

Why Classify?

Numerous critics of the U.S. classification system have argued—not incorrectly—that classification is used too freely and sometimes for the sake of denying information to others who have a legitimate need for it.

However, a rationale and some sense are behind the way in which classification is intended to be used. Classification derives from the damage that would be done if the information were revealed. Thus, classification related to intelligence collection underscores both the importance of the information and the fragility of its source—something that would be difficult to replace if disclosed.

The most common classification is SECRET (CONFIDENTIAL is rarely used any longer), followed by TOP SECRET. Within TOP SECRET are numerous TOP SECRET/CODEWORD compartments—meaning specific bodies of intelligence based on their sources. Admission to any level of classification or compartment is driven by an individual's certified need to know that specific type of information.

Each classification level is defined; current definitions are found in Executive Order 13526 of December 29, 2009.

- CONFIDENTIAL: information whose unauthorized disclosure “could be expected to cause damage to the national security.”
- SECRET: information whose unauthorized disclosure “could be expected to cause serious damage to the national security.”
- TOP SECRET: information whose unauthorized disclosure “could be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security.”

Higher levels of access are useful bureaucratic levers for those who have them in contrast to those who do not.

The Obama administration has also created a category called Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI) to handle information that is sensitive but not classified and to create uniform standards for handling unclassified information (Executive Order 13556, November 4, 2010).