no fewer than 29 times in his speech last week to the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington.

A few highlights: "Now . . . is a time to reaffirm what it means to be conservative and why this must be our greatest hour as conservatives." (Hey, that was a twofer.)

"We conservatives aren't just proud to cling to our guns and to our religion."

"I know conservatism because I have lived conservatism." (Ding-ding!)

And, as a bonus, he said "America," or a variation, 27 times. "Principles" came up six times.

Rick Santorum, the former senator from Pennsylvania, was no slouch in the shout-out-to-the-right department, either, though he didn't match Romney's numbers. In his speech, he mentioned a variant of the word "conservative" 14 times. "America" got a full 17 mentions, and "principles" came up six times.

With Emily Heil

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