

WHAT'S SECRET ABOUT WORLD WAR II?

Even 45 years after the Freedom of Information Act was enacted, the process is still too daunting and in many cases works far too slowly.

Governments, even the most democratic, are reflexively determined to keep as many secrets as they can. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the United States, enacted 45 years ago, is an essential corrective.

But the process for obtaining classified documents is still too daunting and bureaucratic and in many cases far too slow — with some requests languishing for more than a decade.

The Obama administration has prodded noticeable improvements. But 14 of the 35 busiest agencies fielding FOIA requests have backlogs older than two years and continue to lose ground, according to the latest watchdog accounting by the National Security Archive at George Washington University. Eight bureaucracies had requests more than a decade old.

The oldest request, about allied activities during World War II, was filed May 8, 1991. A cobwebbed runner-up is a 1993 query about the Sicilian mafia in the 1940s, according to the study, whose authors requested pending FOIA requests under the FOIA to get a handle on the backlog.

The main reason delays get out of hand appears to be the law's referral process allowing separate agencies to claim partial jurisdiction, or "equity," over a FOIA request. This is one of the security safeguards written into the law, which otherwise allotted agencies 20 to 30 business days to process a request.

The White House laid down steps for stricter response times in 2009, pruning an estimated backlog of more than 130,000 requests by tens of thousands. Still, only 49 out of 90 federal agencies had put improvements in place as of last March, according to the study.

Congress has amended the law six times over the years, in hopes of improving access. It is back on the case with proposals for a commission to pinpoint problems and propose solutions. Surely citizens deserve an even stronger fix as the shadows linger and lengthen.