

THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The process for classifying information remains much as it was when first established more than 70 years ago. The methods for identifying, marking, handling and storing sensitive information have remained fairly constant. Users make decisions to assign information to one of three current categories based on loosely defined levels of presumed “damage” to national security.⁶ Estimating the level of damage that might result from unauthorized release is often an exercise in speculation and more art than science, particularly when prediction of damage is inconclusive. Agencies often make these decisions in isolation, without input from other classifying agencies or knowledge of prior declassification actions. The vagaries in this process lead to imprecise and excessive classification.

From its inception, the purpose of the classification system was to categorize and protect sensitive information. Classified information lost its national security value and risked national security damage if not closely held by those who created it and their authorized customers. Historically, classification occurred mostly through a rote process, almost always favoring protection and with little restraint or concern for declassification and eventual public access. Over-classification was a natural consequence of having a culture of caution, with every

incentive to avoid risk rather than manage it. Outdated and inadequate guidance and training only added to the problem, and little or no consideration was accorded to the possible tactical value of disclosure or to the public’s eventual right to know.⁷ As a result, limits on access were unnecessarily broad and long-lived, and the cost to store and safeguard this information dramatically increased.

The original design of the classification system was simple enough. Its rules, designations, and markings worked





CONFIDENTIAL

SECRET

RESTRICTED DATA

TOP SECRET

**FORMERLY
RESTRICTED DATA**

UNCLASSIFIED

DECLASSIFIED

By _____ Date _____

**DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 13526, Sec. 3. _____**

By _____, NARA, Date _____

fairly well to control access and prevent unauthorized disclosure of paper records. Beginning in the 1980s, an increasingly complex national security posture resulted in a sharp increase in compartmented and special access programs. These highly sensitive programs required new safeguarding, handling, and disseminating practices that were added piecemeal to a system never intended to manage such a complicated information framework. The number of cleared users increased dramatically, while the secrecy culture was compounded with more sub-categories and markings. No operational incentives existed to impose limits, and the size and complexity of the system were effectively masked from real oversight. Stove-piping not only segregated classified information, but also kept users from seeing how bloated the system had become.

A government producing substantially larger numbers of classified records in a hybrid of formats has led to a

patchwork of modifications to policies and practices of the older, analog paper-based system. With the explosion of digital records, new classification guidance has developed mainly by adapting and applying outdated practices to individual cases, and so has increased the complexity of the system. This complexity makes integration and modernization more difficult and worsens over-classification.

Changes in government operations and the rapid growth of digital information reinforce the case for a new model. There is a need for more streamlined access to information by the Government and the public, challenging longstanding notions of secrecy born in the Cold War information environment. The classification system must be modernized as a dynamic, easily understood and mission-enabling system and one that deters over-classification and encourages accessibility. This will require a coordinated effort across Government beginning with an inter-agency process led by the White House.