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# Secrecy News

## Remembering Steve Garfinkel

Posted on Oct.01, 2018 in [classification \(https://fas.org/category/classification-2/\)](https://fas.org/category/classification-2/), [In Memoriam \(https://fas.org/category/in-memoriam/\)](https://fas.org/category/in-memoriam/) by [Steven Aftergood \(https://fas.org/author/steven-aftergood/\)](https://fas.org/author/steven-aftergood/)

We were very sad to learn that Steve Garfinkel, the former director of the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO), passed away on September 24.



1.jpg)

(<https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/garf-photo->

Appointed by President Carter in 1980, Mr. Garfinkel served as the second ISOO director for two decades until his retirement in January 2002. In that position, he played an influential role in the evolution of the national security classification system during its rapid expansion in the Reagan years and through the ambitious declassification initiatives of the Clinton era.

The ISOO director's job of supervising the operation of the government's classification system is an all but impossible one, since ISOO's resources and authorities are not commensurate with its assigned responsibilities.

But Garfinkel made the whole system better than it was with the tools that he had available. He instituted training programs for classifiers, he restrained some of the excesses of agency officials, and he cultivated a rational approach to the diverse challenges that the late cold war classification system produced.

He made "many contributions to the well-being of our nation," said J. William Leonard, his successor. "While I had the honor to follow in Steve's footsteps as ISOO Director, from the very beginning I recognized that I would never be able to fill his shoes," wrote Mr. Leonard (<https://www.legacy.com/guestbooks/washingtonpost/steven-garfinkel-condolences/190328830>), whose own shoes are quite large.

"He was a monumental man, a man of great honor and integrity," wrote Roger Denk, the former director of the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center. "His sense of humor, combined with his brilliance, made him a joy to be around."

During his years at ISOO, Mr. Garfinkel welcomed with some surprise the growing attention of public interest groups to classification policy. (“Notwithstanding you, very few people give a tinker’s damn about the security classification system,” he had told me in a 1993 interview. (<https://fas.org/sgp/bulletin/sec21.pdf>)) The mounting volume of public complaints seemed to give him greater leverage in his own internal policy debates.

Yet he typically resisted the specific prescriptions offered by critics. After Tom Blanton and I wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/30/opinion/secrets-and-more-secrets.html>) 25 years ago criticizing a Clinton draft executive order on classification and comparing it unfavorably to President Nixon’s policy, Garfinkel lamented that we had been “too effective”: the final Clinton order shortened the duration of classification for most documents, as we had urged, but it also included “a lot more exceptions than I would have wanted,” he said. “Aftergood and Blanton hoisted themselves on their own petard.” Years later, Garfinkel continued to believe that we had made a fateful error.

Garfinkel brought a deep humanity to what was essentially a bureaucratic role. He was warm, kind, funny and not afraid of an argument or an opposing view.

When he “retired” from ISOO in 2002, he took on what might have been an even more challenging task — teaching high school students in suburban Maryland.

“I have no desire whatsoever to return to the government in any capacity, save public high school teacher, which is doing everything necessary to leave me ragged,” he told me. As for secrecy policy, “I hope we never get to the point where we quit trying [to do better], although I have personally quit worrying about it and I think you will inevitably reach that point also.”

Many of the qualities that made him a great public servant also made him a beloved teacher of a generation of students, some of whom remembered him on Twitter last week.

rest in peace to one of my all time favorite teachers. i feel so lucky to have been one of his students. he truly bettered my learning experience and was just so caring and genuine. we'll never forget you, mr. garfinkel ❤️❤️❤️ [pic.twitter.com/MWVT4g85s4](https://t.co/MWVT4g85s4)  
(<https://t.co/MWVT4g85s4>)

— kimberly (@kimberlyxcaffi) September 25, 2018  
([https://twitter.com/kimberlyxcaffi/status/1044634026835922944?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/kimberlyxcaffi/status/1044634026835922944?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

My nephew that goes to Einstein just told me that my favorite teacher of all time Mr Garfinkel passed away. I'm heartbroken 😞 he was so amazing and even years later I still haven't had a teacher like him.

— Cynthia Rodriguez (@ohheycynth) September 25, 2018  
([https://twitter.com/ohheycynth/status/1044430034583334912?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/ohheycynth/status/1044430034583334912?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

Thank you Mr. Garfinkel for everything. wasn't just one of the best teachers there if anything the best teacher but truly an amazing friend. Would go in during lunch to talk to him and chill like everyone else and also ask for some candy. Told me I was destined to be great ❤️  
[pic.twitter.com/NKINuJacdC](https://t.co/NKINuJacdC) (<https://t.co/NKINuJacdC>)

— Alexis (@a\_lexiiiiii) September 25, 2018  
([https://twitter.com/a\\_lexiiiiii/status/1044692291934461952?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/a_lexiiiiii/status/1044692291934461952?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

Mr. Garfinkel, I couldn't imagine going through high school without you. You were by far the best teacher I ever had, and even though I fucked around in your class often, I still feel that you instilled in me a confidence that I'll never lose.

— Spencer Fye (@SpencerFye96) September 25, 2018

([https://twitter.com/SpencerFye96/status/1044404980533342208?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/SpencerFye96/status/1044404980533342208?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

Putting this jay in the air for Garfinkel, RIP u old mf

— bnjrno (@bnjrno) September 25, 2018

([https://twitter.com/bnjrno/status/1044426500030763009?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/bnjrno/status/1044426500030763009?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

Keep smiling Garfinkel [pic.twitter.com/0Du4q7qzd6](https://pic.twitter.com/0Du4q7qzd6) (<https://t.co/0Du4q7qzd6>)

— ᄇᄂᄃᄄ (@picgraphy) September 26, 2018

([https://twitter.com/picgraphy/status/1044778032601473024?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/picgraphy/status/1044778032601473024?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw))

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(<https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2018/10/contractor-accountability-crs/>)

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