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Pentagon

The Number of Secrets Is Up, but Not by So Much

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 8 — For a year now, the Reagan Administration has been trying to bring order to the Federal Government's chaotic system of keeping secrets, first by making fewer secrets, then by imposing tighter safeguards to prevent them from slipping out.

The Administration has markedly slowed the growth in secrets and has restrained the number of officials who have authority to wield a secret stamp. Before 1980, Government secrets went up at a rate of roughly 10 percent a year. In 1980, officials took 16,058,764 separate actions to classify information. The next year that figure was up 8.2 percent to 17,374,102 decisions. But in 1982 the number grew less than one percent to 17,504,611 secrets.

Even so, the pile of secrets is mountainous. If each of those stamped a secret in 1982 was enclosed in a folder only one-eighth of an inch thick, 328 piles of secrets could be stacked beside the Washington Monument at the same height of 555 feet.

The effort to prevent secrets from becoming public knowledge has been less successful. Congress has put a hold on Pentagon plans to rely more on lie detector tests to find the sources of leaks and has rejected a proposal to withhold information on the causes of military air crashes.

The Justice Department still has 20 to 25 cases a year to evaluate for potentially serious violations of secrecy regulations, such as unauthorized disclosures to the press or leaving a secret document in the trunk of a car. Minor infractions continued to rise last year, with 475 cases of unauthorized access and 1,197 instances of unauthorized transmission. Nor was there any noticeable slackening of leaks to the press by Administration officials to serve their own purposes.

New Report to Reagan

On the other hand, the Administration has substantially slowed the release of older secret materials that may be of historical interest, both by tightening the regulations for release

and by cutting back on funds to pay for scrutinizing the documents. The Administration has also issued a directive meant to control what public officials write even after they leave the Government.

In a new report to President Reagan, the Information Security Oversight Office noted that last year "the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency generated nearly 98 percent of all classified information." The Pentagon was first, by far, making 291,831 original decisions to classify information. Under authority delegated from superiors, other officials ballooned that into 13,738,420 "derivative" decisions to classify information.

For instance, when Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger signed his Defense Guidance last year to provide strategic direction to the armed forces, he was the original authority in classifying the following paragraph secret:

"In Central Europe, first priority will be to stop the initial Warsaw Pact thrust with minimal loss of territory, then to gain the strategic initiative to restore the integrity and security of the region."

Later, whenever a military planner referred to that guidance to justify his war plans, he used derivative authority to continue the classification. On an average, every original classification in the Pentagon led to 47 more chops with the rubber stamp.

Some of those decisions seem questionable, at least in retrospect. In one case, the Defense Department classified the dispatch of an Awacs early warning aircraft to Egypt. But the Awacs landed at Cairo West, Egypt's biggest civilian airport, and parked next to a plane from Aeroflot, the Soviet airline.

During the war between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, the Pentagon classified weather information secret even though it was obtained from the United States Weather Service and was available to anyone, including the Soviet Union. In addition, the Soviet Union was gathering its own

information from 16 satellites over the South Atlantic that were monitoring the weather, military action and communications.

The information overseeing office reported that, by the end of the year, the inventory of top secret papers throughout the Government had dropped 18 percent from the year before to 1,434,668 documents as Federal agencies cleared out their files.

Big Black Capital Letters

Top secret is more stringent than secret or confidential (the markings are always in big black capital letters) and is defined as information that would cause "exceptionally grave damage to the national security" if disclosed. But, despite the reduction in inventory, most officials have a hard time saying with a straight face that every document in the inventory fits that prescription.

Moreover, the overseeing office lamented that there had been a "significant increase in original top secret classification decisions," with the C.I.A. leading the way. That suggested more top secret papers would show up in the next count.

Mr. Reagan's executive order that became effective a year ago instructed officials to release secret documents as they became 30 years old, compared with the 20-year limit set by President Carter. That, and a lack of funds, has slowed that flow.

Moreover, officials reviewing older documents have been instructed to be more chary about what they release as the 30-year-old documents refer to the era of the cold war and the Korean War, and may expose information the Administration prefers kept secret.

As a result, the number of pages being reviewed has fallen steadily, from 90.3 million in 1980 under an executive order issued by President Carter, to 19.5 million in 1982 under President Reagan's executive order. Beyond that, the percentage of pages released has dropped from 99.5 percent 10 years ago to 85 percent last year.