

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Secrecy Versus Openness: New Proposed Arrangements for Balancing Competing Needs

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### Summary

Disputes have arisen recently over whether or not to declassify portions of the sensitive content of reports resulting from congressional investigations and national commission inquiries into the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, and related matters. As a result, some have called for Congress to create a special mechanism for the impartial and expeditious resolution of such disputes (S. 2672/H.R. 4855), which may also facilitate better information sharing as recommended by the 9/11 Commission. In this regard, Congress has previously legislated special arrangements for the impartial and expeditious review of certain kinds of officially secret records with a view to making them available to the public. Such efforts at balancing legitimate competing needs for secrecy and openness are examined in this report, which will be updated as events warrant.

Controversy has developed of late over what some regard to be zealous use of security classification to make segments of investigative reports officially secret. J. William Leonard, director of the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO), which is responsible for executive branch oversight of security classification, has taken issue with the classification of portions of the report of Major General Antonio M. Taguba concerning his investigation of prisoner interrogation conditions at Abu Ghraib Prison, and called the action a “bureaucratic impulse” to “almost reflexively reach out to the classification system.”<sup>1</sup>

Recent problems with security-classifiable information in congressional documents date from the closing months of 2002, when the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence prepared to publish their report on their joint inquiry into intelligence community activities prior to, and after, the

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<sup>1</sup> Shaun Waterman (UPI), “Pentagon Classifying ‘Impulse’ Criticized,” *Washington Times*, July 8, 2004, p. A6.

September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.<sup>2</sup> “It took more than six months of wrangling,” according to a *Washington Post* editorial, “for the congressional joint committee investigating the Sept. 11 attacks to extract approval to publish its report — and even then it had to black out an entire section involving Saudi Arabia.”<sup>3</sup> A similar experience occurred with the July 9, 2004, release of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on the intelligence community’s prewar intelligence assessments on Iraq.<sup>4</sup> According to one account, an estimated 20% of the draft report was deleted at the request of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prior to its publication.<sup>5</sup> “It could have been worse, though,” editorialized the *Washington Post*: “If Intelligence officials had their way, nearly half of the 511-page report would have been redacted, rather than the 15 percent or so that was excised in the final version.”<sup>6</sup>

These developments have prompted calls for the creation of an independent panel for the impartial and expeditious resolution of disputes over whether or not to declassify portions of the sensitive content of official reports prior to their publication. In its recent editorial on the matter, the *Washington Post* said:

No one wants to insist on the release of information that could aid terrorists or other enemies of the United States. Clearly, some information reviewed by lawmakers or other investigators must remain secret. But the way the system is structured, no one can have confidence that the judgments to keep information classified are being made on the basis of national security alone — and there is ample evidence to the contrary. The reports already produced have offered a powerful, even chastening demonstration of the importance of outside oversight and review; it’s hard to see what the arguments for classifying parts of those documents would have been. Among other effects, this undermines the credibility of the classifiers when it comes to protecting real secrets.<sup>7</sup>

The creation of such a panel may facilitate improved information sharing, and “restore a better balance between security and shared knowledge,” as recommended recently by the 9/11 Commission.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning the impact of extensive use of classification on the integrity of the classification system, the late Potter Stewart, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court,

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001*, report, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., S.Rept. 107-351, H.Rept. 107-792 (Washington: GPO, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, “Credible Classifications,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2004, p. A14.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community’s Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, report, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (Washington: GPO, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “The Committee: C.I.A. Deleted Large Sections, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2004, p. A9.

<sup>6</sup> Editorial, “Credible Classifications,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2004, p. A14.

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, “Credible Classifications,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2004, p. A14.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington: GPO, 2004), p. 417.

warned that “when everything is classified, then nothing is classified, and the system becomes one to be disregarded by the cynical or the careless, and to be manipulated by those intent on self-protection or self-promotion.” Indeed, he continued, “the hallmark of a truly effective internal security system would be the maximum possible disclosure, recognizing that secrecy can best be preserved only when credibility is truly maintained.”<sup>9</sup>

## Security Classification

Since 1940, security classification policy and procedure — the creation of official secrets — has been prescribed in a series of presidential executive orders. Current arrangements are mandated by E.O. 12958, as amended by E.O. 13292.<sup>10</sup> Congress has, on occasion, considered statutorily establishing security classification policy, but has not actively pursued the matter.<sup>11</sup> The presidential orders specify three levels of protection, ranging from “Confidential,” to “Secret,” to “Top Secret,” the last being the highest. They also indicate types of information that may be so protected, such as “military plans” and “intelligence activities”; the duration of such protection; and the manner in which classified information is to be identified and marked. Classification prohibitions and limitations are provided. For instance, information is not to be classified to conceal violations of law, inefficiency, or administrative error. Procedures for conducting background investigations and granting security clearances for individuals to have access to classified information are also specified in presidential directives, as are the senior executive branch officials who are vested with authority to classify an original document. Other federal personnel classify documents on a derivative basis; that is, they classify records on the basis of their content having been derived from other classified material.

Security classification may be used as an auxiliary to other national security information protection requirements. For example, since 1947, the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) has been statutorily required to “protect intelligence sources and methods from unauthorized disclosure.”<sup>12</sup> This may be accomplished, in part, through security classification and attendant procedures, but is a responsibility that the DCI must fulfill apart from the use of security classification.

Security-classified documents may become declassified if a date or event for declassification, prescribed at the time of their classification, is realized; an applicable time frame, such as 10 years or, by extension, 25 years, from the date of original classification, lapses; an authorized holder of the classified documents successfully challenges the continued need for their protected status; or a mandatory review by agency officials, prompted by a request pursuant to the President’s security classification

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times Company v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713, 729 (1971).

<sup>10</sup> See 3 C.F.R., 1995 Comp., pp. 333-356, 3 C.F.R., 2003 Comp., pp. 196-218.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, U.S. Congress, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *A Statutory Basis for Classifying Information*, hearing, 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Mar. 16, 1994 (Washington: GPO, 1995); U.S. Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, *Secrecy* (Washington: GPO, 1997); U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, *S. 712 — Government Secrecy Act of 1997*, hearing, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., Mar. 25, 1998 (Washington: GPO, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> 50 U.S.C. § 403-3(c)(6).

executive order or the access procedures of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, results in a determination that classification is no longer warranted.

## Accelerated Declassification

Beginning in 1992, Congress has legislated special arrangements for the impartial and expeditious review of certain kinds of officially secret records, with a view to making them available to the public. The first of these involved records pertaining to the November 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, TX. Efforts by the public to gain access to records deriving from federal investigations and examinations of the assassination of President Kennedy and surrounding events were frustrated by several complications. Operative since July 1967, the FOI Act provides any person — individual or corporate, regardless of citizenship — with access to identifiable, unpublished, existing records of the federal departments and agencies without having to demonstrate a need or even a reason for such a request.<sup>13</sup> The burden of proof for withholding material sought by the public is placed upon the government. The statute, however, specifies nine categories of information that may be withheld from disclosure. Among these stated exemptions to the rule of disclosure are protections for (1) information properly classified for national defense or foreign policy purposes as secret under criteria established by an executive order; (2) data specifically excepted from disclosure by a statute which requires that matters be withheld in a non-discretionary manner or which establishes particular criteria for withholding, or refers to particular types of matters to be withheld; (3) personnel, medical, and similar files the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy; and (4) certain kinds of investigatory records compiled for law enforcement purposes.<sup>14</sup> These four exemptions tended to be the ones most often invoked by the agencies in support of their withholding of assassination materials sought pursuant to the FOI Act. In addition, congressional records were not subject to the FOI Act, nor were state or local government records, and law enforcement records of these jurisdictions were exemptible under comparable state FOI laws.

*JFK*, a 1991 film dramatization of President Kennedy's assassination and surrounding circumstances, heightened public interest in the tragedy and explanations of its occurrence. Subsequently, former President Gerald Ford, the only surviving member of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, chaired by Chief Justice Earl Warren, publicly appealed to the leaders of the House of Representatives to seek release of all records concerning the assassination.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, various conspiracy theories, contentions, and unsubstantiated stories about the event and those allegedly involved in its perpetration, which had arisen during the subsequent decades, were troubling to many Americans. In response, Congress legislated procedures and conditions for the independent review and expeditious disclosure of previously unreleased official records relevant to the assassination of President Kennedy. The

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<sup>13</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552.

<sup>14</sup> The full list of exemptions may be found at 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(1)-(9).

<sup>15</sup> George Lardner, Jr., "Ford Urges House Leaders to Seek Release of All Records on Kennedy Assassination," *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 1992, p. A12.

vehicle for these arrangements was the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992.<sup>16</sup>

The statute created a temporary, independent, five-member board to manage the gathering of relevant records for inclusion in the Kennedy Assassination Records Collection, and to review the included records with a view to their immediate or later public disclosure in whole or in part. Appointed by the President from private life with the advice and consent of the Senate, board members received the security clearances necessary for them to perform their duties. Among the records examined by the board members were approximately 250,000 to 300,000 pages of relevant CIA material, and another 23 linear feet of records, 2,500 pages of which related to the portion of the investigation conducted by the Commission to Investigate CIA Activities Within the United States concerning the Kennedy assassination.<sup>17</sup> The review board completed its work and expired in the closing months of 1998.<sup>18</sup> The resulting President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection is managed by the National Archives and Records Administration.<sup>19</sup> The review board received a total appropriation of \$3,750,000 for its operations.<sup>20</sup> In December 2003, National Archives management generally estimated that 98%-99% of the collection is open in part for public examination, and indicated that national security is the principal reason why some materials remained undisclosed at that time.

As the Kennedy assassination records review board was completing its work, Congress enacted the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act, which created an interagency group to “locate, identify, inventory, recommend for declassification, and make available to the public at the National Archives and Records Administration, all classified Nazi war criminal records held by the United States,” among other functions.<sup>21</sup> The President was given broad discretion to appoint to the interagency group such government officials as he deemed appropriate, including, specifically, the director of the Holocaust Museum, the historian of the Department of State, the Archivist of the United States, and at least three members from private life. Two years later, this mandate was supplemented by adding classified Japanese Imperial Government records held by the United States to the efforts of the interagency group to organize, recommend for declassification, and make available to the public certain sensitive captured records of the World War II era.<sup>22</sup> The National Archives provides ongoing information concerning the activities and operations of the

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<sup>16</sup> 106 Stat. 3443.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, *The Assassination Materials Disclosure Act of 1992*, hearing, 102<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., May 12, 1992 (Washington: GPO, 1992), pp. 51, 357-361, 384-412, 419-427.

<sup>18</sup> See U.S. Assassination Records Review Board, *Final Report of the Assassination Records Review Board* (Washington: GPO, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> For Internet access to the Web homepage for the collection, visit [[http://www.archives.gov/research\\_room/jfk](http://www.archives.gov/research_room/jfk)].

<sup>20</sup> See 110 Stat. 3009-340, 111 Stat. 1300.

<sup>21</sup> 112 Stat. 1859, 1860.

<sup>22</sup> 114 Stat. 2864.

interagency group on its website, including copies of *Disclosure*, the newsletter of the group, and related research papers.<sup>23</sup>

## New Arrangements

In its editorial proposing consideration of “an alternative mechanism that could balance the legitimate competing needs for secrecy and openness” when disputes arise over whether or not to declassify portions of the sensitive content of an official report prior to its publication, the *Washington Post* suggested “a souped-up version of an existing entity, the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel [ISCAP], created in 1995 to rule on declassification requests and composed of representatives from the CIA, the State, Defense, and Justice departments, the national security adviser, and the National Archives.”<sup>24</sup> ISCAP was established by E.O. 12958; the director of ISOO serves as the executive secretary of ISCAP. According to its most recent activities report, ISCAP acted upon 37 appeals involving 101 documents in 2002, and “voted to declassify 11 documents (11%) in full, to declassify portions of 56 others (55%), and to affirm the agencies’ decisions in their entirety for 34 documents (34%).”<sup>25</sup>

In furtherance of revising classification arrangements, Senator Ron Wyden, with Senators Trent Lott, Robert Graham, and Olympia Snowe as cosponsors, introduced S. 2672, the Independent National Security Classification Board Act, on July 15, 2004. The legislation would establish within the executive branch a board of three members, appointed by the President with Senate approval, “to review and make recommendations on overhauling the standards and processes used in the classification system for national security information,” according to Senator Wyden. The new standards and processes proposed by the board would be offered for congressional and executive comment and revision. Thereafter, the board would “begin to implement the new system, reviewing and making recommendations on current and new national security classifications, subject to Executive Branch veto that must be accompanied by a public, written explanation.” Referred to the Select Committee on Intelligence, the bill seeks to improve security classification arrangements generally, and, through requested reviews of classification decisions, address the disputes over declassifying portions of the sensitive content of an official report prior to its publication. “The balance in this proposal,” said Senator Wyden, “assures that the public and Congress have access to an independent Board for national security classification matters while leaving undisturbed the Commander in Chief’s constitutional prerogative in military and foreign policy matters through the power to appoint the Board and to veto the Board’s classification decisions.”<sup>26</sup> A companion bill, H.R. 4855, was introduced in the House on July 19 by Representative Robert Cramer, Jr., and it was referred to the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

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<sup>23</sup> Available at [<http://www.archives.gov/iwg/>].

<sup>24</sup> Editorial, “Credible Classifications,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2004, p. A14.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Information Security Oversight Office, *Highlights of Activities of the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel, January-December 2002* (Washington: n.d.), available at [<http://www.fas.org/sgp/advisory/iscap/iscap02.html>].

<sup>26</sup> *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 150, July 15, 2004, pp. S8234-S8237.