

# Review

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**The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America's Top Secrets.** Matthew Connelly. New York: Pantheon, 2023. 540 pgs. \$22.00. 9781101973677.

Though more than a decade in the making, the History Lab and Connelly's book was extremely timely in the age of former President Trump's classified documents fiasco. Focusing on declassified (so, by nature, classified) documents, Connelly takes the reader through time in a historical account of how America has traditionally and nontraditionally used and shared information with the public and among the upper echelon of need-to-knows. This question, and the varying accounts of America's positioning toward freedom of information, inspired his 2014 project, History Lab. With support from his institution and colleagues at Columbia University, as well as foundational support from a MacArthur grant, History Lab sought to apply algorithmic mathematics to swaths of declassified documents to determine how and why to declassifying documents. Connelly maintains that with a continually decreasing budget line and staff ratio at the National Archives, the nation's archivists cannot possibly handle the number of documents marked as any level of classified. Moreover, as the interest in declassification among top leaders goes down and the number of secret clearances goes up, the public interest in access to government transparency and free information stands still as millions of documents remain classified with no real reason as to why. Even Connelly's own lawyers warned him his work on declassified—mind you, declassified—documents could lead him to be questioned under the Espionage Act.

*The Declassification Engine* immerses the reader in the history of American leaders' responses and opinions toward public information, starting with the very open Federalists and Constitution writers. The American Republic, inherently interested in transparency, published its decisions and findings widely almost immediately after the period of meeting deemed necessary. Early colonists were acutely aware of the power associated with the sharing of information and wanted to afford all citizens this right—besides, of course, any women and men of color. Early attempts went as far as to bar any Black men from working at the post office, as there was rampant fear that, as they traveled from place to place, they could share and disseminate information more freely.

Connelly then takes the reader through the greatest hits of America's secrets and how, under Pearl Harbor and President Roosevelt, the modern equivalency of a national secret was created for the public's good. Compounding the conspiratorial events of Pearl Harbor, archives would later reveal that Winston Churchill recorded American politicians as gleeful upon hearing the news at a White House dinner. What began at Pearl Harbor exploded with the creation of the atomic bomb and the new idea that some secrets just simply couldn't be shared. From there, the concept of complete public access to government information devolved quickly, along with the creation of full-blow secrecy organizations like the CIA and the NSA. While America's leaders pushed archives and information out of civilian hands and toward the military-industrial complex, the waters muddied further. The president of the United

States no longer has the only permission to push the button.

National and international secrets became intertwined, and the surveillance state, easily acceptable for our enemies but much less so for our civilians, was born. Once documents between many government institutions were kept at varying classification levels, and secret clearances among a specific tier of people were closely monitored, it became more straightforward for the government to classify information automatically, with no end game toward declassification. It is simply easier—for the military and the NSA, that is, not so much for the National Archives or any archival or record professional tasked with cataloging or organizing such information. Moreover, as more and more information became confidential, it began to overwhelm any attempts at organization. What was once considered the most critical and marked "classified" is now applied to billions of documents with no apparent reasoning, effectively demeaning the entire classification. While he may not say so directly, the reader is left to build up to the present-day dilemmas of Trump vs. President Biden's classified document scandals, and why, for example, Trump's bathroom full of stolen boxes can be considered differently than Biden's forgotten garage full.

Connelly's project and algorithmic tool could ultimately be declared a success. History Lab found glaring anomalies in what was and wasn't classified. Decoded code words were used heavily to denote specific types of classified information and named vast swaths of information that could easily and safely be declassified automatically. He and his team went before several government

agencies to plead their case, getting resounding support from places like the National Archives, the CIA, and the State Department. His main goal was to continue the study and create, with government buy-in, a tool that could be used in real-time to classify or declassify information more routinely. He met his final roadblock at one of his last meetings, the

Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, which had the power and the funding to create the tool on an accurate scale. In opposition to so many of the state leaders they had heard from previously, they just weren't interested. They agreed it would be useful, overwhelmingly so, but they still shrugged. Therein lies the perfect conclusion to our modern

dystopia of information access to the American people, in Connelly's exact wording: "The fact that we cannot assign a dollar value to democratic accountability was precisely the problem. . . . The conclusion is inescapable."—*Alexandra Acri Godfrey, agodfrey@os.pasen.gov, Librarian of the Senate of Pennsylvania, Senate of Pennsylvania*