

# Can you keep a secret?

Business



John F. Kennedy once stated, “ The very word ‘ secrecy’ is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths, and to secret proceedings.”

Throughout the existence of the United States Government, there have been a multitude of secrets kept from the people. Even during the early stages of our government, during sessions of the continental congress, the majority of soon to be American citizens did not know that there was a Declaration of Independence being drafted. With the advent of technology, keeping a secret from the masses has become easier than ever.

With technology, the government is able to store a copious amount of knowledge on titanic databases (Aftergood). Granted, these databases can be broken into and hacked, but would such extreme measures to expose secrets be necessary if the government revised its system of keeping matters confidential? The only reason Julian Assange (founder of Wikileaks, a database of secrets accessible to anyone) and Edward Snowden (Former Central Intelligence Agency employee turned whistleblower) are known worldwide is because the government drove them to releasing confidential matters. With a revised system of secrecy, the government could avoid embarrassing itself and eliminate any future possibility of a leak or an unauthorized release of government knowledge. With the current system of secrecy, the government has set itself on a self-destructive path riddled with plenty of unforeseeable obstacles. In order to successfully minimize government secrecy, the government has to propose and adopt a new system, the people have to take initiative, and there must be more openness between the government and the people.

With a new level of secret classification adopted by the federal government and its entire numerous sub departments, information previously deemed sensitive could be released in a much shorter time span; currently, classified information can take decades to be deemed safe to release (Aftergood 399). A new system could be imposed through Congress, with a bill ordering the reclassification of certain documents. According to Stephen E. Flynn of the Council of the Council on Foreign Relations, “ there is just no question that the system is broken, fundamentally broken...because things get routinely over classified, they can’t get to the people who need them.” This indicates that the dissatisfaction with the current system of classification does not just pertain to a few interested individuals but people with high ranking government positions as well.

If secrets and valuable information are not reaching even top level government workers, this is a clear indication that this system is indeed broken and in need of an immediate reform. Examples of small matters hidden from the public are agency phone directories, outdated historical information that could be used for research, and much much more (Government Secrecy Erodes Confidence). As of now, more secrets are being created than revealed. Previously declassified information has the potential to be deemed classified again without a moment’s notice (Aftergood 400). Secondly, another classification system could be imposed through the executive branch by executive order.

An executive order could bypass all the trivialities of congress and force a reclassification to occur almost immediately. An executive order could also speed up the current system (Morris). In 2009, President Barack Obama <https://assignbuster.com/can-you-keep-a-secret-essay-samples/>

signed an executive order “ to speed declassification of materials and had issued and encouraging Freedom of information Act(FOIA) memorandum. (Pozen)” This executive order however, failed to make any real impact on the speed of the declassification system. Morris filed a Freedom of Information Act request of a simple biography for a Washington journalist, but only to receive it 2 years later, with practically all of the information redacted (Morris). As of now, even a simple biography is deemed too sensitive to release to the public.

The system is broken, and must be fixed to help both the citizens of the U. S. and government officials to receive the information that they need as part of their rights. One final way the system could be changed or sped up by the government is through the Judicial Branch. The Judicial Branch, commonly the most overlooked branch of government possesses a large amount of power. With the correct court case, the Judicial Branch could rule that the classification system must be revamped (Stone).

The Judicial branch has the potential to do this, as demonstrated in the late 1960s, when it ordered the continuation of desegregation of schools. However, one potential pitfall is the fact that the judiciary lacks the expertise to actually provide an adequate solution (Napolitano). There have been previous cases where the Judiciary Branch has challenged the executive branch on secrecy judgments but was forced to back off for danger that a case may reveal too much. As of 2008, the executive branch alone reported 23, 421, 098 classified documents, breaking a record set the previous year. If this trend continues, the amount of classified documents is only going to increase, with no sign of slowing down (Pozen 259).

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If the government is to successfully reform its system of keeping secrets, it needs a push. Not just from lawmakers and government workers, but from us, the people. The people are the ones to whom secrets pertain to the most, and thus they must be the ones to demand for them. An example that differentiates between a “small” and “large” secrets is, “Agency X is withholding photographs of detainee abuse, though they do not know what exactly the photographs show. The photographs are a shallow secret. Other times, outside parties are unaware of a secrets existence; they are in the dark about the fact that they are being kept in the dark.

They have no clue that Agency X possesses detainee-related evidence of any kind. The photographs are a deep secret. (Pozen 260)” Pozen argues that there exists another dimension of secrets. Secrets that the public don’t even know exist. If the government already has such a plethora of secrets hidden away, then these “deep” secrets must be what should actually be kept confidential. The majority of the 23 million classified documents are merely trivial secrets that the government has not declassified yet.

If this can be assumed to be correct, it can also be safe to assume that the government is not releasing these secrets because it has no reason; it needs a push from an outside source. As previously stated, “There is no bright line dividing deep from shallow secrets, but rather a continuum running from one extreme to the other. (Pozen 262)” The people of the United States are legally spied upon by the government legally through select acts; however, the people also have the power to request secrets from the government through other select acts. The Patriot Act, passed shortly after 9/11, had an overwhelming majority backing it in Congress (Wells). The act allows for <https://assignbuster.com/can-you-keep-a-secret-essay-samples/>

increased foreign and domestic surveillance at the government's behest. It basically allows the government to legally wiretap and keep tabs on suspicious individuals.

The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act is similar to the Patriot Act, but is purely for foreign affairs. It makes wiretapping legal as long as permission is attained from the Supreme Court first. For a citizen to file a request to declassify information, they have to evoke the Freedom of Information Act. The act was passed in 1966 (What is FOIA); "...the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) provides that any person has a right, enforceable in court, to obtain access to federal agency records, except to the extent that such records (or portions of them) are protected from public disclosure by one of nine exemptions or by one of three special law enforcement record exclusions.

A FOIA request can be made for any agency record" (What is FOIA). The FOIA process is a long one, some accounts detail time spans as long as two years before the federal agency actually got back to them (Morris). Even when the FOIA is successfully evoked and a classified document is declassified, many times, entire sections of the declassified information have been redacted or erased. If every declassified document mirrors this, then there is a serious issue with the declassification system. There is no point to the FOIA if the declassified information has no useful information at all. The FOIA passed nearly 70 years ago, but it has been severely ignored by the masses.

It is the only legal tool the people possess and should be used to its full extent. There have been no concrete instances where a singular person has

managed to stand against the government and demand that secrets be released. Sure, some have tried, i. e. Assange and Snowden, but their methods have severe repercussions.

An executive act that had some success, "...The John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act and the Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act each led to the declassification of significant bodies of historical records. President Clinton's 1995 executive order, which aimed to set a twenty-five-year lifetime for most classified documents, led to the declassification of approximately a billion pages of historically valuable records (Afterwood 406)." Unfortunately, this executive order was later made null after another executive order from Bush contradicted it. The government must realize that revealing secrets furthers, develops, and strengthens its relationship with the people. A successful government maintains a mutual level of understanding with its constituents and ensures that they are kept up to date on all matters applicable to them.

Numerous world governments such as New Zealand have achieved a mutual understanding with its citizens. Most secrets requested by the people are eventually released in a short time span. Granted, this exact system may not work with the much larger and messier government of the United States, but it could be used as a model for reform. The United States Government is not the worst government in the world in terms of government secrecy, but it is not the best. There are many ways it could be improved, and it could start by looking at the governments of other nations around the world. As of right now, even China, a communist nation, has more open government protocols than America (Horsely).

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It may seem impossible to eliminate or even reduce secrecy in our massive bureaucratic government, but it can be achieved with enough time, manpower, and cooperation. In 1956, the Coolidge committee observed that “[t]here is a tendency to use the classification system to protect information which is not related to national security... [t]his constitutes an abuse of the classification system...and tends to destroy public confidence in the system.” (Aftergood) As of now, this statement utterly describes the secrecy situation of the government. Out of 23 million secrets, it would be safe to assume that 70% or more of these could be revealed now. As a general rule, the government is an instrument of the people and should be treated as such; secrets should be deemed reveal able or not by the masses, not the people who classify them as secrets. The fundamental idea behind a democracy is that the majority is always right, minorities will always exist to oppose the majority, but the will of the majority is the will of the nation as a whole.

A citizen’s duty should be to keep track of the government and take action if something does not seem right. They should keep up to date on current events and be prepared to question the government, even using the FOIA if necessary. The government’s duty is to respond positively to the needs and wants of its citizens. With this mutual relationship, a government and its people can coexist in harmony, no matter what the issue is. “ The alternate to indiscriminate secrecy is not indiscriminate openness...Nothing should ever be classified in the absence of an identifiable threat to national security...Innovations and experiments in security policy should be promoted to identify fruitful directions for system wide reform” (Aftergood 416).



More secrets should not be created if there is no genuine threat to the country. Every secret created, is one more probable cause for a whistleblower or leaker to take action against the government. Ultimately, the purpose of all secrets, whether small or large, is to be revealed. Works Cited Aftergood, Steven. "The CIA "Family Jewels," Then and Now." Fas.

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