



## THE DECLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

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**D**eclassification is used to remove restrictions on and grant public access to classified information that no longer requires safeguarding. The current business practices used for declassification review are slow, resource-intensive, and painstaking. In the typical review process, agency reviewers apply their own agency standards for continued classification to a document on a page-by-page, line-by-line basis. If more than one agency asserts its equities in a piece of information because of sources or origination, the document is referred for review by each agency sequentially, but with little pressure for timely action.<sup>15</sup> It is not a methodology designed for efficiency or for managing risk with appropriate regard for the public interest or other policy objectives.

Most agencies operate their declassification programs in isolation from each other, using disparate sets of rules and procedures. They generally do not collaborate to gain efficiency or to fashion systematic, government-wide approaches to declassification. Because agencies' declassification guidelines and criteria are often outdated or difficult to understand, they can produce inconsistent declassification decisions and missed referrals to other agencies. Agencies rarely share internal classification and declassification guidance, fearing loss of control of their information equities and contributing to partner agencies' lack of understanding of their specific interests and sensitivities. This sort of disjointed approach may put classified information needlessly at risk while also avoiding timely declassification of information.

Today's national security actions increasingly produce records containing information from several agencies. The current process of referring records between agencies to complete declassification review may take years to coordinate and complete. The slow pace of declassification can also be traced in part to inadequate declassification training and outdated or confusing guidance.

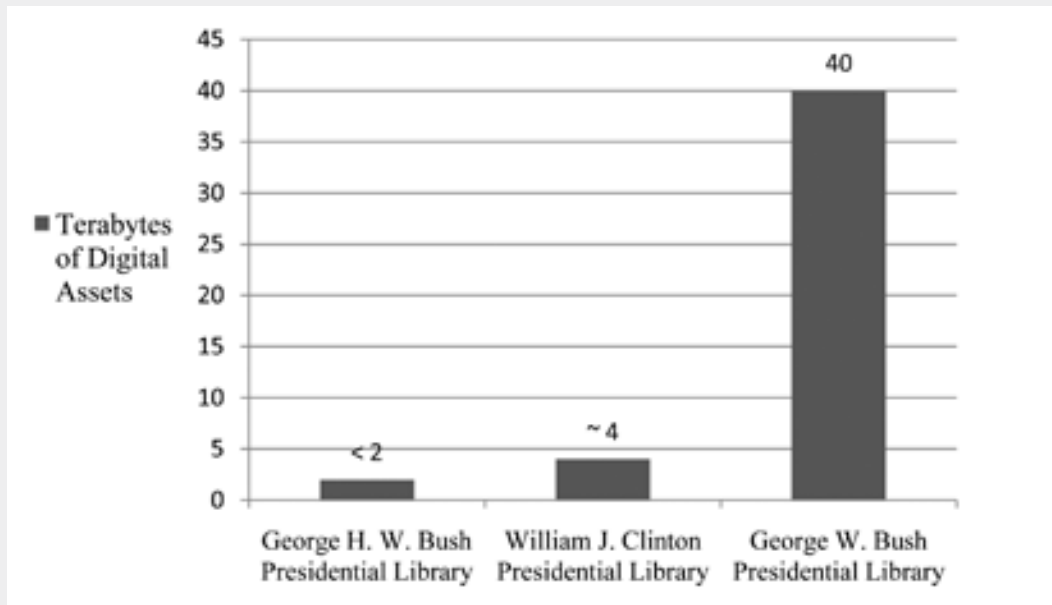
Desktop computers and email changed the landscape of Government operations. "Information" is produced and shared easily, and data volumes have soared. The current approach to declassification, rooted in the paper-based past, is comprised of multiple layers of human review, lacking both a risk management approach and the

advantages of modern technology. It is clear that current capabilities and business practices will never be up to the task of handling the volume of digital records held by, and being newly created across, Government. Without changes, the exponential growth in the creation of digital records requiring review will radically increase backlogs, and thus dramatic reform of the review process is needed.

Beyond the sheer volume, classified data exist in varying technical formats and are subject to decentralized agency-centric management and policies. Government has failed so far to manage review of the paper records and media created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Agencies are not using available technologies fully or consistently, although this would surely improve efficiency and effectiveness. The demands presented by 21<sup>st</sup> century digital data generation underscore the need to replace the traditional, time-intensive, agency declassification process with an integrated Government-wide system that takes advantage of today's digital age technologies.

Executive Order 13526, "Classified National Security Information" and its two predecessors established specific declassification requirements for all national security agencies.<sup>20</sup> Despite these identical mandates, a Government-wide approach to declassification remains elusive. Separate agency declassification programs evolved into a segmented declassification system where each agency reviewed its information and attempted to identify any classified information from other agencies. Agencies were

## A SNAPSHOT OF THE LOOMING DIGITAL CHALLENGE



*This graph represents one isolated example of just how quickly the volume of digital information assets is growing at agencies across Government.<sup>16</sup> According to the National Archives' estimates, the Presidential Libraries alone hold the equivalent of at least 5 billion pages of digital information in need of review.<sup>17</sup> Lining the pages end-to-end would stretch over 631,313 miles and would be long enough to circle the Earth more than 25 times. Even as we struggle to comprehend numbers of this size, agencies are predicting further exponential information growth at shorter intervals.*

required to perform the same tasks, such as completing automatic, systematic, and mandatory declassification reviews, yet how agencies designed and implemented their specific programming to meet requirements was conducted without interagency coordination. The declassification system has become increasingly complex and unwieldy. Accordingly, the public has become increasingly frustrated and confused by what it encounters when trying to navigate the labyrinth of agency programs.

Executive Order 13526 also mandates that all classified information be automatically declassified by agencies when it is 25 years old. The birth date of records soon subject to automatic declassification coincides with the dawn of the digital Internet Age: classified records from 1988 will be automatically declassified on January 1, 2013. Agencies are unprepared and ill-equipped to handle the difficult task of reviewing the enormous volume of these so-called "born-digital" records as they become

**AT ONE INTELLIGENCE AGENCY ALONE, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT APPROXIMATELY 1 petabyte of classified records data accumulates every 18 months. One petabyte of information is equivalent to approximately 20 million four-drawer filing cabinets filled with text, or about 13.3 years of High- Definition video.<sup>18</sup>**

*Under the current declassification model, it is estimated that one full-time employee can review 10 four-drawer filing cabinets of text records in one year. In the above example, it is estimated that one intelligence agency would, therefore, require two million employees to review manually its one petabyte of information each year. Similarly, other agencies would hypothetically require millions more employees just to conduct their reviews.*

**FILE FORMAT OBSOLESCENCE: *The Threat to Long-term Maintenance of Digital Assets***<sup>19</sup>

*During the early decades of computing, no systematic efforts were made to collect software documentation or file format specifications. Without proper documentation, the task of trying to interpret an old file, or even determine what format it was written in, becomes daunting.*

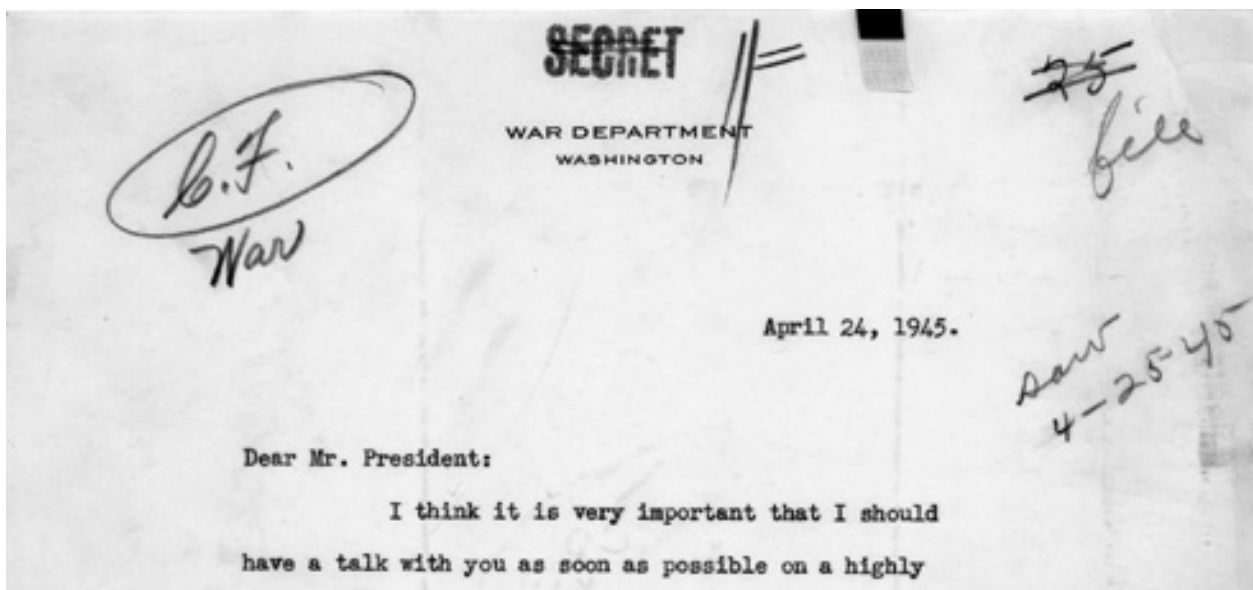
*Case in Point: While we may not have realized the threat of obsolescence when we first started purchasing personal computers over twenty years ago, we certainly experience the frustration of it now. Trying to read an old 3.5 floppy from ten years ago can be frustrating if you don't know what software or hardware was involved in its creation. Say you find a ten year old PC to test an old floppy on and it is unable to read it. You may believe the floppy is damaged, but it could just as easily be an old Macintosh floppy, which your PC would be unable to identify because it runs a different Operating System. Most people would probably throw that floppy in the bin, unaware that those files were just fine.*

subject to automatic declassification after 25 years. In 2009, the Board noted that “future historians may find that the paper records of early American history provide a more reliable historical account than the inchoate mass of digital communications of the current era.”<sup>21</sup> This concern persists today, and has only grown worse.

The automatic declassification efforts begun during the Clinton Administration to improve transparency and access to information have been hamstrung by the complex and inefficient interagency referral and review processes. This has resulted in a processing backlog at the National Archives of approximately 400 million pages older than 25 years. In an effort to address the growing backlog, the President established the National Declassification Center

(NDC) within the National Archives to “streamline declassification processes, facilitate quality-assurance measures, and implement standardized training to allow more effective and efficient declassification review of records determined to have permanent historical value.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to records awaiting standard declassification review, the backlog includes records pending review for other access restrictions, such as proper handling of historical nuclear information, Privacy Act compliance, and archival records processing.<sup>23</sup> These are additional, resource-intensive procedures that must be completed by agencies, the NDC, and the National Archives before records are made available to the public. The President instructed agencies to develop more cooperative processes



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THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT CITED THE NEED FOR INCREASED INFORMATION sharing across agencies and with Government partners to better protect national security interests.<sup>26</sup> Success in combating the nation's adversaries may dictate refraining from classification or downgrading or declassifying information to permit access. Despite this imperative, declassification continues to be conducted largely in isolation as before, despite the need for greater collaboration and better access to information

to eliminate this backlog and make as many records accessible to the public as possible by the end of 2013.<sup>24</sup> Although the NDC has streamlined declassification review and has sizably reduced the backlog, its bi-annual reports indicate that it may not meet the President's prescribed goal to eliminate the backlog.<sup>25</sup> The expected growth of electronic records will create new backlogs almost incomprehensible in size.

Under the terms of Executive Order 13526, agencies may exempt from declassification specific information as it becomes 25 years old if release would damage national security. Guided almost exclusively by the need to identify records requiring continued protection, agencies have followed page-by-page review practices with little or no attempt to prioritize collections of higher historical value or with high demand for access.

Declassification review processes are built and operated to accept no risk in reviewer decision-making—a much more conservative process than is prescribed by the current Executive Order. There remains an institutional culture where reviewers routinely exempt information from declassification without actually considering whether harm will occur if it were released. This practice of managing the declassification system to zero risk wastes valuable resources and extends secrecy without justification.

There are significant policy benefits from declassification that can aid national security decisions and diplomacy.

Declassification is a valuable information sharing tool, particularly when information holders must partner with stakeholders outside the intelligence and defense communities. Information may be the newest and most important policy tool of the modern era, with declassification during operations offering a strategic advantage. Public release not only makes policymakers accountable for their decisions and actions; it also affords agencies the opportunity to correct misinformation in the public domain and bolster their position in current debates. Nonetheless, declassification review is perceived by agencies as an historical exercise with very limited relevance to today's national security mission, making declassification a significantly under-resourced and under-appreciated function.

Declassification performs a service crucial to democratic society, informing citizens and promoting responsible dialogue between the public and Government. As dramatic changes take place in the information landscape, so the public's expectations are changing as well. The public, now fluent in digital technology and communication, is accustomed to timely information and expects improved access to Government information. The denial or loss of access to historically valuable records is a real concern. National security and democratic values are not separate and cannot be treated as conflicting. The new realities of the digital age require agencies modernize their declassification practices to meet the needs of all information users.

*“The opportunity to change the classification system comes at an important point in our history. In this post Cold War period, we can move away from a strategy that has been characterized as something close to total risk avoidance and develop instead an approach more clearly based on risk management.”*

*Redefining Security, A Report to the Secretary of Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence,  
February 28, 1994, Joint Security Commission*