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To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy of Sciences Study on Social & Behavioral Science and Improving Intelligence for National Security" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: Rapid Learning: A new, high-priority declassification rule

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

A major review of US government classification/declassification is underway. Would you include recommendations in your Report for high priority declassification of government documents relevant to rapid learning and improving government performance?

The criteria of lesson-drawing and improving government performance are not part of current law/Presidential directives. But such a rule for rapid declassification will provide data and evidence, concerning critical issues, that will help social scientists to do our jobs of lesson-drawing, codifying institutional memory, contributing to the informed discussion of current policy choices in the US and abroad, and providing entry-level training for the next generation of government professionals. We may be able to reduce future violence.

It also would be helpful for the National Academy of Sciences to alert professional social science associations and journalists to your recommendation and seek their support.

The benefit of including this rapid-learning priority is illustrated in the following story from The New York Times. Because declassification work has a low priority for agency funds there is, by now, a 400 million page backlog from WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Here is one example of more recent material that should be given declassification priority:

The Saddam Hussein Transcripts

If declassified, the Saddam Hussein transcripts can play a vital role to improve theories of rational deterrence and coercive diplomacy.

For example, in the case of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, rational deterrence should have worked: America, the world's superpower, was willing to organize a vast multinational coalition to reverse any invasion and produce a huge cost to Iraq. Were there failures - by America - in communicating threats and deterrent resolve before the invasion? Was Saddam Hussein - as one psychiatrist has judged - a "borderline personality" for whom there might be special requirements for deterrence? Should - as some research suggests - there have been a fast and vivid "fear and awe" demonstration of American military capability or a high-level visit by the [male] Secretary of State rather than a warning from a lower-ranked female representative? And could this have avoided war at a very low cost to America? We ought to know what Saddam Hussein and his senior advisers said in the (now classified) record.

Similarly, why did a second war become necessary? Saddam Hussein knew US military capabilities and resolve from earlier, direct experience. But he seemed to behave irrationally and lost his regime, his life, and the lives of his sons. Yet he seemed, in other respects, a ruthlessly rational and unprincipled man who calculated risks realistically, survived, and gained dictatorial powers in a cut-throat political system and survived even after his earlier defeat and in the face of economic sanctions. He was not a secret jihadist or ally of al-Qaeda or secretly trying to build and hide WMD's. What went wrong?

Lessons for Professional Diplomats in *Other* Countries

- The criteria for learning are not merely whether the US government needs to learn.

Cultural divides work both ways (Saddam Hussein had limited personal experience of America), and the most important lessons may be for the next generation of professional diplomats of Middle East countries who are being trained at the Georgetown graduate program in Qatar and elsewhere. Social scientists may discover, for example, that there are misperceptions of America in the Arab world, and mistakes of forecasting, message-interpretation, and message-sending. And that - even more than the development of US diplomacy - it is the development of professional diplomacy throughout that region, informed by social science, that is needed to learn and embody the lessons for the future.

Lloyd Etheredge

The New York Times. December 30, 2009

Obama Curbs Secrecy of Classified Documents

By CHARLIE SAVAGE

WASHINGTON _ President Obama declared on Tuesday that “no information may remain classified indefinitely” as part of a sweeping overhaul of the executive branch’s system for protecting classified national security information.

In an executive order and an accompanying presidential memorandum to agency heads, Mr. Obama signaled that the government should try harder to make information public if possible, including by requiring agencies to regularly review what kinds of information they classify and to eliminate any obsolete secrecy requirements.

“Agency heads shall complete on a periodic basis a comprehensive review of the agency’s classification guidance, particularly classification guides, to ensure the guidance reflects current circumstances and to identify classified information that no longer requires protection and can be declassified,” Mr. Obama wrote in the order, released while he was vacationing in Hawaii.

He also established a new National Declassification Center at the National Archives to speed the process of declassifying historical documents by centralizing their review, rather than sending them in sequence to different agencies. He set a four-year deadline for processing a 400-million-page backlog of such records that includes archives related to military operations during World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Moreover, Mr. Obama eliminated a rule put in place by former President George W. Bush in 2003 that allowed the leader of the intelligence community to veto de-

cisions by an interagency panel to declassify information. Instead, spy agencies who object to such a decision will have to appeal to the president.

As a presidential candidate, Mr. Obama campaigned on a theme of making the government less secretive. But in office his record has been more ambiguous, drawing fire from advocates of open government by embracing Bush-era claims that certain lawsuits involving surveillance and torture must be shut down to protect state secrets.

Steven Aftergood, the director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, expressed cautious optimism about Mr. Obama's new order, saying it appeared to be "a major step forward" from the vantage point of those who believe the government is too secretive.

"Everything depends on the faithful implementation by the agencies," Mr. Aftergood said, "but there are some real innovations here."

Mr. Obama also suggested that his administration might undertake further changes, saying he looked forward to recommendations from a study that Gen. James L. Jones, the national security adviser, is leading "to design a more fundamental transformation of the security classification system."

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