



*Report to the President from the Public Interest Declassification Board on
Transforming the Security Classification System*

INTRODUCTION

“A popular Government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

James Madison to W.T. Barry, August 4, 1822

A democratic society is grounded on the informed participation of the citizenry, which in turn requires access to Government information. If officials are to be accountable for their actions and decisions, secrecy must be kept to the minimum necessary to meet legitimate national security considerations. An open documentary record of official decisions is essential to educate and inform the public and enable it to assess the policies of its elected leaders. To maintain democratic values, government must act to ensure openness and should have to justify any use of secrecy.

Adequate public access to Government information by definition depends on how well government agencies record what they do and then permit access to those records. Without accurate and accessible records, history and democratic accountability suffer. Any overlay of secrecy makes accountability more difficult. At its most benign, secrecy impedes informed government decisions and an informed public; at worst, it enables corruption and malfeasance.

Technology has revolutionized the way information is created, stored, disseminated and used. This has led to an exponential increase in electronic information creation and, compared to the paper age, to vastly accelerated growth of records. For most government agencies, the information explosion of the last two decades has significantly compromised their ability to manage records properly, especially records “born digital.” Policies and practices have not been modernized to keep pace with the increasing volume and changing nature of electronic records.

Modernizing records management through the use of technology will improve performance and promote

openness and accountability in government. This is particularly true in the area of electronic records management. The President’s recent Memorandum on Managing Government Records and its Directive specifically addresses this relationship between transparency and openness of government.¹ The memorandum calls for a much-needed modernization effort across Government to ensure improved management of records, particularly those of historical value. Among the many challenges in managing electronic records is the high cost of operating decentralized, disparate systems securely. Preserving large volumes of electronic records for future access is also problematic as media formats and retrieval hardware continually evolve.

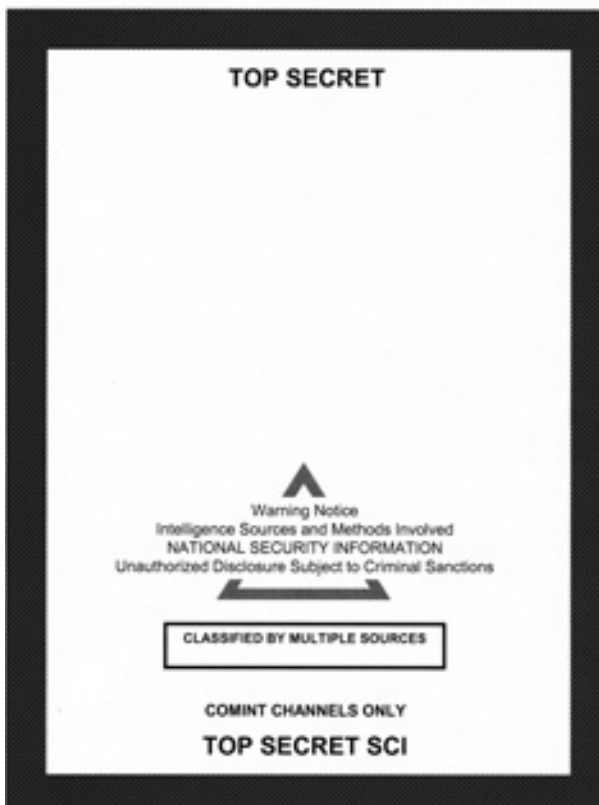
While agencies need to modernize and improve overall records management performance, classified records pertaining to our nation’s security demand particular attention. Current practices for handling classification, declassification, and management of these records are outmoded, unsustainable, and keep too much information from the public. Classification and declassification are typically performed in isolation from each other, rather than as phases in a record-keeping continuum,



and reflect an imbalance between the value of safeguarding national security information and the value of public release.

The Board previously issued a report to the White House in 2008 detailing a series of recommendations to improve the performance of the declassification system.

The report, *Improving Declassification*, led to significant changes in declassification policy.² Many of the Board's recommendations were included as new policy in Executive Order 13526, including the recommendation for establishing a National Declassification Center to organize and consolidate declassification efforts across Government.³ In his Implementing Memorandum on Executive Order 13526, "Classified National Security Information," the President tasked the Public Interest Declassification Board "to design a more fundamental transformation of the security classification system," to help it function effectively and efficiently in the information age.⁴



In response to the President's tasking, the Board researched and studied the security classification system to understand how classified records of every level of sensitivity are managed and how different users influence classification and declassification decisions at the front-end and the back-end of the system. The Board met extensively with stakeholders inside and outside of government to understand the challenges the system presents to all users and to solicit suggestions and ideas for its transformation. The Board engaged senior leaders at agencies, as well as their subject matter experts, classifiers and declassifiers in their discussions. They assembled representatives from civil society and open government groups, as well as historians, researchers and information and archives professionals in academia and Government. They also consulted with leading technologists and security experts in the private sector.

The Board drafted eight preliminary recommendations based on the outcome of these meetings. As part of its outreach efforts, the Board hosted a public blog, *Transforming Classification*, launched on March 16, 2011, after a public forum held at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.⁵ Subsequently, the Board expanded its recommendations into white papers and posted them for comment on the blog. To advance the online discussion, the Board solicited ideas and posted white papers submitted by the public. The blog remained active for thirteen weeks and received 104 comments. A subsequent public meeting at the National Archives invited further public participation in reviewing the draft recommendations and opened a wider dialogue about the public's white papers and comments. Discussion with key stakeholders inside and outside of government continued following the completion of the blog. The Board refined their recommendations based on these continued discussions with leaders and experts inside and outside government.



From discussion with system users, the Board learned how classification, declassification, and access-control policies come into conflict and inhibit the ability to share information critical to operations, all with great consequence to users. The Board also concluded that new policies and, likely, some new organization and culture change are necessary to transform the classification system for the digital age and better align it with public access to historical information.

Policies and practices based on an outdated secrecy bias are often counterproductive in the current information environment and require modernization. Better organizing and integrating classification, declassification, advanced technologies, and historical interests will improve access to Government records for all users. Better access to information will help our citizens and their government better manage national security and foreign policy in a complex, dangerous, and rapidly changing world.

With this background and analysis, the Board has prepared a series of recommendations on how best to transform the security classification system to protect national security more effectively while promoting government openness. Success will hinge on the Government's ability to apply new and existing technologies to advance automation and human-assisted analysis. Evaluating the effectiveness of proposed changes, particularly "piloting" new technologies prior to widespread implementation, will be critical to their acceptance in the national security community and so to their practical success in transforming the system.

There is still much work to be done. The recommendations in this report are but a first step in a series of serious measures that can reform and modernize the security classification system. The Board recognizes that its recommendations will require discussion to address the needs of implementation. This report's recommendations are intended as a catalyst for an inter-agency process that will result in meaningful reform. Once implemented, these recommendations will ensure more open and transparent government for a society that accepts necessary, but more limited, secrecy.