

NATIONAL ARCHIVES SPENDS 3 DAYS DECLASSIFYING 11 WORDS DECLASSIFIED 40 YEARS AGO

The Pentagon Papers were declassified earlier this month. In advance of its formal declassification, the National Archives had announced that 11 words would remain classified. But ultimately, the entire document was released.

Kudos to Steven Aftergood for FOIAing the documents that explained what happened.

Staffers at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library discovered on June 3 that “The full text of that page [containing the eleven words] was released in 1971 [by the House Armed Services Committee] in what appears to be an officially declassified copy,” according to email correspondence (pdf) released this week by the National Archives under the Freedom of Information Act.

In other respects the House Armed Services Committee edition of the Papers was “heavily redacted,” officials noted, but it did contain the eleven words.

Given the fact of their prior disclosure, any attempt to keep them classified now would surely backfire, they reasoned.

“The researcher who is most aggressive in pursuing the PP [Pentagon Papers], John Prados [of the National Security Archive], will most likely find the ‘declassified’ occurrence of the page pretty quickly. So please advise

everyone that if they insist on maintaining the redaction, Prados will likely scope out the 'declassified' page very quickly. As you can tell by his NPR appearance [on June 3], Prados will parade this discovery like a politician on the 4th of July," wrote Alex Daverede of the National Archives.

Now, I don't mean to beat up on the professionals at the Archives, who have a tough job balancing the public interest with classification requirements. (Though I am appalled that this discussion was resolved in language like, "it has been determined that the redactions provided earlier are no longer appropriate.")

But just as silly as the thought of redacting 11 words out of the millions in the Pentagon Papers, at this stage, is the fact that these professionals had to spend 3 days—from 2:34 on June 3 to 2:17 on June 6 (though note the DOD acquiescence to this declassification—see PDF 9—appears on an undated note not even printed on letterhead)—debating what to do with these 11 words that had been declassified 40 years earlier.

Though look on the bright side. If professionals can be asked to spend 3 days doing this, then we're not yet beyond the stage where we can pay people to dig holes and then fill them to create jobs. The trick is, apparently, that under the national security state, we ask workers to dig and fill virtual holes in our secrecy regime, rather than real holes that serve a societal purpose.