

The Atlantic Monthly | September 2007

The Nation In Numbers

## Classify This

The Bush administration's pathological hiding of information

by Graeme Wood

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The Bush administration conducts much of its work in the shadows. "Black site" detentions, extraordinary renditions, and domestic eavesdropping all happen in secret, and only by the grace of leaks and slipups do we know they happen at all.

Most secrets stay secret. But for the last quarter century, at least we've known how many secrets were being kept, because of the [Information Security Oversight Office](#), or ISOO, an internal government watchdog that keeps tabs on secrecy standards and the number of documents classified each year. Its data show that the shadows have been getting darker and bigger lately, and are now at least the size of those at the height of the Cold War.

In 2006 alone, the Bush administration classified no fewer than 20.6 million documents, up from ISOO's recorded low of 3.6 million in the Clinton era. At that rate, with an average document length of 10 pages, the executive branch could fill an archive the size of the Library of Congress in just 40 years.

Secrecy always grows during wartime, and the recent jump owes much to Iraq and Afghanistan. But classification also follows the rhythms of domestic politics. Information is power, so the saying goes, and executive-branch secrecy has the effect of hiding activities from Congress.

The pace of classification can vary finely, even in individual government agencies, according to which party holds the White House and which holds the House of Representatives. For instance, the Department of Defense, whose employees tend to vote Republican, classifies zealously under Republican presidents, and even more when the Democrats control the House.

The oversight office monitors these trends and advises the president if classification efforts are threatening national security. But starting in 2003, the White House became the government's most flagrant scofflaw: The Office of the Vice President simply stopped reporting how many staffers had the authority to classify and how often they exercised that power.

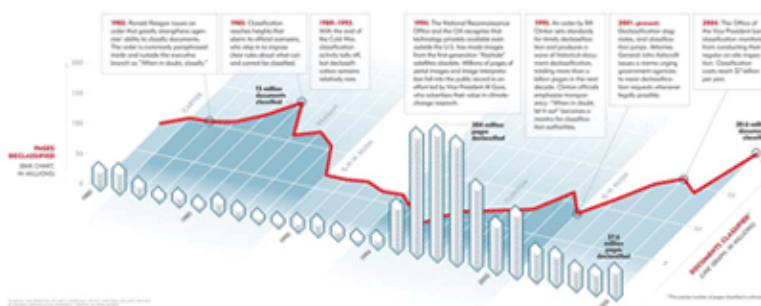
Recent administrations have differed over how much secrecy is best. Ronald Reagan ordered agencies to err on the side of caution; Bill Clinton urged them to classify sparingly. But some observers say this administration's commitment to secrecy stands out. Then—Attorney General John Ashcroft issued a government-wide memo in 2001 pledging the Justice Department's support for all legally defensible efforts to resist [Freedom of Information Act](#) requests. Thomas Blanton, who heads the National Security Archive, says, "A single query has animated all the choices this White House has made: Does this decision enhance presidential power or not? And if it increases presidential power, they go and do it."

Leaving aside the blinkering effect it has on congressional oversight, too much secrecy impedes the routine functioning of the executive branch, by making useful information difficult for many government employees to see. It also makes leaks—both intentional and accidental—more likely, as civil servants take the top-secret stamp less seriously and lose track of what's restricted.

Ironically, the vice president's office itself has provided evidence of this latter danger. Representative Henry Waxman, the Democratic chair of the House Oversight Committee, has pointed out that Dick Cheney's office has been involved in at least three major leaks since 2003: disclosing parts of the [National Intelligence Estimate](#), passing secret information to coup plotters in the Philippines, and revealing Valerie Plame's identity. "It would appear particularly irresponsible," Waxman wrote to Cheney in June, "to give an office with your history of security breaches an exemption" from government-wide regulations concerning

classified information.

Even John Bolton, the former undersecretary of state and U.S. representative to the United Nations—and a defender of extensive classification—acknowledges that the current classification environment is chaotic and likely to produce breaches. In a letter urging leniency for former vice-presidential chief of staff I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Bolton wrote, “It was frequently hard to know who was cleared to see what or what could be discussed with whom. If there is anyone who fully understands our ‘system’ for protecting classified information, I have yet to meet him.”



[[Click here](#) to view a larger image of the chart above.]

### 1982:

Ronald Reagan issues an order that greatly strengthens agencies' ability to classify documents. The order is commonly paraphrased inside and outside the executive branch as “When in doubt, classify.”

### 1985:

Classification reaches heights that alarm its official overseers, who step in to impose clear rules about what can and cannot be classified.

**1989–1992:** With the end of the Cold War, classification activity tails off, but declassification remains relatively rare.

### 1994:

The National Reconnaissance Office and the CIA recognize that technology privately available even outside the U.S. has made images from the first-generation “Keyhole” satellites obsolete. Millions of pages of aerial images and image interpretation fall into the public record in an effort led by Vice President Al Gore, who advertises their value in climate-change research.

### 1995:

An order by Bill Clinton sets standards for timely declassification and produces a wave of historical-document declassification, totaling more than a billion pages in the next decade. Clinton officials emphasize transparency: “When in doubt, let it out” becomes a mantra for classification authorities.

### 2001–present:

Declassification stagnates, and classification jumps. Attorney General John Ashcroft issues a memo urging government agencies to resist declassification requests whenever legally possible.

### 2004:

The Office of the Vice President bars classification monitors from conducting their regular on-site inspection. Classification costs reach \$7 billion per year.

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