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Ashcroft Urges Caution With FOIA Requests

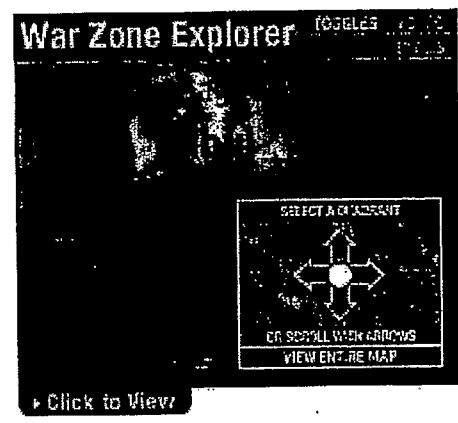
Associated Press
Wednesday, October 17, 2001;
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Obtaining government records might become more difficult under a Bush administration policy change made a month after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Attorney General John D. Ashcroft directed agency leaders to be cautious in releasing records to journalists and others. He said agencies must "carefully consider" issues such as threats to national security and the effectiveness of law enforcement.

Ashcroft also said agencies that legitimately turn down requests made under the Freedom of Information Act will have the backing of the Justice Department.

"Any discretionary decision by your agency to disclose information protected under the FOIA should be made only after full and deliberate consideration of the



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institutional, commercial, and personal privacy interests" that could be implicated, Ashcroft said in a memo dated Oct. 12 and released yesterday.

The FOIA allows reporters and others to get unclassified government records that officials otherwise would not release. Journalists have used the law to reveal government wrongdoing and abuses.

Caesar Andrews, editor of Gannett News Service and president of the Associated Press Managing Editors, said public access should not be weakened.

"We certainly understand that during these very volatile and sensitive times there will be information that needs to be kept classified. At the same time, given the same volatile environment, there is a tremendous need for the public to have access to certain information. I'd bemoan any holding back," he said.

Ashcroft said the Bush administration is committed to complying with the FOIA so Americans "can be assured neither fraud nor government waste is concealed."

He said that must be balanced with other issues, including national security and the protection of business information.

The attorney general told agency leaders to consult with Justice Department lawyers about significant requests for

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