



Security clearances in the age of social media

May 13, 2016

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The Hill

Of the roughly 323 million citizens of the United States, more than four million hold federal security clearances. An even smaller number of these individuals hold the highest clearances. They are simultaneously the most trusted—and some of the most scrutinized—individuals in the world. Until now, that scrutiny generally stopped where the real and virtual worlds coalesce: social media.

Yesterday, America's top intelligence official, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, signed Security Executive Agent Directive Five, empowering federal background investigators to incorporate publicly-available social-media information into their routine vetting process for clearances.

It may surprise many readers to know the government only now is codifying its approach to the virtual lives of the people it entrusts with real secrets. What may be less surprising is that technology often outpaces policy, and Director Clapper's pen marks the end of a long, deliberative process to ensure background investigators are equipped for today's realities while maintaining our timeless freedoms, civil liberties and privacy rights. The Directive permits collection of publicly-available social-media information of the individual under investigation. Absent a national security concern, or criminal reporting requirement, information pertaining to individuals other than the individual being investigated—even information collected inadvertently—will not be pursued. In addition, investigators may not request—or require—individuals to provide social media passwords, log into a private account or take any action that would disclose non-publicly available social media information.

The privilege of having access to our nation's secrets comes with serious responsibilities and accountability. Among the obligations of security clearance holders, we must report interactions with foreign nationals and members of the media, obtain permission for foreign travel, share the details of our personal finances and undergo extensive background investigations and re-investigations. Additionally, many clearance holders are subjected to polygraph exams. These are critical elements of the continuous evaluation process to which we consent. We all

understand and accept that these requirements are a small price to pay to protect our nation's secrets and ensure the trust the American people have placed in us.



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Social media has become an integral—and very public—part of the fabric of many Americans' daily lives. We cannot ignore this important open source in our effort to safeguard our secrets—and our nation's security.

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