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Editorials

The Adventures of
[REDACTED]

If Mark Twain had faced
government censors,
Huck Finn would be blacked out.

The Freedom of Information Act gives citizens the right to review government documents.

It has enabled curious researchers to discover terrible government abuses and wonderful government successes.

Yet too many elected officials prefer secrecy. They whittle away at the public's right to know, exempting this or that sort of information from FOIA. Virginia law includes more than 100 exemptions, and their number and scope seem to increase every time the General Assembly is in session.

Some of those exemptions make perfect sense. Others have less persuasive justifications, for example, records of the Virginia Military Advisory Council's work to prevent bases closing in the commonwealth.

Officials try to have it both ways. Voters like openness, so politicians keep the documents public. Then, when voters aren't paying attention, they issue black pens to custodians of records.

When an agency releases a document, it may redact it. That's the fancy word for the practice of blacking out portions of a document, and it's something government officials abuse to great effect.

A few years ago, when the CIA released documents relating to the waterboarding of prisoners, almost all of the content was expunged. In one 43-page document, only a handful of words on a single page survived, "... certified interrogators ... have employed



the following standard and enhanced interrogation methods with Khalid Shaykh ((Muhammad)) ... the waterboard."

Everything else was blacked out. (See it online at bit.ly/ciaRedact.)

That's an extreme example, and not the best for demonstrating the real power of redaction.

When wielded as a scalpel, it can appear that a government body is releasing records when it really is being anything but transparent.

Applying the plethora of optional exemptions in many cases can render an important record useless.

To show how it works, we pulled an American classic off the shelf, one with which most Americans should be familiar.

Below is the second paragraph of Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," a passage that provides an update since "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

We've cited some reasons a government censor might gut this great work of literature.

Visit bit.ly/adventuresRedacted to read the original passage and see what you're missing.

Then think about what else you're missing. What embarrassing facts and criminal acts do elected officials hide with their black pens?

Now the way that the book winds up is this: [REDACTED] and me found the money that the [REDACTED] and it made us rich.

We got [REDACTED] apiece [REDACTED] It was an awful sight of

money when it was piled up. Well, [REDACTED]

Ongoing police investigation.

[REDACTED] all the year round — more than a body could

tell what to do with. [REDACTED] and allowed [REDACTED] would sivilize

Adoption records.

me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent

[REDACTED] was in all [REDACTED] ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old

Improperly redacted.

[REDACTED] and was free and satisfied. But [REDACTED]

Terrorism-related national security intelligence.

[REDACTED] hunted me up and said [REDACTED] might join if I would go back to the [REDACTED] and be respectable. So I went back.