

TOSSING OUT CHAFF

* Air Force accountability not detectable.

Everyone knows why we have military security. In time of war, even seemingly innocuous hits of information can be pieced together by an enemy, putting men and operations at risk.

Those responsible for security in the military are brought up on such tales, and their instinct is to err on the side of caution. But on the other hand, this is a democratic republic, where the military is subject to civilian oversight. We are not at war, and the fact is that far too much "military secrecy" these days is designed to keep things secret not from the likes of the Serbs and the Iraqis, but from precisely the citizens who are paying for it.

This is demonstrated in spades by the Air Force's ongoing behavior in the lawsuit in which workers at the secret Groom Lake base claim they have contracted cancer and suffered other ill effects from illegal and careless burning of toxic wastes on the base.

Representing the plaintiffs, Professor Jonathan Turley of the Georgetown University School of Law has filed briefs charging the Air Force with seeking to "over-classify" information which might reveal its guilt. In order to demonstrate this tactic, Turley says he introduced in court the Air Force Manual from the base, which was "clearly marked unclassified." Professor Turley pointed out that this unclassified document contained much of the information which the Air Force has been claiming to be classified. The Air Force responded on June 15 by ordering Professor Turley's motion and brief themselves, declared "classified."

Although Turley's pleadings point out that "Aircraft of various sizes can be seen taking off and landing from the facility from public lands," the Air Force has refused to answer, on grounds of military security, whether any jet fuel is kept at the base.

The military's strategy, evidently, is to give ground so grudgingly that the plaintiffs' patience and finances will be exhausted before the real issues can ever come to judgment.

No one expects or wants the Air Force to present blueprints for secret aircraft at this trial. But the military would be well advised to remember that the single most important requirement for their security is the continued faith and trust of the American people. Civilian employees do not sign away their rights to due process when they go to work for the military < the United States government must remain as liable for harm caused by

negligence as any other defendant.

The vast majority of Nevadans love the Air Force, and are proud to have played such a large role in its development. Maybe the service really is blameless in these illnesses -- though if so, we would think the government would be anxious to so prove in open court.

No long-term good can come from this pattern of stonewalling. Leaders whose very stock in trade is courage should demonstrate the courage now to whistle in the hounds, and either settle this suit (if wrongs were done), or allow the real issues to be resolved, promptly and fairly, in open court.

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