

Bush may use privilege in Swift case

by UPI

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration is signaling in court documents that may invoke the "state secrets" privilege to block a suit against a Belgian banking cooperative. The U.S. Justice Department claims the suit against the Swift consortium, which secretly provided the United States with millions of private financial records, could disrupt of a vital national security program and cause the release of "highly classified information," the International Herald Tribune reported Friday. U.S. President George Bush's government has used the once-rare "state secrets" privilege to shut down more than 30 terrorism-related lawsuits. The privilege allows the government to halt litigation if it poses a threat to national security. Swift, which routes trillions of dollars every day among banks, brokerage houses and other financial institutions, began sharing large portions of its database with the U.S. government after the Treasury Department issued broad subpoenas for the information in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. However, some consider the program improper and say it may be illegal. Steven Schwarz, a Chicago lawyer representing two bank customers suing Swift on invasion-of-privacy grounds, said the program "is an Orwellian example of government overreaching and unfettered access to private financial information that is not consistent with the values upon which our country was founded."

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