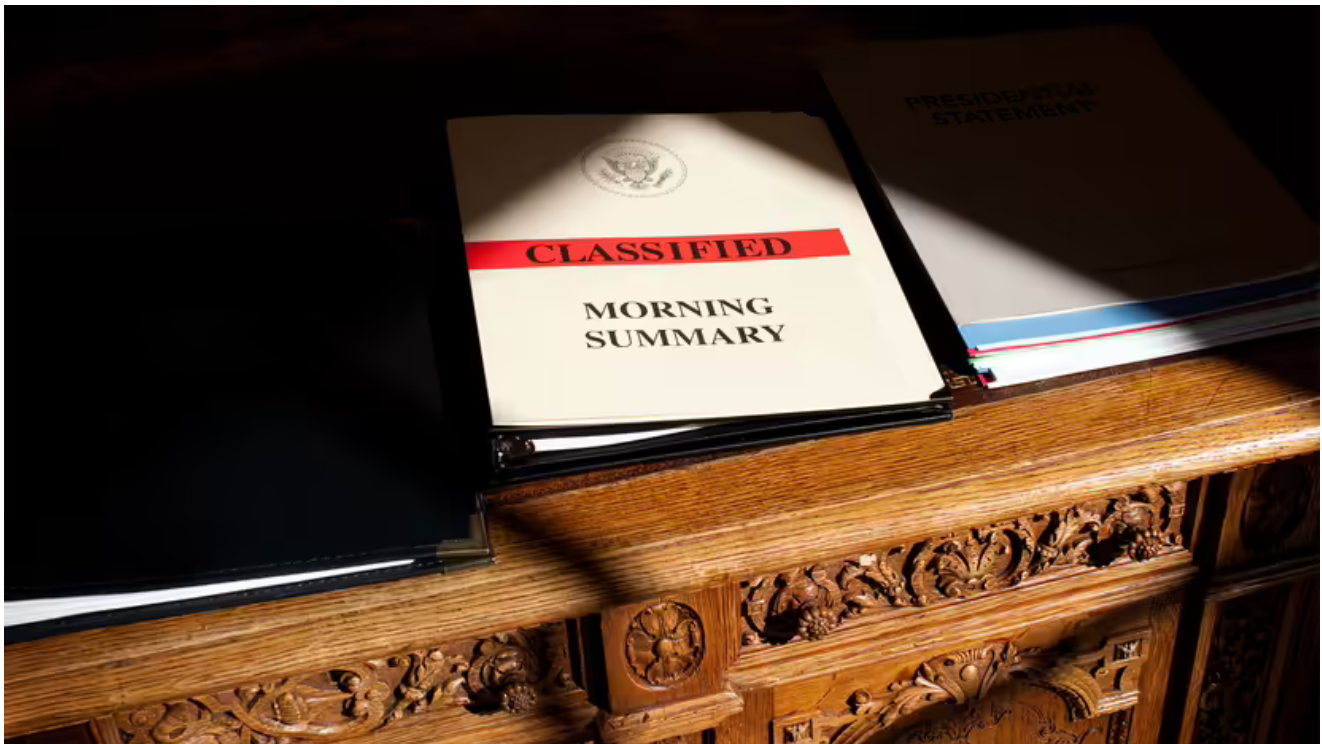


6 Startling Revelations from Declassified U.S. Government Documents

By: [Patrick J. Kiger](#) | Jan 25, 2022



A classified document awaits the perusal of the president on the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office in Washington, D.C. Pete Souza/The White House/Getty Images

Over the decades, the U.S. government has generated almost unimaginably vast quantities of documents — possibly in the hundreds of millions — containing information that officials deemed too sensitive to be made public. It's a trove of information that contains, in bits and pieces, a hidden history of wars and diplomacy, of spies and secret weapons and presidents' most fateful decisions.

"Declassified government documents are absolutely vital to our understanding of the history of U.S. national security policy," [Jon DiCicco](#), professor of political science and international relations, Middle Tennessee State University, explains via email. "Such documents are

windows into the inner workings of the U.S. government and national security establishment."

Sometimes, they can take many years to surface. Back in 2011, for example, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) finally declassified what it said were the U.S. government's oldest classified documents, one of which had been secret since 1917. The papers, which described methods for creating invisible ink and opening sealed letters, were deemed releasable because "recent advancements in technology" made the information no longer sensitive, then-CIA director Leon Panetta explained at the time.

Most classified documents aren't supposed to stay hidden forever. A 2009 executive order issued by then-President Barack Obama generally compels classified documents to be marked for automatic declassification 10 to 25 years after release — though a few exceptions, such as information that identifies a confidential human intelligence source or design details for weapons of mass destruction, can be kept from public view indefinitely.

"The burden is on the intelligence agency that produced the intelligence," says Larry Pfeiffer. He's a 32-year veteran of the U.S. intelligence community who now is director of the Michael V. Hayden Center for Intelligence, Policy and International Security at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government. "If they want to keep it classified, they have to have some very compelling reasons to do it."

The government has so many secrets that sifting through them and figuring out what is eligible for release is a daunting task. In 2017, the most recent year for which statistics are available, federal agencies reviewed 83.8 million documents, of which 46 million — slightly more than half — were declassified.

Pfeiffer says that declassification actually benefits U.S. intelligence agencies, because it helps the American public to understand what U.S. intelligence agencies do, and why their mission is important.

"The [public] tolerance for the secrecy of these organizations has become smaller," Pfeiffer says. "There's a demand by people to have a greater understanding of what their intelligence agencies actually are up to ... And the intelligence agencies are incredibly powerful and outrageously secret. So over time, for the intelligence community to continue to be able to do the great work it does to protect America, it needs to have the trust of the American people. And, in order to obtain that trust, we need to be willing to kind of lift the skirt a little bit and show people what we're really up to."

Here are six surprising revelations that have emerged in recent years from declassified documents. Many are available from the website of George Washington University's National Security Archive, an organization of journalists and scholars that has amassed what may be the largest collections of formerly secret government information.

1. The U.S. Army Drew Up Plans for a Base on the Moon

In 1959, Lt. Gen. Arthur G. Trudeau, the Army's chief of research and development, commissioned this proposal for building a future lunar base, which he believed would be needed to "develop techniques in moon-based surveillance of the Earth and space," and to counter the Soviets' expected territorial claims on the moon. The plan envisioned setting up an outpost in late 1965. Nearly 150 Saturn I and II launches would be needed to ship nearly 500,000 pounds (226,796 kilograms) of cargo needed to construct an underground base for 12 men.

2. The Kennedy Administration Considered Invading Cuba in 1962, Expecting Heavy Casualties

In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Maxwell Taylor wrote a Nov. 2, 1962, memo at the request of President John F. Kennedy, who wanted to know what human cost would be incurred by invading Cuba. Provided that the Cuban forces used conventional weapons but not tactical nukes, Taylor wrote, "our medical plans are drawn up to accommodate up to 18,500 casualties in the first 10 days of operation." However, if tactical nuclear weapons were used, "there is no experience factor upon which to base an estimate of casualties."

TELEGRAM **INFORMATION** **FOR RELEASE** 1999/12/12 ONNK-OR-051

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COUNTRY ALGERIA / CUBA

SUBJECT POSSIBLE VISIT OF FIDEL CASTRO TO ALGERIA

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One of the many declassified documents pertaining to the activities of Cuban leader Fidel Castro held at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts.

3. Gulf of Tonkin: A Fake Attack Escalated the Vietnam War

A declassified National Security Agency historical analysis confirmed what many had long suspected: One of the two supposed North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 — which President Lyndon Johnson's administration had used as justification for a massive escalation of the Vietnam War — had never actually happened. As the article noted, intelligence and defense officials who doubted the administration's evidence had kept quiet, due to "an awareness that President Johnson would brook no uncertainty that could undermine his position."

4. The U.S. Government Practices Surveillance of High-profile Americans

As the result of the National Security Archive's efforts, the National Security Agency in 2013 declassified an historical document describing a "watch list" of prominent Americans critical of the Vietnam War, whose overseas communications were tapped by the government from 1967 to 1973. "President Johnson wanted to know if the domestic anti-war movement was receiving help from abroad," one document explains. Project Minaret, as the effort became known, expanded to include surveillance of more than 1,600 people, including civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney Young, Muhammad Ali, Democratic U.S. Senator Frank Church of Idaho, Republican Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee, New York Times columnist Tom Wicker and Washington Post humor columnist Art Buchwald. The surveillance operation continued under the Nixon administration until Attorney General Elliot Richardson, who was concerned about its doubtful legality, decided to shut it down during the Watergate scandal in September 1973.

5. The CIA Used 'Enhanced Interrogation Techniques' on al-Qaida Detainees

This 2004 report by the CIA's inspector general, initially released in heavily redacted form by the George W. Bush administration and then again with fewer deletions by the Obama administration, describes "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques" used on al-Qaida detainees. The techniques detailed in the document include "walling," in which prisoners were pulled forward and then pushed into a wall, slaps to the face, stress positions, sleep deprivation and waterboarding, in which "the detainee's head is immobilized and an interrogator places a cloth over the detainee's mouth and nose while pouring water onto the cloth in a controlled manner," with the effect of restricting airflow for 20 to 40 seconds and creating "the sensation of drowning and suffocation." Another technique involved confining a detainee in a box for up to 18 hours, sometimes with a "harmless insect" placed inside as well to increase the discomfort.

6. 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena' Has Been Tracked by DOD

This one involves some information that wasn't actually classified, but which hadn't been made available publicly. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) authorized the U.S. Navy to release video of three incidents, one in 2004 and the others in 2015, in which Navy fighter pilots had encountered "unidentified aerial phenomena," — which is another way of saying UFOs.

"After a thorough review, the department has determined that the authorized release of these unclassified videos does not reveal any sensitive capabilities or systems, and does not impinge on any subsequent investigations of military air space incursions by unidentified aerial phenomena," DOD noted in a press release.

The COVID-19 Relief Bill passed by Congress in 2020 also included a provision requiring various government agencies to release their files on UFOs. Here is an assortment of documents, including the mysterious report of a sighting of multiple "fast-moving flying objects" over Stalingrad in 1954, posted on the CIA's website.



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/rO_M0hLIJ-Q

DiCicco cautions that declassified documents don't always provide the full story. Other relevant documents may remain classified, and the ones that are released often contain redacted information, "which means that the document is not readable in its entirety." Additionally, he notes, a particular document may only contain one official's or agency's perspective on a complex situation. "For this reason, it is necessary to examine declassified documents from as many relevant offices and departments as possible," says DiCicco.