

## Erasing History at the National Archives

*By Max Holland*

In December 20, 1960, representatives from U.S. corporations with business interests in Cuba—including Exxon, ITT and Domino Sugar—met with then-CIA director Allen Dulles. The meeting was called, according to an agency history written in the late 1970s, so that Dulles could hear the executives' grievances about Fidel Castro's regime. Without hinting that the CIA was at that moment training a small army of exiles, Dulles listened as the corporate chieftains suggested ways to sabotage Cuba's economy and precipitate military intervention. Their message was simple: "It was time for the U.S. to get off of dead center and take some direct action against Castro."

Without such documents as this partly declassified CIA history, the American public would have been left in the dark about the "sometimes overactive" role corporate interests played in Washington's anti-Castro efforts in the 1960s. Yet if some elements of the federal government now have their way at the National Archives, such blank spots in the archival record will become increasingly common.

The tampering with history has been documented most extensively by Matthew Aid, a scholar writing what promises to be a definitive history of the National Security Agency. Aid, who has been conducting extensive research into intelligence-related holdings at the National Archives since 1979, began noticing something strange in the summer of 2005. Individual documents, and sometimes entire files, that he had read in full 10 years ago were mysteriously disappearing from the open shelves. Eventually, and despite a virtual gag order imposed on archivists familiar with the withdrawals, Aid was able to piece together the story about a secret reclassification program in existence since 1999. Several agencies, most prominently the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and the U.S. Air Force (USAF), have been conducting a broad effort in total secrecy to prevent public access to previously released government documents.

The roots of this issue go back to a reform promulgated by President Clinton in 1995 to break the logjam over classified records from the Cold War. Clinton's Executive Order 12958 represented an ambitious effort to force federal agencies to disgorge vast amounts of records while keeping a limited number secret that fell into specific categories. It mandated that within five years, all records 25 years or older would automatically be declassified, regardless of whether they had been reviewed. Inevitably, the effort ran into some hurdles. A document from the State Department, for instance, might also contain sensitive information from the CIA. Often the CIA's "equity" in the document would be obvious, but sometimes not. To be declassified "under the proper authority," both agencies had to review the document.

Within three years, a significant problem cropped up with respect to the inadvertent release of information about nuclear weapons in open archival records. One category of information, known as "restricted data," is considered so sensitive it is "born classified." To its credit, the Department of Energy (DOE) openly sought a modification of Clinton's EO, which had banned the reclassification of documents once they became public. In late 1998 Congress authorized the DOE to scour the records of other agencies under stringent conditions, which included the filing of regular reports about documents the DOE had reclassified.

So far, so good. But in 1999, other federal agencies found instances of unrecognized "equities" in State Department documents, and by 2001 these agencies were insisting on the right to re-review, in secret, *any* records that had been declassified if they contained defense, foreign affairs, or intelligence information. After *The New York Times* broke the news on February 21 about Aid's discovery of this secret reclassification program, an embarrassed National Archives declared an instant moratorium on the process. By that time, however, 9,500 documents, totaling 55,500 pages, had been surreptitiously reclassified. Because the CIA, DIA, and USAF have operated, unlike the DOE, under a shroud of secrecy, their efforts have resulted in dozens of absurdities, all of which make a mockery of EO 12958, which was modified but not rescinded by the Bush administration in 2003.

One ridiculous outcome is the attempt, apparently by the CIA, to reclassify documents that were not only declassified years ago but published (with CIA consent!) in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series. These volumes are available on-line, and hard copies are held by libraries all over the world, including the National Archives' own library. Now the original documents have been deemed too secret to read. Not to be outdone, overzealous USAF reviewers have reclassified intelligence, and policy papers, and reportedly even newspaper clippings, about the strategic bombing of Japan during World War II.

The Information Security Oversight Office, which was established at the National Archives under the 1995 executive order, is currently conducting an audit of all the withdrawn documents. When those findings are released as scheduled in late April, more egregious examples of reclassification-run-amok are bound to surface. The question then will be, What were these reclassifiers thinking? And why were tax dollars used to have them think it?