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Oops. McFaul Outed in Government Transcript of Off-the-Record Call

By The Moscow Times

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President Barack Obama's administration has come under fire for its desire to speak off the record in some meetings with journalists. But what if the administration inadvertently breaks its own rules?

That's what appeared to happen this week when the U.S. State Department arranged a teleconference with journalists to discuss Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Moscow.

The teleconference was designated as a "background briefing," which according to State Department guidelines meant that an "official's remarks may be quoted directly or paraphrased and are attributed to a 'State Department official' or 'Administration official,' as determined by the official."

True to form, a subsequent transcript of the teleconference deleted all participants' names, replacing them with "Moderator," "Senior State Department Official One," "Senior State Department Official Two" and so on.

The transcript went so far as to delete name-dropping during the call, with the document, posted on the State Department's website, starting with the statement, "Good morning, everyone. This is [Moderator]. Thank you all for hopping on this morning."

"On the phone with us here, we have [Senior State Department Officials One and Two]," the moderator says. "From here forward, they will be known as Senior Administration Official Number One and Senior Administration Official Number Two. At the end of this call — and this call is, of course, on background — at the end of their remarks, we'll be taking some questions."

But despite the effort to keep the participants' identities strictly off the record, a glance at the transcript quickly makes it clear that "Senior State Department Official One" is none other than Michael McFaul, the U.S. ambassador to Russia.

"Senior State Department Official One" starts the discussion of Kerry's visit by describing the secretary of state's plans to meet President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday.

"The following day," continues "Senior State Department Official One," "Secretary Kerry will have a meeting with representatives from civil society at my home, at Spaso House, and then he'll meet our tremendous staff out here in Russia."

Spaso House is the elegant mansion off the traffic-congested Garden Ring Road where U.S. ambassadors have lived since Washington established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1933. The current occupant is McFaul, who played host to a group of activists from nongovernmental organizations at his home on Wednesday morning.

A U.S. Embassy spokesperson did not immediately reply to an e-mailed request for comment.

U.S. government officials have explained in the past that anonymity allows them to speak more candidly.

Journalists know that if they don't respect the privacy rules, they might not be invited to further briefings.

Still some journalists have complained that Obama and his administration have overused their prerogative to speak in off-the-record settings. A few critics of the policy have expressed fears about a possible erosion of media freedom.

But such concerns have been around for years. Officials in the previous administration of President George W. Bush also often spoke anonymously with journalists, notably in the lead-up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

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