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# Government Secrets Can't Last Forever

WASHINGTON (Dec. 30) – About 400 million pages of government documents – from World War II through the Cuban Missile Crisis to the final days of the Cold War – have been sitting in boxes for decades, their secrets hidden. But a new order by President Barack Obama will declassify them within four years unless they meet narrow exceptions.

It's the first time a president has laid out in writing that executive branch documents cannot be classified forever – a sea change, according to William J. Bosanko, director of the Information Security Oversight Office, which is part of the National Archives.

"It's a fundamental principle of government that people can hold the government accountable, but to do that they need to have access to the records," said Bosanko, whose office will implement the executive order Obama issued Tuesday.

Bosanko goes to work every day in the National Archives building, where "Study the Past" and "What is Past is Prologue" are etched into the façade.

"Even the government learns from these records," he said.

AFP / Getty Images

A new executive order issued by President Barack Obama says the executive branch cannot keep most classified documents secret forever.

President Bill Clinton first started focusing on the backlog of classified documents. Under tight timelines from him and a subsequent order by President George W. Bush, more than 1 billion documents have been declassified since 1995.

But the 400 million pages that remain – along with hundreds of millions of pages of documents less than 25 years old – likely contain, along with the dross of bureaucratic red tape, a wealth of information from wartime diplomatic posts and military attaché reports as well as details of battle reports that might help veterans make their cases for certain benefits.

Classifying – and declassifying – information always has been a balancing act between preserving national security and making government transparent. Kori Schake, a researcher at the Hoover Institution think tank and a former State Department official under Bush, said she worries that Obama has taken away the veto power over declassification that the intelligence community recently had.

"We will too much shift the balance away from the intelligence community's ability to keep legitimate secrets about how we know things," she said.

Patrice McDermott, head of the nonprofit OpenTheGovernment.org, said intelligence and military agencies fought Obama's order "tooth and nail."

"This administration will be leaning on the intelligence community to work collaboratively to get that information ... available to the public," said McDermott, whose organization puts out an annual "Secrecy Report Card." Almost \$200 is spent maintaining old secrets for every dollar spent on declassification, according to that report.

The report also shows how the mountain of classified information can grow. In 2008 alone, more than 203,000 decisions were made to classify sources.

Under the Obama order, executive branch documents will be made public after 25 years unless they meet nine narrow exceptions, such as revealing active war plans or current vulnerabilities of national security.

After 50 years, only documents that reveal human intelligence sources or key designs of weapons of mass destruction can be kept secret unless an agency head believes there are extraordinary circumstances. After 75 years, nearly all records will be public.

Other main points of the order:

- A new system for deciding which documents get evaluated first will take into account public interest in the topic, the historic nature of it and whether it's likely to win declassification.
- A new National Declassification Center will help coordinate declassifying documents that involve more than one agency. Currently it can take years as agencies take turns poring over a particular document.
- Agencies will have to reassess the 2,000 different guides they use for classifying information. The order pushes them to avoid unnecessary classification.

Cully Stimson, senior legal fellow at the Heritage Foundation and former deputy assistant secretary of defense, said the order will clear away the "underbrush" of documents that are classified for no good reason. But, he said, Obama should focus more on keeping information from being classified in the first place when it's not necessary.

In 2008, 31.4 million pages were declassified, but the impending deadline and the streamlining from the new center are expected to increase that rate.