

Public Interest Declassification Board

Minutes of the Meeting

March 17, 2008

The Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB) held its fifteenth meeting on Monday, March 17, 2008, in the Adams Conference Room of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. L. Britt Snider, Chairman of the PIDB, chaired the meeting. Board Members present were Martin Faga, Steven Garfinkel, Joan Vail Grimson, Ronald Radosh, David E. Skaggs, and William O. Studeman. Also present: Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States; William J. Bosanko, Acting Director, Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO), serving as Executive Secretary for the PIDB; John C. Powers, William C. Carpenter, Christopher O. Hofius, and Lee H. Johnson, ISOO, serving as the PIDB staff. Many representatives of the public were also present in order to comment on the recently release report to the President on declassification and to make recommendations for improving the Classified National Security Information System.

I. Opening Statements

Professor Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States, began the meeting with an opening statement. He acknowledged the good work of the Board as being the voice of the public in order to support Government openness and transparency. He continued on to thank the audience for attending the meeting and addressing their issues to the Board members.

II. Tom Blanton Provides Recommendations for Improving the Classified National Security Information System

Tom Blanton of the National Security Archive made recommendations to the Board for improvements to the Classified National Security Information System. He began by stating that the Classified National Security Information System contradicts the advancement of knowledge. Mr. Blanton proceeded by using the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) controversy in 2003 to illustrate that over-classification of information can diminish transparency within the Federal government. Mr. Blanton explained that information asymmetry leads to failures in the Classified National Security Information System. In this particular case, the Government withheld information in order to conceal information that would have damaged the justification and support for invasion of Iraq. Mr. Blanton also reported that the National Security Archive made a chart that included statistics taken from the ISOO Annual Report concerning original classification authorities and classification decisions. Mr. Blanton recommends taking the Board's report to the next President of the United States and pushing for legislative action at the beginning of the next administration. Mr. Blanton declared that Congress should act to establish a National Declassification Center through means of a statutory framework. According to Mr.

Blanton, it needs to be the duty of the Board to request more funding for declassification efforts. Mr. Garfinkel agreed that the beginning of the next administration would be the best time to pass an Executive order to implement changes to the Classified National Security Information System.

III. Representatives from the American Historical Association Address the Board

Richard Breitman, Brian Martin, and Arnita Jones, representing the American Historical Association (AHA), addressed the Board and commented on the Report to the President for improving declassification. After providing a brief historical background on the AHA, Richard Breitman explained why he thought the National Declassification Initiative (NDI) does not have enough power. His [presentation](#) pointed out that the originating agencies will still govern classification practices and may continue to demonstrate overclassification tendencies. Originating agencies will still have the ability to override certain declassification decisions that are made within the NDI. Mr. Breitman recommends that NARA should have the authority to declassify records that are over a certain age, such as 40 years. Additionally, NARA should immediately offer to take custody of records that are still classified over 30 years.

In his [address](#) to the Board, Mr. Brian Martin suggested that the Archivist should be an objective part of the NDI. The NDI also should be obliged to report their progress to historians as well as to agencies. Mr. Martin recognized that there is a great challenge in trying to determine which documents are of the greatest historical significance. An ad hoc group of historians should be created in order to establish historical significance, perhaps using a “wiki”-model as a deliberation medium. Mr. Martin also recommended that the Government needs to address how it can reduce the cost of declassification while increasing the timeliness of the process. If declassification efforts were consolidated under NARA, declassification could be streamlined as well as expedited. Mr. Martin also suggested that declassification practices should move away from document-by-document review and utilize file series declassification methods.

IV. Representative from Openthegovernment.org Addresses the Board

Patrice McDermott, representing Openthegovernment.org, provided her remarks to the Board and spoke on electronic records management. Ms. McDermott explained that the inefficiencies associated with electronic records management is causing a loss of historically significant documents, such as e-mails that are deleted or sent from personal accounts. Agencies need an electronic record-keeping system to track, organize, and store e-mails. Ms. McDermott questioned how the e-mails would be transferred from the White House at the end of the Presidential administration. Electronic records also need to be transferred to a neutral digital format to establish long-term preservation and accessibility. Ms. McDermott suggested that declassification policies be folded into NARA’s Electronic Records Archives (ERA) initiative. The other area for major concern presented by Ms. McDermott was the issue “Sensitive but Unclassified” (SBU) material. It was mentioned that the Classified National Security Information

System does not have a systematic decontrol policy. SBU material is being handled in a manner similar to classified information, but is exempt from oversight mandated by Executive Order 12958, as amended. Ms. McDermott recommended that a law be created to establish and oversee the use of special SBU markings.

V. Representative from the James Madison Project Addresses the Board

Mark Zaid, representing the James Madison Project, explained that the public desires reassurance that these recommendations will be materialized in the near future. The Board members informed Mr. Zaid that all Board meeting minutes are posted online. Mr. Zaid suggested that the Board solicit the Congress in order to pass a statute to make changes in the Classified National Security Information System. In addition, efforts to declassify Congressional and Judicial records should increase. Mr. Zaid not only discussed issues about declassification, but also explained the importance of classification decisions and practices in the Federal government. Mr. Zaid requested that the Board provide a report of all the recommendations of the commissions and boards that have reviewed the Classified National Security Information System. He proceeded to recommend that the Board consult with historians on various agency review boards for recommendations on improvements to the classification and declassification systems. Mr. Zaid also suggested that file series declassification could be funded by universities with vested interest in the historical value of a set of documents. It was discussed that clearances could be granted to historians who could help in the declassification process. However, the historians with security clearances would then have to have their publications reviewed before publication, which would deter historians from desiring clearances.

VI. Scott Armstrong Provides Recommendations for Improving the Classified National Security Information System

Scott Armstrong, representing the Information Trust, spoke to the Board about the ERA program at NARA. Mr. Armstrong commented that electronic records projects at NARA have a tendency to be late and insufficient in quality. According to Mr. Armstrong, more expertise should be acquired by NARA in order to improve the efficiency of the ERA initiative. Mr. Armstrong also suggested that a single database be created in order to store all declassified documents processed by NARA and other agencies.

VII. Jim David Provides Recommendations for Improving the Classified National Security Information System

Mr. Jim David briefly commented to the members of the Board that document retention levels should be reduced at various agencies. This would decrease the time period in which a document is held after it is declassified.

VIII. Adjournment

To close the meeting, the Chair warmly thanked the responders for their thoughtful comments. The meeting held for the public ended at approximately 12:30 p.m.