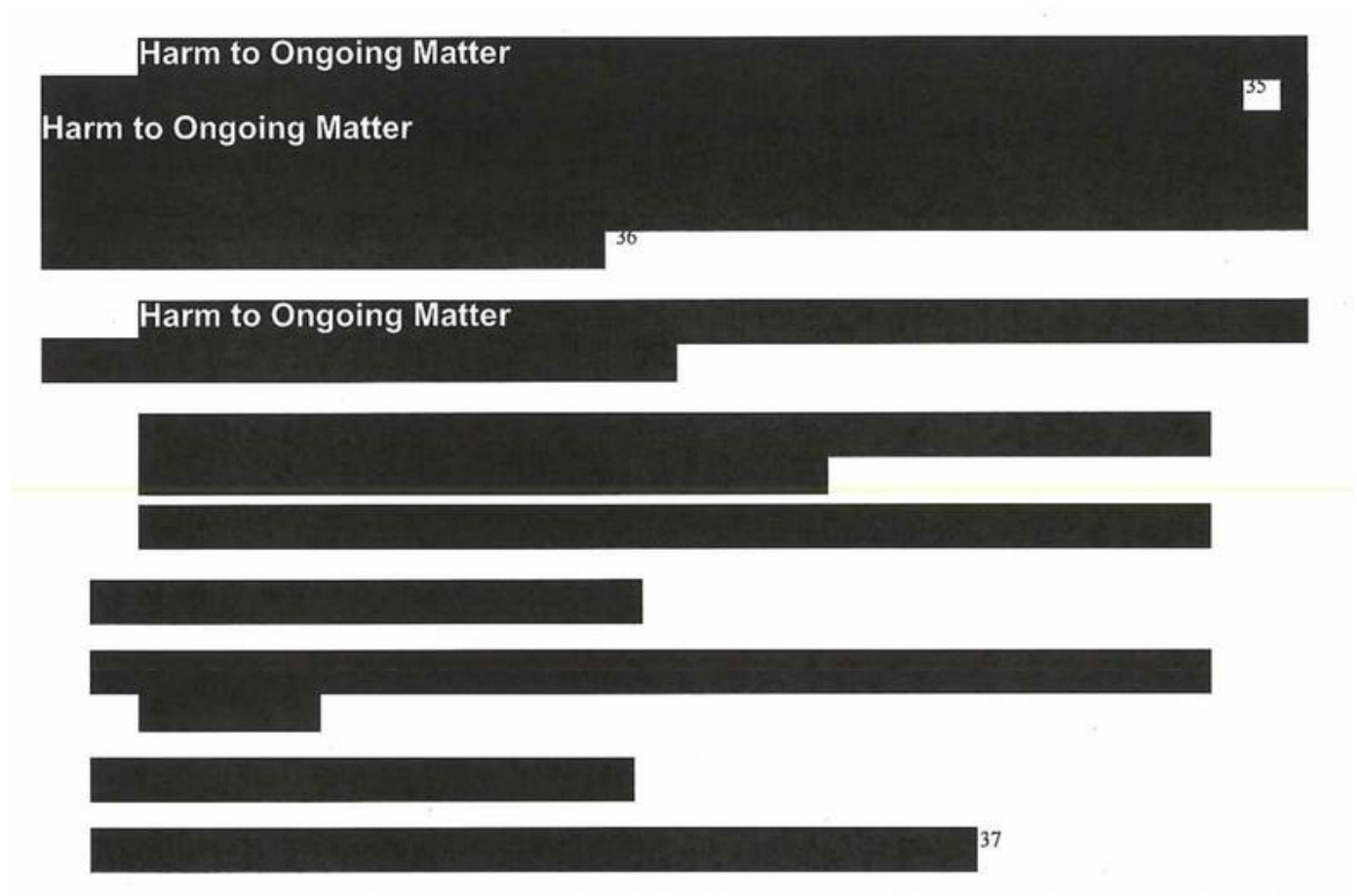


The Mueller report is hardly the first time officials have gone heavy on the black pen.

By [Fred Kaplan](#)

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Page 29 of the Mueller report.

Screenshot by Slate, report courtesy of the Department of Justice.

Nearly half the pages in [special counsel Robert Mueller's report](#)—163 out of a total 381 pages of text—contain passages that Attorney General William Barr has blacked out. In some cases, the redactions cover just a few words or a name; in many cases, though, whole paragraphs or entire pages are deleted.

Most of the deletions were made for one of two reasons: "Investigative Techniques" (facts that, if uncensored, would reveal intelligence sources or methods) and "Harm to Ongoing Matter" (facts pertaining to grand jury probes or upcoming trials).

In principle, these are legitimate reasons for redacting government documents. But two points need to be made. First, because some of the “ongoing matter” concerns people indicted and facing trial as a result of the Mueller investigation, the redactions prevent us from assessing the nature and scope of the relationship between Russia and President Donald Trump’s campaign.

For instance, in a section titled “Trump Campaign and the Dissemination of Hacked Materials” (Volume I, pages 51–58), almost the entire text is blacked out. The same is true for most passages concerning Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort (for instance, Vol. I, page 143). See also a section titled “Russian Hacking and Dumping Operations,” especially a subsection whose title is redacted (“Charging Decision as to [Harmful to Ongoing Matter],” Vol. I, pages 176–79). Another multipage blackout is labeled “Constitutional Considerations” (Vol. I, pages 190–91). A passage recounting Trump discussing a pardon for Manafort is followed by two fully redacted pages (Vol. II, pages 128–30).

The second point that needs to be made about redactions is that they often have little or dubious basis. Thursday morning, in anticipation of the Mueller report’s release, the [National Security Archive](#)—a private research organization at George Washington University—published 10 examples of bizarre redactions from the thousands of Freedom of Information Act suits it has filed over the years.

In some cases, redactions—or the removal of redactions—were ordered for obvious political reasons. But often, the government gatekeepers have taken out the black pen because there are no firm standards on what should and should not be made public. When in doubt, officials—often to protect their careers—opt for caution, not transparency. In many cases, different officials have different standards or make different decisions. The result is rampant overclassification.

For instance, the archive’s report displays a 1984 State Department document on Geneva Convention violations in Rwanda, as it was marked up in four separate declassifications between 2001 and 2012. Each version redacts certain passages—but the passages are different in each one: Words that are clear and open in one version are blacked out in another, and vice versa. All four reviewers justified the deletions for reasons of “national security.” In fact, they were for reasons of individual judgment.

Back in 2011, the U.S. government, finally, formally declassified the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret history of the Vietnam War that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had ordered way back in 1967. Daniel Ellsberg leaked the report in 1971, and the New York Times and several other newspapers famously reprinted huge chunks of it that same year. Sen. Mike Gravel, a Democrat from Alaska, then entered the full report into the Congressional Record, after which [Beacon Press](#) published it in four volumes. And yet, the government’s official public version redacted 11 words—even though the complete report, including those 11 words, had been available to the world for the previous 40 years.

We may never know what’s in those redacted passages of the Mueller report. Whether we **should know—and how it might alter our view of its conclusions—is a vital question.**