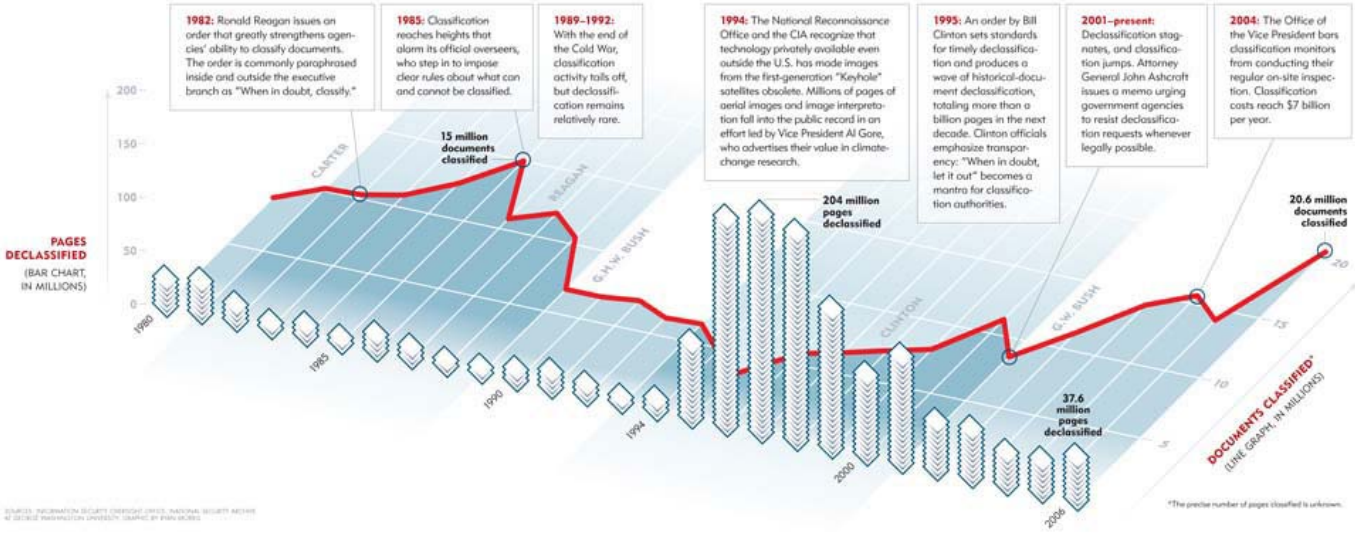
1982: Ronald Reagan issues an order that greatly strengthens agencies' ability to classify documents. The order is commonly paraphrased inside and outside the executive branch as "When in doubt, classify."
1985: Classification reaches heights that alarm its official overseers, who step in to impose clear 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.
PAGES DECLASSIFIED
(BAR CHART, IN MILLIONS)
200
150
100
50
0
1980
1985
1990
1994
2000
2006
CARTER
REAGAN
G.H.W. BUSH
CLINTON
G.W. BUSH
15 million documents classified
204 million pages declassified
37.6 million pages declassified
20.6 million documents classified
20
15
10
5
DOCUMENTS CLASSIFIED*
(LINE GRAPH, IN MILLIONS)
*The precise number of pages classified is unknown.