

SECURITY REPORT CARD: quantitative indicators of secrecy in the federal government

EXCERPTS from A Report by OpenTheGovernment.org —
Americans for Less Secrecy, More Democracy

August 26, 2004
Executive Summary

Government data now confirm what many have suspected: Secrecy has increased dramatically in recent years under policies of the current administration.

Whether measured by the number of documents stamped secret, where agency heads put their dollars, or trends over time, the numbers reflect the extraordinary growth in secrecy in the face of increased public demand for information from government. Secrecy's recent growth started in the Clinton administration and accelerated under the Bush administration.

For example:

- The federal government spent \$6.5 billion last year creating 14 million new classified documents and securing accumulated secrets – more than it has for at least the past decade.
- Agency heads are shifting taxpayer dollars from efforts at declassifying pages of documents to efforts to secure its existing secrets.
- Last year, agencies in the executive branch spent an extraordinary \$120 to make and keep documents secret for every dollar spent on declassification.
- Public demand is rising with over 3 million requests for information from government agencies under the Freedom of Information Act last year alone. At the same time, resources devoted to handling public requests for information has held steady.

This report is an initial step toward establishing measurable benchmarks for regularly evaluating the level of secrecy in government.

Why a Report Card Now?

Recent events add to the growing sense that government policies and practices since 9/11 and under the Bush administration have dramatically expanded secrecy. Journalists investigating the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal discovered classified documents that revealed that the Pentagon had known for months about the problem. The Senate Intelligence Committee's report on pre-war intelligence on Iraq was delayed when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) initially sought to keep half the document classified. Yet when it was finally released to the public, as Steve Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists noted in recent testimony before a House subcommittee, CIA reviewers had redacted (blacked out) information in one section, which they had inconsistently approved for public release in another section of the same report.

Given that such recent events highlighted secrecy as a key problem, the question arose: could government secrecy be quantified?

A Note on the Indicators

OpenTheGovernment.org sought to identify measurable indicators of secrecy that could be used as a benchmark to evaluate openness and secrecy in government in the United States. We sought data easily available primarily from government sources. There are many indicators out there that could be included; this is not intended to be comprehensive but rather first step toward quantifiably measuring the scope of secrecy under the policies and practices of the current administration. There are myriad ways in which government interacts with the public, and secrecy in the federal government extends far beyond the executive branch. Over time, our intention is to expand this initial compilation to reflect the many topics on which public access to government information and secrecy affect policy decisions.

Other Indicators of Openness and Secrecy in Government

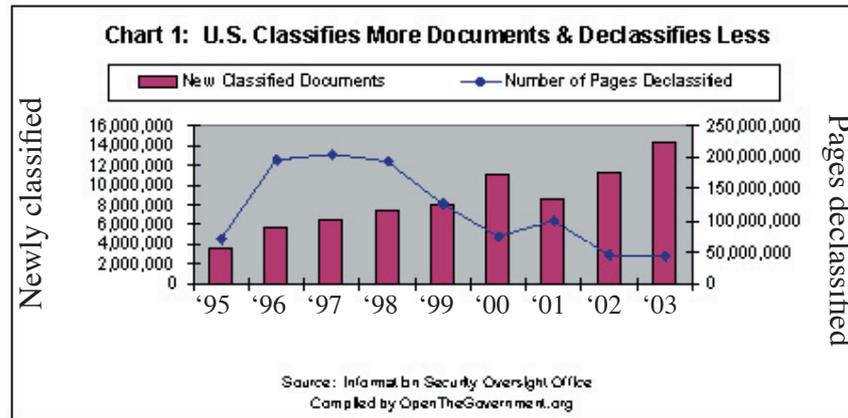
These indicators do not account for the proliferating, often ad hoc, policies for restricting or limiting public access to information that is not classified. Controls on information hinder information sharing between the government and the public. These controls include expanding, broadly defined classification categories such as:

- Sensitive Security Information
- Sensitive Homeland Security Information
- Sensitive But Unclassified and
- For Official Use Only

Some of these new regimes that limit, or have the potential to limit, the public's right to know were established by Congress. Other regimes, apart from the classification system, are created by the agencies, which employ them. Such vague restrictions on information previously available to the public hinder the ability of the public to make their communities healthy, safe places to live and strengthen government accountability.

In addition, the public has grown accustomed over the last decade to looking to government websites as a source of information. This is a crucial aspect of open government not measured in this set of indicators.

What follows is a brief look at how the main indicators we examine have changed over time.

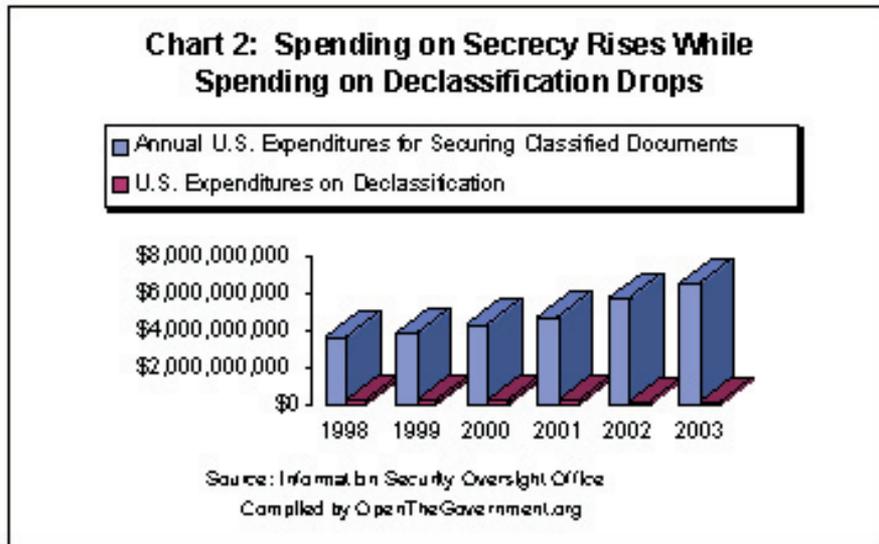


Years	New Classified Documents	Number of Pages Declassified
FY1995	3,579,505	69,000,000
FY1996	5,790,625	196,058,274
FY1997	6,520,154	204,050,369
FY1998	7,294,768	193,155,807
FY1999	8,038,592	126,809,769
FY2000	11,150,869	75,000,000
FY2001	8,650,735	100,104,990
FY2002	11,271,618	44,365,711
FY2003	14,228,020	43,093,233

With 14 million new documents stamped secret in fiscal year 2003, the federal government created 60 percent more secrets than it did in the year (FY 2001) prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. While some increase in classification is to be expected in wartime, this dramatic rise runs counter to recommendations by the 9/11 Commission and the congressional Joint Inquiry into 9/11, both of which recommended reforms to reduce unnecessary secrets.

The numbers in Chart 1 show that the rise in government secrecy, as measured by the number of newly classified documents, accelerated, but did not begin, during the current administration. In fact, government secrecy rose during much of the Clinton years.

And yet far more information could be made available to the public without harming national security. For example, the CIA took only two days – remarkably quick by agency norms – to review and release publicly, almost in its entirety, the controversial President’s Daily Brief (PDB) of August 6, 2001 regarding al Qaeda. And yet it is only one of 13 PDBs that have ever been released publicly during the entire past four decades the CIA has delivered these daily reports to the president. Based on this example, it raises the question whether most could safely be declassified now.



EDITORS NOTE: For complete report and updates see OpenTheGovernment.org