

5 From behind the fence

Threading the Labyrinths of classified historical research

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On one typically crystalline August afternoon at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in 1994, I received a call from my secretary. She informed me that my long-awaited United States Department of Energy (DOE) security “Q” clearance had arrived, allowing me access to documents and conversations for a classified history project to which I had been assigned.¹ I could now actually visit my secretary, Mildred*, and my immediate supervisor, John*, whose office was until then in a building off-limits to me. John had instructed the secretary to tell me to pick up my new identification badge, then meet him at the entrance gate at the main Administration Building, where I was to move into a new office that was, as they said, “behind the fence.”

I dropped the papers I was reading, and hurried over to the badge office, picked up my new, bright-blue, electronically encoded badge and walked next door to the gatehouse where the security officer looked at my identification and let me pass with a smile. I walked over to John at the main entrance and he enthusiastically shook my hand and said, “Welcome to the brethren!” Jokingly I reminded him I was a woman but thanked him anyway for his warm welcome to this apparently elite club. We both laughed.

John led me to his office on the building’s top, fourth floor. Without a word he opened his combination-locked safe, and excitedly pulled out stacks of classified documents, saying “Take a look, you will need to review these materials for your research.” I briefly scanned a few of the documents—labeled Secret-Restricted Data, or SRD for short—mostly nondescript and boring 1950s-vintage military policy committee meeting minutes redacted from the National Archives in Washington, DC. John put them back in his safe and locked it, and led me away around the suite of offices our group occupied. He pointed out where my new office was. Later we talked a little about progress on the project—an ambitious multi-author history of nuclear weapons development during the Cold War—that I had been hired for, and our work plans for the coming year.

The next morning I began moving in to my new office, but not before I attended a class that instructed me about some of the caveats of having a clearance, and some etiquette associated with it: for example, I was not to wear my badge when off laboratory grounds, such as in local restaurants, lest I encourage potential spies to