

Public Interest Declassification Board

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EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

William J. Bosanko

March 6, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We wish to inform you of the work and recent recommendations of the Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB) regarding secrecy in Government and the status of the Government's declassification effort. The Board is required by law to report to you, and we have a statutory mandate to promote "the fullest possible public access to a thorough, accurate, and reliable documentary record of significant...national security decisions and...activities." This mandate reflects an underlying premise of representative democracy: citizens' access to information about Government is essential to their informed decisions and their ability to hold elected officials accountable.

Our Board was heartened by your early statements and actions on openness in Government. Still, we have to sound a note of alarm about how well the Government is doing in this area. In fact, we have concluded that this fundamental principle of self-government is at risk and, without decisive action, the situation is likely to worsen.

In December 2007, the Board issued its report, *Improving Declassification* (enclosed). The following recommendations are the most important:

- Prioritize declassification of records of major historical significance.
- Expedite declassification of the records of former Presidents.
- Establish a National Declassification Center to streamline the inefficient and time-consuming sequential processing of records with multiple equities and require agencies to participate.
- Expand the uses and roles of historians, historical advisory boards, and interagency cooperative history offices to prioritize declassification reviews and to develop historical studies on selected defense, intelligence, and foreign relations topics.
- Develop means to declassify national security information of major historical significance in Congressional records under control of the Congress.
- Develop the means to handle the ever-larger volumes of classified records produced in electronic and other non-print forms.

When issued in 1995, Executive Order 12958, "Classified National Security Information," envisioned that most 25-year-old records could be automatically declassified with limited review. This has proven not to be the case. Intensive effort pursuant to the Order has produced a mountain of over 400 million pages housed at the National Archives and Records Administration but inaccessible to the public until further

declassification and archival processing can be accomplished. It is apparent that the current system is deficient and cannot succeed as currently configured. There are major four reasons:

First, the volume of classified records vastly exceeds the agencies' capacity to perform timely declassification. This produces extended delays, decisions that often fail to reflect a comprehensive understanding of an issue, and indiscriminate processing of records without regard for their historical significance. Addressing this imbalance requires prioritization that focuses resources on the most significant historical records. Primary attention should be given to selected bodies of high-level, historically significant materials, starting with Federal records accessioned into the National Archives and the holdings of the Presidential libraries.

Second, no coordinated interagency process exists for efficient consideration of multiple and often conflicting agency interests. The establishment of a National Declassification Center to address the inefficient application of resources and the time-consuming sequential processing of records with multiple agency equities would greatly help remedy this problem.

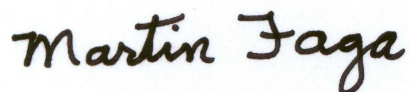
Third, without strong leadership on declassification, agencies have proven risk averse. To ensure a proper balancing of risks and benefits, agency leaders must engage in the development of the policies that guide declassification programs and support a National Declassification Center.

Fourth, new technologies have made the already daunting declassification problem much bigger. The rapid evolution and expansion of digital records in varying formats have severely affected the Government's ability to identify and preserve important records and raised the real possibility that we will lose much of our history. Future historians may find that the paper records of early American history provide a more reliable historical account than the inchoate mass of digital communications of the current era.

Comprehensive reform of the current approach to declassification—including the revision of E.O. 12958, as amended—is needed to address these and the other issues covered in our report. Additionally, serious attention to the classification process itself is needed to ensure that it supports declassification and to address the particularly challenging and long-standing issue of over-classification.

The Board plans to focus its upcoming efforts on the challenges posed by technological advances as well as the opportunity that they can serve to increase transparency and dialogue between Government and the public in support of declassification. We will soon provide our work plan for the remainder of this year and look forward to assisting you in implementing policies that promote openness and public access to Government information.

Respectfully,



MARTIN FAGA
Acting Chair

Enclosure

cc: General James L. Jones, USMC, Ret.
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs