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Tks for your help--bon soir, M  
By Dana Milbank and Mike Allen  
Washington Post Staff Writers

The Bush administration last night issued an order delaying the release of millions of government documents and giving the government new powers to reclassify information that is already in the public domain.

The order, rewriting a Clinton administration directive, allows the government to delay until the end of 2006 documents that otherwise would have been released April 17 under a program of automatic declassification after 25 years. The government now has more discretion to keep information classified indefinitely if it falls within a broad definition of national security.

A key component of the new order removes a Clinton administration provision, from a 1995 order, saying that information should not be classified if there was "significant doubt" that its release would compromise national security. The Bush order removes the "significant doubt" provision, meaning that there will be more of a presumption that material should be classified unless proven harmless.

In addition to the three-year delay in the release of information already scheduled for release under the 25-year automatic declassification, the order exempts various pieces of information from future automatic declassification, including: "information that would assist in the development or use of weapons of mass destruction"; information that would harm "national security emergency preparedness plans or reveal current vulnerabilities"; information "that would impair the application of state of the art technology within a U.S. weapon system"; and information that would "impair relations between the United States and a foreign government."

A senior administration official who told reporters about the order in a conference call last night said the three-year postponement of automatic declassification was needed to complete a review of records or sensitive information; documents will be released as they are cleared, the official said. "The agencies haven't been able to complete the review of everything, which is obviously necessary for national security," the official said. The order gives the government more authority to reclassify information that had been "inappropriately declassified."

The White House released the 10,000 word order at 6:40 p.m. last night, making it difficult for experts in disclosure and government secrets to review the order. Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, said the order "will slow the declassification process" and "signals a greater affinity for secrecy."

Aftergood, who had seen a draft of the new order, said he was pleased that some of the Clinton order's mechanisms have been ratified by a

Republican president. But Aftergood said he was disturbed by provisions that make it easier to reclassify documents that have been declassified, and by the presumptive secrecy for information provided in confidence by a foreign government. "It makes secrecy reflexive rather than intelligent," he said.

In a statement introducing the order, Bush described it as a balance between national security and open government. "Our nation's progress depends on the free flow of information," he wrote. "Nevertheless, throughout our history, the national defense has required that certain information be maintained in confidence in order to protect our citizens, our democratic institutions, our homeland security, and our interactions with foreign nations."

The Bush administration has acted to expand executive power and secrecy in a large number of areas, particularly since the 2001 terrorist attacks. For example, it won new protections from congressional oversight in a lawsuit against Congress's General Accounting Office, and it has worked to tighten the release of historical presidential records and documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Bush also has won passage of legislation expanding government surveillance power.

Thomas Blanton, executive director of the private National Security Archive, said the order keeps key parts but of the Clinton reform but sends "one more signal from one high to the bureaucracy to slow down, stall, withhold, stonewall."

"This is an administration that was already tending toward greater secrecy before 9/11," he said. "Now we have a war, which is the ultimate leverage." Blanton said he does not believe the administration's motive is covering up. "This is a matter of theology for them," he said. "They really do believe in their hearts that we the people have made the White House too open and too accountable."

In 1995, President Bill Clinton signed an executive order that removed classified protections from millions of national security documents older than 25 years unless they fell into a narrow category of sensitive information needing continued protection. Before that, documents remained classified indefinitely.

The Bush official who briefed reporters said the order represents a "continuation of automatic declassification...with appropriate modifications." Some civil liberties experts had feared Bush would revoke the automatic declassification authority entirely, rather than modify it to allow more thorough reviews and easier reclassification of information.