

'Black budget' shows massive bureaucracy, misplaced priorities, expert says

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Fred H. Cate

Classified budget figures and successes and failures by American intelligence agencies, exposed for the first time this week by The Washington Post, show a massive bureaucracy with misplaced priorities, according to an Indiana University cybersecurity and privacy expert.

Through documents leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, the Post was able to reveal details of how the U.S.'s \$52.6 billion "black

budget" is divvied up among the nation's 16 [intelligence agencies](#) and how some of those agencies are using the money. According to IU Maurer School of Law Distinguished Professor Fred H. Cate, it appears, at least on the surface, that the government is creating barriers against its own interests.

"The major failure identified in all of the post-9/11 assessments was a 'failure to connect the dots,'" Cate said. "Nevertheless, the vast majority of the black budget is being spent on [data acquisition](#)—collecting more dots—rather than analysis. It suggests we didn't learn much from the tragic attacks the 12th anniversary of which we are about to commemorate."

The secrecy of the numbers is also problematic, Cate argued. The Post agreed to withhold many sensitive details contained in their report, but publishing the budgetary summary—voluntarily—could provide significant benefits to the public, he said. Since 2007, the government has released the total level of [federal spending](#) on intelligence efforts, but never before has the public seen where that money goes.

"Why are the numbers secret in the first place?" Cate asked. "The high-level summary is informative without in any way compromising security, suggesting that the [secrecy](#) is designed to reduce public oversight, rather than advance any legitimate national interest. This suggests many Americans might think the money could be better spent elsewhere."

Another issue raised by the black budget is the significant investment in offensive cyberattacks. The Post's documents show that the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency have begun launching "offensive cyberoperations" against designated foes. This, Cate said, is problematic because there is no legal framework to regulate such activities, and it is inconsistent with outspoken U.S. opposition to cyberattacks by other countries, particularly China.

"When taken in context with earlier documents from Mr. Snowden, which suggest the U.S. is actively engaged in cyberespionage against China, Russia and others, this new report shows what a difficult position the U.S. is in," Cate said. "It is hard to publicly chastise other nations for engaging in activities that we appear to be conducting in secret and without a legal framework to control."

Perhaps the most challenging question facing Congress and the American public is the value of national security, Cate said.

"Is spending \$52.6 billion a year worth what we are getting for it?" he asked. With cities going bankrupt, federal programs being decimated by budget cuts and hundreds of thousands of defense employees forced to stay home over sequestration, are these taxpayer dollars being well spent?

"The federal government spends about \$5 billion a year on cancer research, despite the fact that over a half-million Americans die from various cancers annually," Cate said. "Is investing 10 times as much in the black budget yielding 10 times as much benefit as saving those half million lives every year? The secret allotment of tens of billions of dollars for efforts that no one can successfully say are working raises serious issues that Congress and the public should be addressing."

Provided by Indiana University

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