

Modernization of Congress Member Day Hearing – Security Clearances  
Rep. Mast (FL-18) Testimony  
March 12, 2019

Chairman Kilmer and Vice Chair Graves, thank you for holding this hearing today and affording me an opportunity to speak on a topic which has concerned me since arriving in Congress two years go.

Per House rules, Representatives are entitled to such information as is necessary to perform their job and represent the interests of their constituents. Many times, that information includes sensitive details about American policies and programs that, if revealed to the public, would jeopardize the national security of the United States, operational security of ongoing missions, or reveal U.S. strategy in dealing with foreign countries. I do not want to glaze over the national security implications lightly – some of the information Representatives and Senators are privy to would collapse whole intelligence networks, dramatically alter international diplomacy, shift global economic markets, compel new wars, or put U.S. security or assets at risk by revealing sources; if that information were known by our enemies.

American lives are too often lost to unauthorized and illegal breaches of security information. That is why we evolved procedures over the breadth of our nation's existence to properly investigate the men and women who are worthy of the special trust that is required to become stewards our nation's secrets. Prior to being elected to Congress, I was part of that small subset of Americans trusted with classified information, from Department of Energy Q Clearance to TS-SCI with countless read-outs to different programs. The process was long and the investigations were invasive to earn that trust. They include investigators meeting with associates, polygraph, lifestyle examination, financial review, and this is redone every few years. By the time I earned that trust and access to classified information, the potential consequences of a breach of my responsibilities was quite evident and deeply personal to me.

As a special operations asset within the Armed Services, I understood the gravity of security breaches and the toll that would be paid by my fellow operators if the details of our activities were known to our enemies; or even to friends and allies who were not authorized the knowledge I was given. Beyond the devastating impact to my community, it was made abundantly clear to me that in the event I was the one who leaked sensitive information, I would lose my access to classified information and be subject to prosecution, or perhaps imprisoned.

When I was sworn in as a Member of Congress in January of 2017, I stepped into a new role where access to our nation's most sensitive information was automatically granted. Being elected is not the same as being investigated to ensure trustworthiness to handle and keep state secrets. We as Representatives undergo no vetting in advance of classified briefings. We never get debriefed after receiving classified information. There is a shocking lack of procedure in our institution to earn the special trust that should be required for access to our nation's most sensitive information.

Access that is so casually bestowed will never be adequately respected. We are flirting with disaster in perpetuating this assumption of responsible stewardship based solely on our ability to

win an election. The special trust we exercise over classified information was not earned. For us, it is a privilege that is nearly impossible to lose. This is a system that is doomed to fail.

I hope that this Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress will dedicate time and thoughtful reflection on establishing procedures for Members of Congress to earn access to our nation's secrets – rather than continue a flawed tradition of assuming we will all be responsible stewards. I further hope that we agree to reforms with clear consequence for any of our colleagues who breach that trust. Finally, I hope that as a result of improved institutional safeguards on classified information, the Legislative and Executive branches will collaborate more candidly, with mutual confidence that sensitive details of our work will never be politicized or used to harm our shared interest in national security.