

Decision to Keep Nuclear Weapons Data Classified Hurts US National Security

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The Trump administration's decision to classify the total number of nuclear weapons that the United States possesses and the number of nuclear warheads dismantled in 2018 marks an abrupt change from the recent norm. Every year since 2010, the United States has chosen to declassify its nuclear stockpile and disarmament figures as part of an effort to encourage nuclear diplomacy and openness. But this year when the Federation of American Scientists asked the Pentagon for the figures to check its work in the Nuclear Notebook (a collection of world nuclear stockpile and disarmament information), the administration chose not to declassify.



Hans Kristensen—the director of the Federation of American Scientists Nuclear Information Project and a longtime author of the authoritative [Nuclear Notebook column](#) on world nuclear arsenals the *Bulletin* has published since 1987—is particularly vocal about the classification setback. The decision not to declassify the stockpile and decommissioned numbers, he says, “surrenders any pressure on other nuclear-armed states to be more transparent about the size of their nuclear weapon stockpiles” and is an “unnecessary and counterproductive reversal of nuclear policy.” This decision to classify comes at a time when [the Trump administration says it is looking to ramp up talks with Russia and China on arms control](#), a negotiation that would be easier for United States diplomats if they could go in backed by the official numbers.

In a short conversation with Kristensen, I asked about the future of the [Nuclear Notebook](#) and if the [Federation of American Scientists](#) would continue to push for declassification. He made it clear how the government's simple denial of one information request can affect many aspects of an open and honest nuclear debate.

(Editor's note: This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.)

Heather Wuest: Why do you think the government is changing the norm after making these numbers public for so many years?

Hans Kristensen: It was a surprise. When the Obama administration first chose to declassify the nuclear statistics in 2010, it was understood that the decision to keep this information classified would not just automatically be made public from now on but reviewed every year. The nuclear statistics can become declassified in two ways; an official can come out and give the public the numbers, or someone, in this case the Federation of American Scientists, can submit a request for declassification to happen. But, the decision to declassify has happened for seven years in a row. It has become normal for the United States government to make these numbers public.

HW: The government denied your 2018 declassification request. Do you have plans, or is there a protocol to re-ask? If so, is your team planning on asking again?

HK: We can re-ask, and we will continue to pursue the goal of getting this information declassified by whatever avenues are open to us.

It is important that the United States return to what we believe is the most appropriate form of transparency. The decision to keep this information classified is confusing. It is not like making this information public discloses anything bad, or of military significance. But the decision to keep the stockpile information secret has a significant impact on public perceptions both here in the United States and overseas. The practice of declassifying this number has been invaluable for US nuclear diplomacy. It grants the United States a positive level of transparency and credibility that the other nuclear weapons states don't have.

There is a tired counterargument that we usually hear that the US chose to release this information to encourage countries to do the same, but they didn't follow; therefore the US shouldn't declassify its numbers anymore.

HW: It has been my understanding that France and the United Kingdom have been declassifying their stockpile information.

HK: Yes, and that is all fine, but they are not our adversaries. We know British and French numbers pretty closely, and the United States government knows them as well. The hope was that offering the United States' nuclear numbers would inspire similar transparency in Russia and China, but that is a tougher sell. Increasing nuclear transparency globally is just one long-term objective. We want to convince the world that it's safe and advantageous to be transparent about their nuclear weapons data and convince them that they will not be more vulnerable if they do this.

Nuclear transparency accomplishes a lot; it eliminates fear mongering, rumors, worst-case scenarios, assumptions, and mistrust in other countries. There are a number of diplomatic benefits as well, judging from the reactions we have gathered from United States officials that have been involved in nuclear diplomacy over the last seven-to-eight years. Officials are also taken aback by the decision to keep the nuclear numbers classified because it so clearly undercuts advantages and goodwill towards the United States. Transparency gives

diplomats room to act and maneuver, numbers that they can refer back to and use to engage other countries on issues of nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation.

The decision to keep the numbers classified is doubly strange with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference coming up next year. In that meeting, United States diplomats will try to persuade the treaty and negotiation regime that everything is OK. But they have no new nuclear negotiations to talk about, no actionable treaties, and now they're shut out of nuclear transparency. Lack of transparency will make it hard for diplomats to make the case for the United States in an international forum—a forum that depends on political goodwill to convince as many countries as possible to strengthen nonproliferation norms.

HW: The Nuclear Notebook spells out what nuclear stockpile numbers are, what they mean, and how much dismantlement is taking place. Why is it important to have these kinds of facts available beyond diplomacy?

HK: There are many levels of society that benefit from this sort of factual information. Even within the government, different branches have different levels of security clearance. Just because the government has its own number does not mean that those numbers can be used widely in an internal debate. When nuclear numbers are public information, it empowers officials to go out and talk about this. I have been in meetings with government officials who I know have the [official] numbers, [but]who were briefing Nuclear Notebook numbers so that they could talk about this in a way that would not challenge their secrecy.

As mentioned before, transparency provides many benefits not just for the government or diplomatic corps; transparency also informs the nuclear debate at large. When we publish these estimates, it enables people in other countries, where they are not allowed to research their own countries national information—for example, in China or Russia—to be part of the conversation. These numbers enable intellectuals, scholars, journalists, what have you, who write stories about nuclear security issues to refer to a source that is not going to get them in trouble. That benefits the public debate, allows more to be included in the conversation about where nukes are in the world, what is their status, the trend, is it getting better or worse, all of these things. These are important conversations, conversations that will not go away, and it is essential to have factual information for these conversations to take place.

Having ready access to factual information about nuclear systems answers many basic questions like: What is this system? What does it do? How many are there? Have we had this before? What is the yield? Where are they stored? People need access to all of this information to be able to have important debates, develop an understanding, and to write about what is going on.

Access to ready factual information about nuclear security matters is also essential, in a broader societal sense, to the role of democracy. Nuclear weapons are inherently undemocratic. They are so big, powerful, important, the consequences so extreme, they create special rules, exceptions from normal oversight and democratic processes that we take for granted in the other parts of society. People need to know and understand these numbers because we are in a position to hold people accountable.

Nuclear weapons live in this sort of secret space. The secrecy is warranted but also often exaggerated. Choosing not to declassify the 2018 nuclear numbers is an example of the

secrecy around nuclear matters being exaggerated too far. This decision has harmed United States interests, and government officials have no reference to any national security damaged by the seven years of prior declassifications. In this case, they have closed the book just because they don't like it, and this is fundamentally undemocratic. So, my team and I are going to try to push this, through requests, through conversations, legislation, and if necessary, through members of Congress.

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