



Alex Wellerstein. *Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 528 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-02038-9.

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An inherent tension exists between the scientific ideal of openness and the national security demand for secrecy. Nowhere is this tension more prominent than in the debate around nuclear weapons: too much secrecy might pose a threat to knowledge and industry, but too little secrecy might pose a threat to the nation. In *Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States*, Alex Wellerstein deftly explores this tension, providing an insightful and comprehensive history of American efforts to control the spread of nuclear information. By focusing on secrecy, he offers a fresh perspective on familiar events, from émigré physicist Leo Szilard's campaign of self-censorship to the publication of the Smyth Report after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the anti-secrecy movement that flourished at the end of the Cold War.

Throughout the book, two particular developments loom large in the debate between openness and secrecy. First, General Leslie Groves adopted and formalized a comprehensive secrecy protocol for the Manhattan Project that included censorship, clearances, code names, and compartmentalization. Many of these practices continued into peacetime and served as a constant source of dispute. Second, the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 al-

lowed the nascent Atomic Energy Commission to regulate "Restricted Data," which entailed all data related to nuclear weapons regardless of origins. The concept that information could be "born secret" troubled independent scientists whose work was now potentially subject to government regulation. For example, in one of the most original contributions of the book, Wellerstein describes the complications faced by scientists who investigated laser fusion at private companies and tried to publish their work to establish priority.

Besides covering the inherent tension between the scientific ideal of openness and the national security demand for secrecy, Wellerstein also highlights the inherent tension between secrecy and accountability. Secrecy enabled the Manhattan Project to elude congressional oversight and avoid potential dissolution. During the Cold War, secrecy enabled government officials to hide abuses from the public and avoid potential backlash. The eventual revelation of these abuses—the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the articles exposing the Watergate scandal—prompted activists to push for anti-secrecy measures as a way to hold those officials accountable for their actions. The anti-secrecy activists no longer saw government secrecy as a way to protect the Amer-

ican people but as a way for corrupt officials to protect themselves. Meanwhile, the existence of nuclear weapons provided those officials with “the ultimate justification for secrecy policy” because nuclear weapons constituted an existential threat to the nation (p. 379).

Wellerstein identifies the concept of fear as one of the most important tools for shaping public opinion about scientists during the Cold War, a view most thoroughly explored in Jessica Wang’s book *American Science in an Age of Anxiety* (1999). He sympathizes with the idea that the fear of Soviet bombs, atomic spies, and the potential for nuclear terrorism contributed to a kind of “security theater” in the United States, the purpose of which was “to make its practitioners, and the American people, feel safe,” though he acknowledges that it is difficult to know whether such measures actually did prevent nuclear proliferation (p. 405).

If *Restricted Data* champions anything, it is the power of open-source information. Most of the stories in the book hint at this power, such as Groves’s publicity strategy for the atomic bomb and journalist Howard Morland’s attempt to reconstruct the Teller-Ulam design of the hydrogen bomb by reading encyclopedias. From World War II to the present, the press variously served as a witting accomplice in government propaganda as well as an external check on excessive secrecy practices. Although Wellerstein focuses on nuclear secrecy to the exclusion of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and other intelligence agencies, historians of the American intelligence community will find much in the book that corroborates and complements their own work.

Open sources can contain an incredible number of secrets—or at least information that certain entities want to keep secret—but not every secret can be found in open sources. Perhaps better than any story within the book, the book itself is a testament to the virtues of declassification. Through dogged research, including original Freedom of

Information Act requests, Wellerstein manages to peek behind the veil of nuclear secrecy and deliver a sweeping history with clarity and style.

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