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Secrecy versus Openness: Historical Perspectives

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“I think all members of the laboratory are agreed that the work which is being pursued here is of such importance that we should not like to see it or any part of it fall into private or foreign hands,” J. Robert Oppenheimer announced to his colleagues at Los Alamos on November 15, 1943, putting the first formal secrecy policies into effect—while promising “to make the procedure as little burdensome as possible, and to reduce its interference with the actual prosecution of the work.” “After the war, the question of secrecy was reconsidered... but the practice of classification continued; it was our ‘security,’ whether it worked or failed,” Oppenheimer’s colleague Edward Teller updated us in 1981, halfway between the mimeographed handout of 1943 and the labyrinthine security policies of today. “We now have millions of classified technical documents,” Teller continued, and “the limitations we impose on ourselves by restricting information are far greater than any advantage others could gain.” Teller titled his critique “The Road to Nowhere.” Is there a road back? In some notable cases (digital computing, satellite reconnaissance, GPS) we have taken the road to openness, and Teller’s opinion, at least in this domain, appears to have been correct.