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“Demystifying Declassi■cation” Blog Post: Original Version
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum

One of the most common questions that we hear from researchers is, “When will this document be
declassi■ed?” (sometimes expressed more plaintively as, “Why isn’t this document declassi■ed?”).
Even for seasoned researchers, security classi■cation can seem mysteriously opaque and may of hint of
governmental cover—up or paranoia.

To dispel some of the mystery, our Declassi■cation Unit describes here the process by which classi■ed
documents are opened to the public.

How is information declassi■ed?

As a

result of years of complaints, and the real need to balance open government with national security,
President Clinton signed Executive Order 12958 in 1995. In a

nutshell, the Order dictated the automatic

declassi■cation of all information 25 years or older, subject to very narrow exceptions. The staffs of the
National Archives facilities were then required to organize a

review of all of their holdings, implement a
plan for their review for declassi■cation, and then act on those declassi■cation decisions. In the case of
the Kennedy Library, when the initial executive order was signed in 1995, we needed to plan to review
over a million pages of documents and over 200 hours of tapes*

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it was daunting. But we forged ahead
with the work over the next decade and a

half, and at present we estimate we are waiting for the review
returns on 300,000 pages and have 20 hours of recordings left to review. In the meantime, the executive
order deadline has been extended several times, and currently the work continues under a new order
(13 526).

The concept of declassi■cation review requires some explanation. The staff of the Declassi■cation Unit
spends its time on both “mandatory reviews” and “systematic reviews.” “Systematic review” means what
it sounds like: the Declassi■cation staff begins at the beginning of a

collection and reads each document,

word by word, or listens completely to every tape, and applies the declassi■cation guidelines that we have
received from the agencies to this material. There are two types of possibly sensitive information that the
staff might encounter:

1) Deed or Privacy. Less than 1% of the materials the Declassi■cation staff deals with is subject to
privacy protection.
2) National Security, of which there are three broad categories of potentially sensitive materials: a)
Intelligence information; b) Nuclear weapons information; 0) Information on or from foreign
governments.

The guidelines mentioned above were issued in the early 19903 by various government agencies for
materials from their particular agency. Using these agencies’ guidelines, the Declassi■cation staff
reviews an item to determine if the subject matter is no longer considered national security classi■ed
information. If it is no longer sensitive, it is stamped as “declassi■ed” and placed in the open stacks for
researcher use. If it is deemed possibly still sensitive, then we submit a copy of the document to the
agency or agencies that created or have what is called “equity” in the document. “Equity” is a metaphor
borrowed from the ■nancial sector and means that an agency is interested or invested in the fate of a