Sanitized for Your Protection: Editing Classified Documents

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I started having second thoughts about giving a paper on the subject of working with classified documents almost as soon as I agreed to do it. In the first place, I'm not editing classified documents—or any kind of documents, for that matter—now. I used to, though: for over a quarter of a century I edited the papers of Dwight David Eisenhower at Johns Hopkins University. My duties there included handling all matters of classification and declassification, as well as physical, personnel, and information security.

Four years ago, as we were proofreading the index for the final set of Eisenhower volumes, I left to take a position at the Library of Congress. Arriving on Capitol Hill with my still-valid Top Secret and COSMIC clearances, I again found myself dealing with these matters—but from the other side of the counter. Where I had once been a supplicant, begging and pleading for the release of classified documents, I soon found myself a guardian of secrets, nuggets of information supposedly too sensitive to be given to my former peers and colleagues. The job of classified documents officer is not a happy task.

My experiences at the Library of Congress have, however, given me a new and different perspective on the promise and perils—emphasis on the latter—of using classified documents in an editorial project. Based on what I've been doing for the past few years, I’d have to say that the ideal opportunity for editing these materials would be for official historians, whose sponsoring agencies control access to, and release of, the information in the classified records to be published. I suppose that it would follow that this paper should have been given by one of the State Department scholars who edit that magnificent series, Foreign Relations of the United States.

All I have to offer are my thirty years of experiences at the foot-soldier level. It's hard to gain perspective from a worm’s eye view. I'm reminded of a passage in one of my favorite books, Tim O’Brien’s If I Die In A Combat...
Zone. O'Brien (who served, as did I, as a grunt during Vietnam) asked, "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there?" He answered his own question: "I think not. He can tell war stories."

Before my own declassification—war stories, a few simple truths. In order to have access to classified documents, two things are required. First, researchers must have security clearance to look at documents classified at three different levels: Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret. Furthermore, certain subjects require specialized varieties of clearances: what's known as a "Q" clearance for matters related to atomic energy and weapons; a special clearance known as COSMIC for NATO-related matters; and Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI) clearances for perhaps the most guarded subjects of all, such as intelligence, overhead-reconnaissance, and cryptographic matters. These clearances must be granted by a U.S. government agency. The process by which this is done may take more than a year, and the cost is over $1,000—a cost that somebody must pay.

Once clearance is granted, there is an additional hurdle: "Need-to-Know." This must be determined by the holders of the information. At the Library of Congress, our practice is to ask the agencies that originally generated the documents whether individual researchers can look at them. If a particular collection contains documents generated by a number of different agencies, then all of those agencies must give permission before a researcher can start going through boxes. In the case of the Eisenhower Papers Project, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant, in the early 1970s, to allow us to examine classified Army files containing JCS records, even though we had Top Secret clearances and the Army's permission to look at its records. So the incredibly patient and accommodating folks at the National Archives went through all the relevant files—trust me, there were a lot of them—and enclosed the JCS documents in brown-paper envelopes so we could do our research.

Need-to-Know is fraught with perils. While I was working on the Eisenhower Papers, a Johns Hopkins archivist came to me with some documents from World War II, fully 40 years old, that she had run across in the papers of a former University president. Knowing that I had a clearance, she asked for advice. I told her that even though the documents were very old, and would almost certainly be declassified if anybody in an official position could get a look at them, she must still treat them as if they involved current matters of national security. I gave her the name of a friendly and capable official who would help her get the items cleared. Some months later, we
were visited by a security agent from the Defense Department (which, I might remind you, did not even exist during World War II), who brought an official citation for a security violation by Johns Hopkins. The violator? Me. Even though my security clearance was for Top Secret, and the documents in question were only marked Confidential, I lacked Need-to-Know. The only reason I was authorized to see classified documents was for the purpose of editing Eisenhower papers—not for processing materials in the University’s archives. Nothing tremendously bad happened, but it was embarrassing, and the school was a little irritated with me. It didn’t help that the 25-year old security official, who looked about sixteen, lectured me about my responsibility to safeguard the security interests of the United States.

Permission to examine classified files is a big step, but only the first step on the road toward publication of a documentary edition. If permission is granted to make copies (and it usually is), such copying will have to be done on a photocopying machine authorized to make reproductions of classified documents. If notes are made (not usually the practice for documentary editions) these notes must be taken under control and given the appropriate classification—usually the highest level of classification to be found in the original documents. My unhappiest experience in this regard came in connection with NATO documents I examined in a secure vault of the National Archives. My handwritten notes were classified Top Secret and whisked away to SHAPE Headquarters in Brussels. Some of them I never saw again—and I could never remember what the missing items were all about.

The next step involves getting the notes or copies back home, where the editorial project has established a facility secure enough to be approved as a repository for classified materials. This used to be easier than it is now; at one time the National Archives would routinely downgrade (reduce the security classification from Top Secret to Secret) older documents so that they could be carried or mailed with little difficulty. Today, however, such items are not downgraded on such a pro forma basis, and federally authorized couriers or a federal courier service must carry Top Secret items from one place to another. Not an impossible task, but another obstacle that must be overcome.

For the Eisenhower Papers, transmission was less of a problem than permanent physical security. A few years after we began our work, the anti-war protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s compelled Johns Hopkins to move all classified research off the main campus at Homewood and thirty miles out into the Maryland countryside. This meant the end of the infrastructure that
supported our classified environment. We made do with un-wired and lightly
guarded security containers in our new offices in the Hopkins main library.
(This was in fact a better location for us to do our research, if you ignore the
humiliation of being put into the same enclosure as the vintage 1940s and
1950s marriage manuals, which had been locked away from the supposedly
impressionable eyes of the all-male undergraduate student body.) This situa-
tion was a source of constant worry—to me at least—because our facilities
were unequal to the formal requirements for holding the high level of classi-
fied documents that we possessed. I feared we would never survive a thor-
ough security investigation.

Fortunately, the authorities, having bigger fish to fry, turned a blind eye
to our shortcomings. There was a security flap some thirty years ago, caused
by a ill-considered remark made by an employee of another non-government
papers project, one which I will not name. She told an inspector making his
rounds in the National Archives that she never bothered to lock up very old
classified documents, on the grounds that the national security of the United
States would by no means be affected. This prompted a review of all similar
projects, including ours. A very bored inspector came out and could find
nothing substantially wrong. In order to have something to report back to
headquarters, however, he discovered a deficiency: our safes contained no
listing of procedures to be followed in the event of an atomic attack or
national emergency. This we quickly remedied. I doubt, however, that in the
post-9/11 environment editorial projects will be able to slide in under the
radar screen as we did for so many years.

Once an editorial staff has its classified documents firmly in hand, in its
secure location, it can begin working, using the most of the same techniques
as other editors. There are a few differences, however. Information derived
from classified sources carries with it the same security classification as the
originals; in effect, new classified documents will be created through the
normal editorial process. All draft annotations that draw upon classified
sources for information must be taken under control, clearly marked, and
protected.

After a manuscript has been created—a classified manuscript, remember—it
must be submitted for review. In earlier, easier days, the Eisenhower
Project could get by with submitting its work-product to a single declassifi-
cation review team. In our case it was the Army's, because almost all of the
documents we used had been generated by the Army. By rights we should
have submitted the entire thing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also, but we were

10 Documentary Editing 27(1) Spring 2005
reluctant to jeopardize our publication timetables. So we used Army-generated documents, found in Army files, for most matters in which the Joint Chiefs had been involved. We were also fortunate in that the JCS had coincidentally launched its own declassification program, and we were able to supplement what we could get cleared by the Army with newly declassified items from the JCS files in the National Archives. Today, most federal agencies jealously guard their rights—called “equities”—of control over information in which they have subject-matter interest. I suspect that publication of a manuscript of classified edited documents would have to run security-review gauntlets established by just about every agency whose documents were used. This could take a while.

There is an alternative to this time-consuming procedure, one which I chose when it came time to move on away from the familiar Army files in which we had been so comfortable. I decided that we would henceforth create an unclassified manuscript, based on declassified or redacted (that is, partially declassified or “sanitized”) copies of classified documents. (I might add, parenthetically, that redacted documents have their own drawbacks. Once we received back from the CIA a redacted document in which only 15% of the words—I counted—had been removed. There was absolutely no way to determine the original subject of the paper from the 85% portion that had been cleared.)

By using only declassified information in our manuscript, not every member of a project needed a security clearance. Furthermore, manuscript drafts need not be protected—a change that greatly reduced the amount of classified paper with which we would have to deal. We would be saved from such unhappy accidents as had occurred when we inadvertently sent a still-confidential document to our publishers to be set in type. (Fortunately, the document in question was declassified before the books came out: a case of No Harm, No Foul, in my opinion, but presumably not an idea shared by the security authorities.) The introduction of modern word-processing equipment (a state-of-the-art 10-megabyte WANG system) allowed us to correct and amend our text as new material was declassified in response to our multitudinous requests.

In the current, ultra-security conscious environment, creating an unclassified manuscript, based on declassified documents, may be the best route to follow. Government cutbacks have stripped agencies of funding that might have gone into declassification. Clearing secret papers is now a very slow process. And even when agency responses are prompt, the results may still
be disappointing; in my first records-declassification action at the Library of Congress, I submitted a batch of thirty items to the CIA for review. Six months later came their answer: none could be released, even though the documents were over fifty years old.

Declassifiers are tremendously overworked (and, I might add, under-appreciated), in large part because a deadline is looming over them. At the end of next year, all records twenty-five years old or older and scheduled for retention by the National Archives—and not specifically exempted from release—are to be automatically declassified, regardless of whether federal agencies have reviewed them. (There are, as you might expect, more than a few exceptions to this rule.) All this means is that it might take a long time for an agency to get around to declassifying your manuscript; it is for certain that they will not guarantee return of your declassified or redacted book by any date-certain. Publishers, as we all know, have their own schedules, and they are not happy when delivery of a manuscript is made dependent on the whims and timetables of third parties.

Would I recommend working with classified documents to editors looking for a project today? Yes and no. It is intensely rewarding to be able to publish things for the very first time—and newly declassified materials are almost by definition certain to attract attention. It’s also fun to work in classified files that your uncleared colleagues are forbidden to see. (I must say, though, that the most embarrassing and potentially newsworthy item I ever came across concerned a scheme concocted by a prominent figure in U.S. history—not Eisenhower—to deceive the NCAA by putting ineligible athletes on the West Point football team.) The down side to having a classified shop is that delays and frustrations are inherent in the process. I well remember the important Eisenhower document that was returned to us by the National Security Council completely declassified—one month after our books had been published. Oh well, that’s what electronic editions are for, I suppose. It’s extremely unlikely that there will ever be a second letterpress edition of our volumes (now priced at $200 per volume). But the whole process was fun, at least for me, and I hope that our screening, clearance, and publication of classified documents served a worthwhile purpose and perhaps even helped others working in a challenging but rewarding field.