

Brief History of
Systematic Classification Review in CIA

1. The Agency was first introduced to systematic classification review by Executive Order (E.O.) 11652, 1 June 1972, which called for the automatic declassification of all national security classified documents over 30 years old unless they were specifically certified by the head of the originating agency or its successor as requiring continued protection. In response, the Directorate of Operations (DO) established a unit of three OSS officers late in 1972 to begin a review of the predecessor organization's records held at the National Archives. E.O. 11905, 19 February 1976, which dealt primarily with U.S. foreign intelligence (FI) activities, promulgated that the Director of Central Intelligence "shall establish a vigorous program to downgrade and declassify FI information as appropriate and consistent with E.O. 11652." The DO increased its effort, but as a result of discussions within the Agency regarding the merits of a centralized versus a decentralized program, the Executive Advisory Group decided on 1 March 1977 that there should be a centralized systematic classification review program under the Information Systems Analysis Staff (ISAS) of the Directorate of Administration. The Records Review Branch, consisting of 40 positions, was established within ISAS for this purpose, and, as the program developed, evolved into the Classification Review Group and the Classification Review Division (CRD) under ISAS' successor, the Office of Information Services. E.O. 12065, which was signed on 28 June 1978, to be effective 1 December 1978, called for the systematic classification review of all permanent records 20 years old or older (except for foreign government information -- 30 years old). It stipulated that the "transition to systematic review at 20 years shall be implemented as rapidly as practicable and shall be completed no more than 10 years from the effective date of this order," i.e., by December 1988. The order established further that subsequent reviews of documents enjoying an extension of classification shall be set at no more than ten-year intervals, with extensions by waiver allowable for specific categories of documents at the discretion of the Director of the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO). Such extensions were soon established, primarily to 20 years.

2. Gradually, CRD's positions have been nibbled away. It has now a table of organization [redacted] The T/O provides for 20 Classification Review Officers at the GS-13 level, supplemented by contract annuitants of long experience, information control assistants, and clericals. Four branches are established within the Division -- one for each directorate -- with a senior, experienced GS-14 officer at the head of each branch. Additionally, 13 independent contractors concentrate on the continuing review of the permanent OSS material. 25X1

3. It became apparent almost immediately that a force of this size would be far from enough to meet the transition period target (December 1988) set by the order. A study conducted for the General Accounting Office in January of 1980

found that the Division, at production rates extant at that time, would require [redacted] officers at a budget cost of \$80 million to meet the target. In 1981, with production rates more than doubling without an increase in manpower, it was still apparent that the Division would meet less than 30 percent of its goal. Early in 1982, the problem was restudied, with a better "fix" on the amount of material to be reviewed. Even with production rates having nearly tripled without an increase in manpower, the study projected that the program would accomplish only about a third of its goal. This assumed that the current, higher production rates could be sustained, and the full staffing complement of 33 would be maintained. It was projected that, at those levels, the transition goal could not be reached until the year 2007; otherwise, an effort to meet the December 1988 target would require an infusion [redacted] a cost exceeding \$19 million. Then by 1988, with the target still not having been met, and work on the backlog thus continuing, the program would be further burdened by two additional requirements: documents originated in the late sixties would become eligible for their initial review, and the ten-year re-review period would commence for documents initially reviewed in 1978 and forward. By 1998, those documents initially reviewed and marked for a 20-year re-review would be added to the pile, and so on. Yet with all this effort, the January 1980 study indicated that only something on the order of six percent of the material was declassified. The 1982 study found that, in the six months preceding, about 30 percent of the documents were being downgraded, with only two percent being declassified.

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Activities Which Require a Classification Review Function
in Liaison with other Government Agencies

1. At this writing, the Department of State and the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) are commencing a review of the Department's 1950-54 holdings for eventual accessioning to NARS, which is expected to occupy 25 NARS personnel and several experienced foreign service officers for the next four years. The Classification Review Division (CRD) of the Office of Information Services will be supplying alternating two-man teams of officers who will participate in the review, initially full-time.

2. The 1955-57 series of the Department of State's Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) will comprise an estimated 28,000 pages which the Division will review in its entirety. The Department is also in the process of reviewing information which will be released as a supplement to the FRUS collection. This may amount to some 124,000 pages which the Division will review on a selected basis. The 1958-60 series of FRUS will require a complete review of some 33,000 pages.

3. CRD is coordinating with the Presidential Libraries in the review of material in their possession. The Truman Library, for example, has requested our assistance in the review of approximately 50,000 pages of material concerning national security topics, and the Eisenhower Library holds approximately 138,000 pages of similar material. The Johnson and Kennedy Libraries are still cataloging their holdings, but it can be assured that their collections of documents relating to national security will be even larger and more sensitive. The Carter collection is estimated to hold nearly 1000 cubic feet or approximately 2,000,000 pages of national security paper.

4. Each week the Department of Defense (DoD) submits several documents to the Agency which it has turned up in the course of its continuing systematic classification review program. In addition, the Department's several historical organizations are moving ahead vigorously with their writing of histories, especially in covering the conflict in Southeast Asia. The Army Center for Military History is preparing 23 volumes on Vietnam, of which CRD has so far reviewed three. Contracts have been drawn up with several former Republic of Vietnam generals now in this country to prepare additional volumes written from their points of view. The other services are also busily writing: at this moment CRD is reviewing 600 pages of an Air Force history on interdiction in Laos.

Toward a Limited Customized
Systematic Review Program

1. Records housekeeping; relief to the Freedom of Information Act, Privacy Act, and Mandatory Review programs; and demonstration of a good-faith effort to release information to the public provide the rationale for maintaining a systematic classification review program within the Agency, but on a very modest scale. The problem with the present Executive order is that it guarantees inefficiency in that its arbitrary review periods apply to all materials with little cognizance of their widely varying degrees of sensitivity. A tailored systematic classification review program, on the other hand, can recognize these variances and thus respond to the spirit of the new order by releasing non-sensitive material while protecting the truly sensitive information, and can make more efficient use of resources in the process. It makes little sense to spend man-years in the review and periodic re-review of most DO and DDS&T material that is so sensitive that less than one percent will be declassified for many years to come. Review should concentrate instead on -- for example -- FBIS holdings and certain DDI finished intelligence which offer some relatively early potential for declassification of material that is sought by scholars and researchers, and thus produces some reasonable results for the effort expended.

2. To implement this modest program CRD reviewers would work through the Records Management Division and Directorate RMOs to expand their program by including the categorizing of permanent Agency records according to their releasability and interest to the public. The objective would be, as a part of management planning, to identify collections to which reviewing manpower would be most effectively applied. This activity would focus on the records of the DDI and the DDA with very limited effort expended on DO and DDS&T records since declassifiable information in the latter two is so negligible.

3. There is further rationale for "keeping our hand in" and maintaining some continuity and expertise within CIA in the business of systematic classification review. Should a change of administration result in one that is desirous of returning to a stronger effort to declassify information, we could find ourselves in short order having to gear up from scratch to reinvent the wheel. Also, having a program which provides evidence that we have been maintaining a good-faith position with regard to declassification and release might save us from the worst of a reimposed and intolerable new "12065."