

## SECRECY REPORT CARD: AN UPDATE

April 5, 2005

This report is part of an ongoing effort to establish measurable indicators of secrecy in the federal government. The first *Secrecy Report Card* was released in August 2004.

### The Federal Government Keeps More Secrets for Longer, New Government Data Shows

In 2004, the federal government set a new record for keeping secrets. Last year, federal employees chose to classify information a record 15.6 million times, according to new government figures released this week. The figure is 10 percent higher than the total in the previous year. And when given a choice, government employees last year chose to keep their new secrets longer than in years past: Two-thirds (66 percent) of the time government employees chose to keep those new secrets for more than a decade. At the same time, the flow of old secrets to the public dropped to its lowest point in nearly a decade to 28 million pages.

The numbers reflect the extraordinary growth of secrets kept in the Cold War-era classification system. Excessive secrecy prevents the public from making informed choices to make our families safer and our nation more secure. National security threats to public health dangers, too much secrecy makes communities unaware of dangers and undermines our democracy. People like Glenda Bowling, who wanted to track rocket fuel found in her community's drinking water supplies, and Sibel Edmonds, who as an FBI translator raised questions about potential improprieties in government, and the countless others making a difference in their communities face inappropriate obstacles when secrecy is wrongfully invoked.

The new data, released in the annual report of the National Archives' Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO) (available at [www.archives.gov/isoo](http://www.archives.gov/isoo)), show that Congress and the executive branch have failed thus far to set adequate checks and balances on secrecy in the federal government. The new numbers show that:

#### At a Glance: Secrecy in 2004

##### **15.6 Million Secrets**

How many times government officials decided to keep a secret

##### **66% Info Kept at Least 10 Yrs.**

How often secret-keepers chose to keep a secret at least a decade (usually is near 50% each year)

##### **↓72% Old Papers Trickle Out**

Drop Since 9/11 in pages of old secrets released to the public

##### **28 Million**

Pages of old secrets released

##### **260 Million**

Number of classified pages awaiting agency review for public release by Dec. 31, 2006

##### **February 2013**

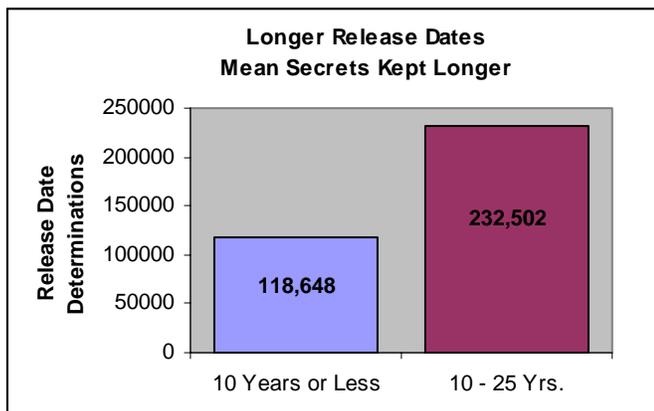
When, at their current rate, agencies will declassify material by that Dec 2006 deadline

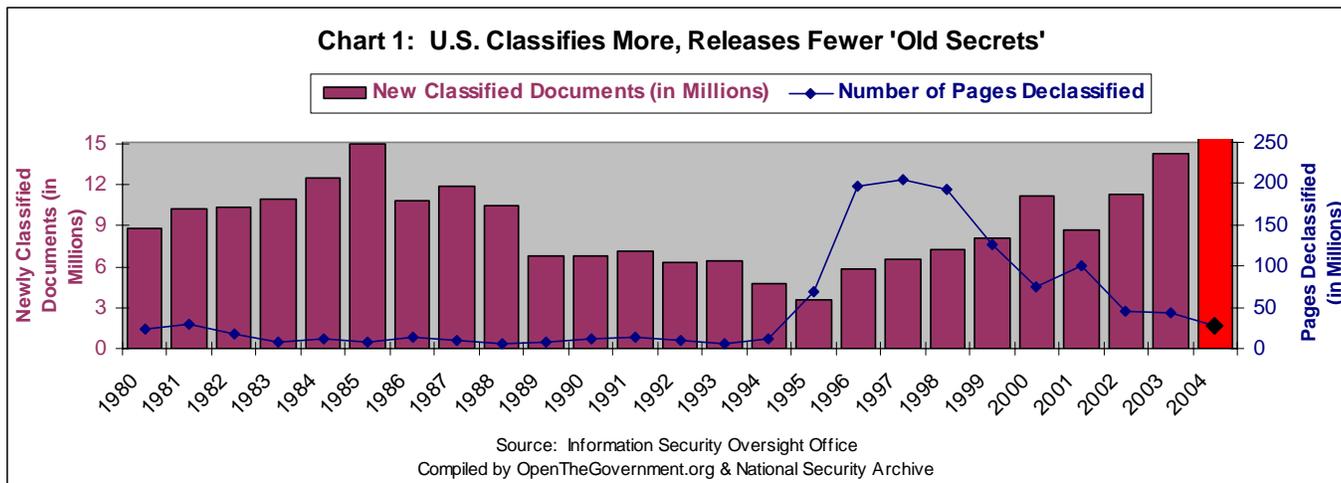
- **Federal government employees decided to keep a secret a record 15.6 million times.** At the same time, the number of people with ability to classify information has remained relatively steady. While an exact count of the number of documents kept secret is impossible, this number is the closest measure we have of secrecy in the federal government. This number reflects the number of times that people in the federal government or working as contractors for the federal government decided to mark documents secret.
- **The flow of old secrets from government to the public dropped to a trickle.** Declassification has dropped 72 percent since 9/11 from just over 100 million pages declassified in the year before 9/11 to just 28.4 million pages in fiscal year 2004, the lowest number of pages since 1994, when agencies began automatically releasing documents classified 25 years or longer. Declassification refers to the process by which agencies review classified material for possible release to the public.

By December 31, 2006, the federal agencies must review 260 million pages scheduled for release to the public. At the government's current rate, it will get through these pages by February 2013. Even then, it will have a decade of new secrets waiting for review. And that assumes agencies receive continued resources for this work. The overall federal budget crunch will make it even harder to catch up – unless new controls and resources (such as declassification boards in each agency, restraints on what information can be kept secret in the first place and other oversight of agency classification decisions) are put in place to restrain the burgeoning secrecy.

- **These new secrets will be kept hidden from the public for a longer time.** When a secret document is first created, one of roughly 4,000 people in the federal government gets to decide when the document should be released to the public. Usually, about half of the time a secret will be released in a decade or less. The other half of the time the "original classifier" chooses to keep the secret between 10 and 25 years.

In 2004, however, more often than not (roughly 66 percent) the "original classifiers" chose to keep their information secret for more than a decade. Not only is the government keeping more secrets, it's keeping each document secret for a longer period of time.





Year (Fiscal Year)	New Choices to Classify Documents	Number of Pages Declassified
1995	3,579,505	69,000,000
1996	5,790,625	196,058,274
1997	6,520,154	204,050,369
1998	7,294,768	193,155,807
1999	8,038,592	126,809,769
2000	11,150,869	75,000,000
2001	8,650,735	100,104,990
2002	11,271,618	44,365,711
2003	14,228,020	43,093,233
2004	15,645,237	28,413,690

**About This Update**

In 2004, **OpenTheGovernment.org** sought to identify measurable indicators of secrecy that could be used as a benchmark to evaluate openness and secrecy in government in the United States. We sought data easily available primarily from government sources.

This report updates some of the data presented in the *Secrecy Report Card*. That report showed that in 2003 agencies in the executive branch spent an extraordinary \$120 to make and keep documents secret for every dollar spent on declassification. In addition, in 2003 alone – the most recent year for which data is available – the public used the Freedom of Information Act to request information from government agencies a record 3 million times. At the same time, resources devoted to handling public requests for information has held steady. That full report is available at [www.OpenTheGovernment.org](http://www.OpenTheGovernment.org).

**About OpenTheGovernment.org**

OpenTheGovernment.org is an unprecedented coalition of journalists, consumer and good government groups, environmentalists, labor and others united out of a concern for what *U.S.*

*News and World Report* called a "shroud of secrecy" descending over our local, state and federal governments. We're focused on making the federal government a more open place to make us safer, strengthen public trust in government, and support our democratic principles. For a complete list of our steering committee and organizations and individuals partnering with OpenTheGovernment.org, see [www.openthegovernment.org](http://www.openthegovernment.org).

**Join OpenTheGovernment.org.** To join the coalition, simply read and sign your name (as an organization or individual) to our Statement of Values, available at [www.OpenTheGovernment.org](http://www.OpenTheGovernment.org).

**Help support OpenTheGovernment.org.** OpenTheGovernment.org's work depends on donations from many generous tax-deductible contributions from foundations and individuals committed to reducing secrecy in our government. Please make donations payable to our fiscal sponsor, The Fund for Constitutional Government, 122 Maryland Ave NE, Washington, DC 20002.

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