

Classifying for Security, Web of Complexity

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 18 — Brrp, brrp goes the high-speed teletype and on the page appears, "TOP SECRET/NODIS—HARVAN/CRITIC. GP 2."

The code clerk at the Defense Department — or State Department or other agency—springs instantly into action. He is galvanized by a four-layer system of classification and distribution for the millions of words a day that flow in and out of the vast national security establishment.

It is this complicated and often cumbersome system that has drawn critical fire from members of Congress and appears to be leading to a searching review.

Representative William S. Moorhead, Democrat of Pennsylvania and chairman of a Government information subcommittee, said today that he hoped to begin open hearings next Wednesday with officials of the Executive branch and legal experts called to testify.

The security system, as described by present and former Federal officials, is considerably less dramatic and more complex than the limited accounts in spy thrillers. And it is one that results in anomalies like orange peels in the "burn bag" where secret documents are placed for destruction and nightly inspections of typewriter ribbons.

The system consists of four basic parts. One describes the importance of the document, another relates only to who shall see it, a third to the urgency of the message, and the fourth to how quickly it can be declassified.

All four purposes are clear, but the four systems overlap. Some obsolete and secondary terms often get in the way and individual agencies add their own variations. The result is that few persons who regularly use the system fully understand it.

The basic component is classification. A document is either unclassified or is labeled Top Secret, Secret, or Confidential. Top Secret refers to information that, if disclosed, could result in "exceptionally grave" damage to the nation. The other terms refer to lesser levels of importance.

Even if a document is not classified, however, its distribution might have to be strictly limited. Years ago, this was attempted with phrases like "Eyes Only" for "Literally Eyes Only," meaning for the eyes of the addressee only.

But in 1964, a more rational system was developed. It also has three parts—LIMDIS, EXDIS, and NODIS—referring to Limited, Exclusive, and No Distribution. These terms define the rank of the officer who decides who gets copies of a document.

EXDIS and NODIS documents routinely are veiled under colored cover sheets.

Theoretically, one former official says, a document could be absolutely unclassified and still be NODIS. "In fact, I can remember such a document," he recalls. "It was for the President and I think it said something about a foreign diplomat being a drunkard."

Despite development of this system, vestiges of the old "Eyes Only" method survive. One former State Department official recalls a NODIS message from a major ambassador to the President also labeled "For the President's Eyes Only."

System Uses Colors

Sometimes for special projects like the Paris peace talks, a code name, or "slug" is also added. This defines a set distribution list for messages about the project. Thus, "HARVAN"—an acronym for (W. Averell) Harriman and (Cyrus R.) Vance, who were the United States negotiators—was devised for the 1968 Paris peace talks.

CONFIDENTIAL

SECRET

TOP SECRET

Samples of stamps used by Department of Defense to classify documents.

In the Johnson Administration, secret peace initiatives were slugged with the names of flowers, like "Marigold." The last in this flower series was applied wryly to the worldwide inquiries of two Los Angeles Times reporters, David Kraslow and Stuart Loory. This set of messages was slugged "Poppycock."

The third level of the system, referring to the urgency of the message, has five parts. "Critic" would, in fact, never be used in a negotiations message, since it means imminent enemy action. "Flash," "Immediate," "Priority," and "Routine" refer to progressively less urgent information.

The fourth level of the system, designated for shorthand, by group number, refers to a set schedule for declassification. One group number might mean a document can be declassified in two years, another might mean six years.

This system was intended to speed up sluggish declassification procedures, said one State Department official. "But it has never worked worth a damn because no one can ever remember which group is which," he commented.

Beyond these four levels are several other categories of restrictions, some of which them-

selves are so secret that their names are classified. These refer to special intelligence categories, and documents bearing their odd labels may go only to officials who have been specially cleared.

One example came to light during the Kennedy Administration when McGeorge Bundy, Presidential national security adviser, was photographed with a bundle of documents under his arm. Barely legible on one were the words "DINAR—Top Secret."

When the photograph was published in a magazine, the name was immediately replaced.

Many Federal offices routinely handle security information and in these a double trash system is frequent. Ordinary waste goes into trash cans; classified waste goes into special "burn bags" which are collected nightly and burned or shredded.

Oops, Wrong Can

One former official recalls having been reprimanded for putting classified trash into the ordinary can and resolving to avoid the problem in the future by putting all trash in the "burn bag."

"I couldn't put it all into the trash can, and I could never remember which can to put things in, so I decided to put it all in the burn bag, orange peels and all."

Secretaries in these offices have extra chores. They often are responsible for scooping up all classified papers and locking them into file-cabinet safes. And if they have carbon-paper typewriter ribbons they must, each night, tear off the used part and deposit it in the "burn bag."

Some agencies have a still more complex system, bringing additional terms to the classification scheme of Top Secret, Secret, and Confidential. For example, "No Forn," often used on lower-level papers, means no foreign dissemination.

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