

If These Walls Could Talk . . .

SCIF Rooms Play It Safe With U.S. Secrets

By Anita Huslin
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, May 28, 2006; D01

The room is unremarkable, and perhaps that's best. If the decor reflected the conversations that transpired inside, the lighting would be shadowy, the upholstery black, the carpet crimson. Instead, it's all beige -- bland and institutional.

In the lexicon of the U.S. intelligence world, this is a Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facility, a place where government officials with the highest clearances are briefed on classified reports and analyses by national security agencies: The facts justifying the war in Iraq. The CIA's definition of torture. Domestic wiretapping. Information that could contradict, compromise and even kill.

After the Memorial Day break, hearings will resume here on WMD intelligence. Who will be testifying? That's classified.

For those who have been in one -- and there are easily thousands of these rooms around Washington -- the SCIF is a sanctuary, the ultimate members-only club for the keepers of secrets. By design, they're not architectural showcases, with little in the way of decorative flourishes.

"It's a different room and so it has a serious demeanor" that conveys "half-baked answers will not be brooked," says Bob Graham, former chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "Things that people are unwilling to say in a public setting they are expected to say here."

"It's seductive," says Tom Kean, who never heard of a SCIF before he was named chairman of the 9/11 Commission. "You get the idea you're seeing something nobody else can see."

That would be true of Room 219 in the Hart Senate Office Building -- the Intelligence Committee's conference room -- a longtime SCIF.

Gen. Michael V. Hayden, President Bush's choice to head the CIA, is a frequent visitor; his name sits atop a stack of placards to the side of the witness table. When he briefs the committee, members sit in a horseshoe arrangement on a platform above him. A voice-activated, Ouija-like camera encased in a black ball pivots to focus on committee members questioning off-site witnesses. But the truth is it's rarely used. If you've got something to tell the committee, they want you sitting in the chair, telling what you know in person.

The committee has heard details about WMDs, 9/11, terrorism and war. Mercifully, according to those who've been there, there's less of the oratory that tends to salt the committee's public meetings. Sometimes, senators fumble to find the questions that will get them the answers they want.



What's said inside the SCIF stays there. It's designed that way, in accordance with an 84-page directive from the director of central intelligence that spells out how communication lines must be sanitized and scrambled, computer systems hardened and telephones checked to ensure that they can't pick up and process audio when they're hung up and idle.

The walls have quarter-inch metal shielding, minimum. The floors are either eight-inch-thick reinforced concrete or contain metal plates to thwart eavesdroppers. Vaultlike doors guard the entry. Copper foil is stuffed into the corners to prevent transmissions. Ventilation shafts have metal baffles or bars to stop any "Mission Impossible"-style intruders. Then there are the motion detectors and alarms.

Beyond the official acronym (pronounced "skiff"), even its nicknames carry an aura.

The capsule. The box. The tank.

People in the security world sometimes speak of SCIFs with awe and envy.

"Those of us who've been in those rooms long to be in them again," says Joe Whitley, former chief counsel for the Department of Homeland Security and now a partner at Alston & Bird. "I have very distinct memories of things I did and said in those meetings."

Sorry I couldn't get back to you . . . been in the SCIF.

Curators from the National Archives edited the Nixon tapes for posterity in a SCIF.

Former national security adviser Sandy Berger swiped some classified terrorism papers from one at the Archives a few years back.

Attorneys for Zacarias Moussaoui, Oliver North, Wen Ho Lee and Manuel Noriega holed up in SCIFs to read thousands of pages of top-secret documents for their clients' defenses. SCIFs are everywhere, from courthouses and law offices to embassies and military bases. Some top-level intelligence people even have them at home.

It's human nature to take satisfaction in knowing something that other people don't. Less gratifying, however, is when you're sitting in a SCIF with people who have answers, and you're not getting them.

"Iraq would be a good example of a situation . . . where I felt frustrated we weren't getting all the information we needed," Graham says. "The administration wants to keep the information as limited as possible to reduce the prospect it might get leaked."

The most impressive SCIFs tend to be built and used by military defense contractors, and since 9/11 the demand for them has grown. Lockheed Martin built a high-tech, 50,000-square-foot facility 200 miles south of its Bethesda headquarters with a number of "secret SCIFs" and a plush, multimedia auditorium built to Defense Department SCIF specifications.

Last year, Computer Sciences Corp. unveiled a warehouse in Hanover, Md., with SCIF space where 650 employees work. For the ribbon-cutting ceremony, CSC jazzed up the environs by propping up a dummy dressed as a soldier and projecting a video of a man being chased by helicopters strafing the ground with gunfire.



This is not something you're likely to see in an office SCIF. Mostly, people sit at desks, staring at computer screens. SCIF rooms generally "are completely unremarkable," says John Pike, director of Globalsecurity.org, a Virginia-based military and intelligence information Web site.

"It has a decorative style that's consistent with the mission . . . completely windowless and the walls are painted light gray, the carpet is dark gray, the furniture is pretty utilitarian."

Outside the offices of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Room 211, the only clue that this space is different is the bank teller window to one side of the entrance. Inside, visitors sign a log book, check their cellphones and wait.

An escort inspects credentials and punches a code into the keypad beside the door. Then he scans a magnetic card, speaks quietly to an aide, and signs light up along the hallway ceiling: UNCLEARED VISITORS.

Tacked on the wall is a poster with a drawing of a steaming cup of coffee that warns: "*A lot of information can spill over one of these. Make sure that your conversation is secure to the last drop.*"

Bill Duhnke, staff director of the committee, would like to do a makeover of the conference room so it looks more like a place where members of Congress and the intelligence community grapple with weighty issues.

"It should look a little more impressive," he says.

Maybe it should, considering the cost. A small, portable SCIF (phone-booth size) made of metal panels starts at \$35,000, not including furnishings, according to **Bruce Paquin, president of Florida-based SCIF Solutions**, which sells modular units. New construction of large SCIFs can easily run into the millions, depending on size, number of rooms and location.

Retired Gen. Matthew Broderick built the Department of Homeland Security's command center on Nebraska Avenue, half of which is a certified SCIF. It came in under \$3 million, "probably one of the cheapest ones in the country, and one of the largest," he says. "I'm a retired Marine Corps general. I know how to stay within a budget."

When Kean found out how much it would cost to build a couple of SCIFs for the 9/11 Commission-- roughly half a million dollars each -- he borrowed a few instead. Inside the Old Executive Office Building, he'd sit in a worn chair at a mismatched conference table and pore over documents, while a minder watched to make sure nothing left the room.

"One of the first reports I read was an FBI report that said Top Secret all over it," Kean recalls. "I read it all and turned to my minder and said, 'I know all this. Why is it secret?' The guy looked at me and said, 'Well, you didn't know it was true.' "

Kean has been SCIF-less for six months now, and that's fine by him.

"I haven't suffered any withdrawal symptoms."

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

