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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

7 December 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable John D. Ehrlichman  
Assistant to the President  
(Domestic Affairs)

SUBJECT: Declassification

1. Bill Colby told me of his lunch with you and your discussion of declassification. We have produced the attached outline summary of the problem and a possible solution for your consideration. It obviously would require further detail if it were to be adopted. The important thing, however, is the degree to which it fits your general thinking.

2. If there is anything else we can do to help on this problem, please let us know.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard Helms".

Richard Helms  
Director

Attachment as stated

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

SUBJECT: Declassification

1. From the parochial perspective of an intelligence officer, the major problem inherent in declassification relates to the risk of compromising operational sources and methods. A report several years old whose substantive content is no longer politically delicate, for example, could nonetheless compromise a still producing source who, indeed, might now be even better or more strategically placed than he was when he provided the report in question. What an intelligence service needs (and strives) to protect are the techniques it employs in going about its business and the human assets, especially foreign nationals, it uses or has used in the past. From an intelligence officer's standpoint, therefore, a document's sensitivity is a direct function of the extent to which that document could compromise sources or methods if it were to fall into unauthorized hands or pass into the public domain.

2. When we address the issue of declassifying the intelligence contribution to major policy decisions or historical events, we are talking about at least three separate types of documents.

(a) Finished Intelligence. This appears in the form of National Intelligence Estimates or special memoranda, drawn from all sources, recounting the facts and assessing a situation. In most cases, declassification of such documents would not jeopardize sources and methods, since the sources of the facts and assessments are usually not stated or are obscured so that they are not apt to be disclosed by declassification of the document. The documents may occasionally refer to the original source of material contained therein, but such references could be edited out or generalized so that the original source remains protected. This would require of course careful review of any such material prior to declassification with this thought in mind.

(b) Disseminated Intelligence. Some disseminated intelligence, such as technical or communications intelligence, reflects its origins in very specific terms so that declassification would almost inevitably result in the disclosure of the

source. In other cases, such as clandestinely acquired intelligence, generalized source descriptions are used in the disseminations, so that the exact identity of the source remains concealed. In all these categories, the passage of time may to some extent alleviate the damage caused by a disclosure of the source, e. g., the fact that we were reading Japanese codes during World War II is hardly a sensitive matter any more. On the other hand, with respect to some of these sources, the passage of time may not relieve the sensitivity of the matter, particularly on material provided to us by a friendly foreign intelligence service which expects us to keep their relationship with us a permanent secret. Thus in the category of disseminated intelligence, a considerably greater job of editing might be necessary to separate items which could be declassified from those which should not be.

(c) Intelligence Operational Traffic. There is a great deal of this material which in almost all cases should not and can not be declassified without a highly inappropriate disclosure of intelligence sources and methods. The material itself is frequently written with special code names which may be valuable in the future. Also the methodology revealed may show things about our service which could be of advantage to an unfriendly power. The true names of our agents and the precise techniques of our operations should in no event be disclosed even after many years.

3. Cutting across the specific problems of declassifying intelligence material is the way our government does business in these times. Thanks to the enormous improvements in communications technology, the government utilizes a flood of separate papers and documents in the course of doing its business. In order to make these manageable at the key decision levels, these raw documents must be collated, summarized and analyzed in the form of over-all reports. This of course is what happens to raw intelligence material through the National Intelligence Estimates and similar documents. Decision-making on major national events is almost always based on the refined product rather than the raw. As noted above, the refined product raises considerably fewer problems of declassification than the raw. For the few cases in which raw documents are used in decision-making, edited versions might be provided.

4. Another factor to be considered is the inter-agency nature of most such major events today. Thus no single department or agency could give an over-all view of a major national event on the basis only of material available to it. The Pentagon Papers display this weakness.

5. A possible solution to the problem might lie in centralizing the production of official histories of selected major events. An historian might be added to the White House staff or the Archivist of the United States might be assigned this responsibility. This officer could serve as a point of coordination and tasking of the various departments and agencies to contribute to a national account of a major event. Department or agency contributions could thus be consolidated into a single over-all account. From the point of view of the intelligence community, this would permit summarization of material considered significant to the event to protect intelligence sources and methods, rather than declassifying raw material. It would also put the focus of the account on the key documents actually used at the national level rather than seeking the impractical aim of declassifying all raw material. Lastly, it would provide an over-all context in which individual raw documents would find a proper place, rather than causing sensational misunderstanding, if and when they came to public notice.

6. Such studies would not satisfy the history purists, of course, but they could meet the legitimate needs of the general public. Criticism could be made that an administration was writing its own histories. The proof of this pudding would be in the eating, i.e., whether the resulting studies were truly objective. The Pentagon Papers have not been subjected to this accusation nor are the Foreign Relations series produced by the Department of State or the studies produced by the Office of Military History.