

Appendix G:

Major Reviews of the U.S. Secrecy System

The following provides a summary of key studies on classification, declassification, and personnel security. This summary does not include numerous other studies that have indirectly addressed these issues in the course of more broad-based examinations of Federal information policies, or studies, such as those of the General Accounting Office, that have been more limited in their scope. Nor does it include the annual reports of the Information Security Oversight Office, which have, on occasion, put forth detailed recommendations for reform to classification practices.

Coolidge Committee - 1956

Created by Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson to investigate how to prevent future leaks of classified information, the Defense Department Committee on Classified Information undertook a three-month review of DoD classification practices and policies. The Committee, composed of representatives from the military services and chaired by former Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Coolidge, declared the classification system “sound in concept,” but also found that vague classification standards and the failure to punish overclassification had caused overclassification to reach “serious proportions” and had resulted in diminishing public confidence in the classification system. Among the recommendations included in its November 8, 1956 report were: addressing overclassification from the top down, beginning with the Secretary of Defense; creating a Director for Declassification within the Office of the Secretary of Defense; and reducing the number of “Top Secret” original classifiers.

Wright Commission - 1957

The bipartisan Commission on Government Security, chaired by former American Bar Association President Loyd Wright, was the only previous Congressionally mandated review of the security system. The Commission held no public hearings, produced no press releases, and made no public statements during its eighteen-month study. In its June 23, 1957 report, the Commission stressed “the danger to national security that arises out of overclassification.” Its recommendations included: abolition of the “Confidential” level and corresponding security checks; restricting original classification authority to agencies already possessing it and limiting that authority to the agency heads; improvement of classification training for those with such authority; creation of a Central Security Office to review the management of the security system and to make recommendations for change when necessary; and legislation criminalizing the unauthorized disclosure of classified information, including by the press.

Moss Subcommittee - 1958

Although the efforts of the Special Government Information Subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee spanned two decades, its early work under Chairman John Moss (including scores of hearings and over two dozen interim reports) was especially significant. Created in 1955, the Subcommittee began its efforts with a two-year examination of Federal classification policies, focusing in particular on the Defense Department. In its first report, issued on June 16, 1958, the Subcommittee attributed overclassification at DoD in large part to the lack

of punishment for *overclassification* but not for *underclassification*. Citing the “loss of public confidence” when information is withheld “for any other reason than true military security,” it recommended: procedures for independent review of complaints about overclassification; mandatory marking of each classified document with the future date or event after which it is to be reviewed or automatically downgraded or declassified; establishment of a date by which the DoD would declassify classified material accumulating in agency files, with a “minimum of exceptions;” and disciplinary action against those who overclassify.

Seitz Task Force - 1970

The Department of Defense Science Board’s Task Force on Secrecy was prompted by DoD concerns over the effectiveness of its security measures. The Task Force, chaired by Dr. Frederick Seitz, found that DoD’s classification system required “major surgery” and noted negative aspects of classification such as its cost, “uncertainty in the public mind on policy issues,” and impediments to the free flow of information. Chief among its conclusions was that “perhaps 90 percent” of all classification of technical and scientific information could be eliminated. The July 1, 1970 report of the Task Force included the following recommendations: a maximum duration of five years for classification of scientific and technological information, with few exceptions; overhauling classification guides by considering the benefits to technological development that would result from greater public access to information; and review and declassification of classified DoD materials within two years.

Stilwell Commission - 1985

Established by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to identify “systemic vulnerabilities,” the Commission to Review DoD Security Policies and Practices found that “little scrutiny” was given decisions to classify. The Commission, chaired by Gen. Richard Stilwell (Ret.), concluded that shortcomings in the classification management arena were “primarily a matter of inadequate implementation of existing policy, rather than a matter of deficient policy.” Among the recommendations included in its report, issued on November 19, 1985, were the following: banning the retention of classified documents for more than five years unless the documents are “permanently valuable;” further reduction in the number of original classifiers; a one-time review and revalidation of all DoD Special Access Programs; minimum security standards for all DoD Special Access Programs; and placement of security responsibilities within a single staff element of DoD.

Joint Security Commission - 1994

Tasked by Secretary of Defense William Perry and Director of Central Intelligence R. James Woolsey with developing a new approach to security, the Joint Security Commission engaged in a nine-month review. Finding that the system had reached “unacceptable levels of inefficiency, inequity, and cost,” the Commission’s February 1994 report, *Redefining Security*, included the following recommendations: a “one-level classification system with two degrees of [physical] protection;” establishing a Joint Security Executive Committee to oversee the development of policies in its new system; use of a “risk management” philosophy when developing new security policies; and a single, consolidated policy and set of security standards for special access programs and sensitive compartmented information.