Recent Developments in Federal Archival Activities[1]

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THE trouble with recent developments is that they are still developing. Worst of all, since I must admit to being a participant in some of these developments, I am likely to be a prejudiced observer — prejudiced, that is, in favor of developments that I am in favor of. To those who are not in favor of developments that I am in favor of, must obviously be left the task of calm and dispassionate appraisal.

I should judge that the principal events of the recent past affecting Federal archival activities, listed as an archivist should list them, in proper chronological order, were, first, the publication of the Hoover Commission recommendations on records management in January and February, 1949; second, the transfer of the National Archives Establishment to the new General Services Administration in July, 1949; third, the passage of the Federal Records Act of 1950 and its signature by the President on September 5, 1950; fourth, the establishment of a Federal records management staff, separate from the staff of the National Archives but within the single organizational entity now called the National Archives and Records Service instead of the National Archives Establishment; and fifth, the establishment of a system of Federal Records Centers in various regional areas of the United States. The two latter developments are in process now and should be dated, I suppose, simply as occurring in the Fiscal Year of our Lord, 1951.

Parenthetically, I probably should have preceded all these events with the development of the atomic bomb. This weapon, together with the possible manufacture of the hydrogen bomb, ultimately may have a more far-reaching influence on Federal archival activities than any I have mentioned. Some archivists might be willing to list the Hoover report in the same explosive category. With all deference to my friend and colleague, Ed Leahy,[2] I put it on a somewhat lesser plane.

[1] Read before the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Madison, Wisconsin, October 10, 1950.

[2] Emmett J. Leahy, author of the task force report on records management prepared for the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government.

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Now, before we attempt to examine or evaluate in any detail the five events I have listed above — excluding the atomic bomb but not the Leahy bomb — I should like to recall certain situations that existed two or three years ago when I returned to the National Archives Establishment from the War Department. I had been absent several years and I will tell you, confidentially, that I didn't apply either for the job of Assistant Archivist, to which I returned, or the job of Archivist. I mention this merely to assure you that I know trouble when I see it. The National Archives — continuing in the line forced upon it by depression, war, and budgetary problems — faced not one but several very difficult situations. Something fairly dramatic, as those things go in our customarily quiet archival world, needed to happen, for reasons I will mention later. One never knows in such dramas, quiet or not, whether he is casting himself as the villain, the hero, or just a plain every-day fall guy. Besides, as any good bureaucrat knows, there is nothing quite so painful as making decisions and taking action, and it was evident that decisions had to be made and action had to be taken.

The history of the National Archives Establishment shows a truly remarkable degree of success on the part of my predecessors in meeting the difficulties that faced them. In my opinion they did the right things — the things that simply had to be done — in the situations in which they worked, and with the experience available to them. On only one matter do I envy them: When R. D. W. Connor did his miraculous job of staffing and organizing the National Archives on a professional basis, in a country with only the meagerest background in archival administration, he started with an empty building. When Solon Buck made the National Archives an indispensable part of the administrative machinery of the Federal Government, playing a role in the management of this machinery that no other archival agency had ever attempted, he started with a building that was still more than half empty. When I became Archivist, the National Archives Building, constructed only a few short years ago after nearly a century and a half of agitation, was for all practical purposes full — full to the gunwales with records.

I do not need to tell you that this fact had a sobering effect on me. The Archivist is charged, professionally as an archivist and legally as a Government official, with the selection and preservation of the enduring archives of the Federal Government. This is an obligation of the most profound and serious character. It can only be realized in all its implications by trying to imagine what our Government and our educational system would be like without such archives. We

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think of amnesia in an individual as a dreadful affair, but fortunately one that is usually temporary. Compare it with the kind of permanent amnesia that would set in on a government with the factual record of its past, as represented in its archives, obliterated: The hundreds of thousands of documents that give cohesion and consistency to the organization and conduct of our national Government; the wealth of hard-won experience and knowledge, in all its immense and intricate detail; the documents that by the tens of hundreds of thousands record our rights and duties and status as citizens, and link us as individuals into the great chain of past and future.

But of course it is quite unnecessary for me to declaim to you, as archivists, upon the burden we all bear. There is no more prosaic occupation, day-by-day, than that of archivist; and no occupation, generation-by-generation, with a more dramatic task. All this is simply to say that as an archivist, faced with the serious responsibilities of his profession and position, I could hardly fail to be impressed by this one salient fact: A building that had been intended by those who planned it to satisfy the requirements of the Federal Government for at least two or three generations was virtually filled in 15 short years. Congress, in fact, had not even gotten around to providing the money to finish the interior construction and equipment of the building!

Now, of course, I shouldn't dwell on this fact too long, since there is certainly danger of over-emphasizing it and there is no mystery at all in how it came about. Big Government simply results in Big Records, and the only question is how we go about the task of assuring that the relatively small percentage of permanent records among them is properly preserved and made available, not only to succeeding generations but to our own generation.

In 1948, I and various of my colleagues recognized a few of the alternatives. One of them — a way that is always fascinating to contemplate — would have been to do nothing. The Budget Bureau being what it is, I am not certain this would have been possible. But assuming it had been, there might have been one or two interesting results. First, I have fairly good reason to suppose that in the wealthier Government departments we would have seen the development of ministerial archival establishments, similar to those that exist in European governments. Those who did the original planning for the National Archives Establishment thought this unwise, and I think it both unwise and uneconomical. Second, the poorer departments and agencies, always hard pressed for space, would

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have re-created the situation that existed when the National Archives Establishment came into being in 1935, gradually filling up offices, attics, basements, and almost any other available space in the utmost jumble of administrative wastefulness, disorder, and neglect. This process, in plain fact, had already begun again by 1950. If it is arrrested, it will be because we did not adopt the alternative of doing nothing.

A second possible alternative, always looked upon with naive hope and enthusiasm by those who have not had the experience of facing Congressional subcommittees on appropriations, was that we persuade Congress immediately to provide funds for National Archives Annex No. 1. As a matter of fact, we tried this, with signal unsuccess, although some additional new construction will have to come sooner or later. Congress has authorized no extensive building program for the civilian agencies of the Executive Branch of the Government for the past 10 years, and is unlikely to do so in the near future.

Now I have been speaking of possible alternatives as if they were really alternative courses of action. This too, like my emphasis on our building full of records, can be overdone. In 1948, as always, it was the total situation that counted. The elements added up, not as alternatives, but as conditioning factors. One factor, space, had reached a turning point. And since the space in the National Archives Building had been a sort of escape valve for other agencies, one could expect various unfortunate things to happen in the numerous departments and agencies of the Government if nothing were done — another conditioning factor. And Congress, that most important of all factors, seemed in the words of my colleague, Oliver Holmes, in his notable article in the *American Archivist* a year ago, ". . . to have settled upon the [National Archives] a sort of fixed annual allowance that no presentation of the facts of life could increase." [3] That certainly was a factor; and associated with it was one other — a factor that seemed to me rather important.

I am not sure that I can express this matter without implying that I disagree with the policies pursued by my predecessor during the war, which I don't. I refer to the increasing amount of time and energy and thought our most experienced and best qualified archivists in the professional custodial branches of the National Archives were having to give to records problems in other agencies of the Government, at the expense of archival work within the Na-

[3] Oliver W. Holmes, "The National Archives at a Turn in the Road," *American Archivist*, 12:341 (Oct. 1949).

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tional Archives. No one should jump to any hasty conclusions here. I do not believe that archivists should retreat to the cloisters. It is a problem, in the Federal Government, of organization and emphasis in large part, although it is in some part also a matter of function. The fact is, to quote Holmes' article again: since the business of being disorderly is so human, "There is no end . . . to the amount of funds that can be put into records administration work." [4] Actually, the National Archives was at the point where some balance and stability had to be achieved: Some turning back, within the branches having custody of records in the National Archives, toward the traditional functions that had had to be neglected during the war.

One further factor that had a bearing on the situation, and then I will leave the background and talk briefly about the developments. This factor had its derivation in the mundane business known in the Federal civil service as "job description" and "job series." In April 1947 the first examination for archivists in the higher grades P-2 through P-6 was announced. Previously there had been examinations for the lowest grade professional archivist, P-1, in which certain minimum academic qualifications were maintained. Because of a number of very practical job-classification problems arising out of the war, for which no one is to blame more than I am myself, the 1947 announcement made it possible to substitute experience for academic qualifications in such a way that in time, the latter might very well disappear. In addition, no attempt was made to distinguish between the work of an archivist and that of a staff specialist in current records management. The latter, in my present opinion, belongs in what the Federal Government calls the Organization and Methods Examining series of job classifications, rather than the archivists series. By 1948, although I was uncertain how to resolve the problem, I was pretty sure we had to begin drawing some distinction between archival work and current records management work, if only to allay the mounting confusion among civil service job classifiers. Now I must add immediately that archivists should and are being used as staff specialists in certain phases of current records management work. This, I am sure, will continue to cause some degree of confusion in the minds of job classifiers; and no doubt it confuses you right now. But I shan't stop to explain. There is and always will be, I hope, much overlapping between current records management and archival activities. But each has a basically different emphasis and requires different qualifications, no matter how

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 351.

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closely the activities and individuals involved are related to each other in common purpose.

Speaking by and large, academic qualifications in history and the social sciences are essential for an archivist, if he is to develop subject-matter competence in the areas of documentation for which he is responsible. I believe he must develop such competence if he is to perform his professional chores intelligently. On the other hand, management outlook and experience are essential to the records management specialist, if he is to develop as a member of the management team — and it is only as a member of that team that he can ever hope to be effective in the long run. In a word, the whole field of dealing with records has progressed sufficiently to demand a certain amount of specialization. At least that is one of the assumptions that affected my own view of the situation in 1948.

Now that is enough about the setting and the situation. One possible opportunity to do something about it was right at hand, in the form of the bipartisan Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, organized under an Act of Congress passed in July 1947 — the so-called Hoover Commission. Whether or not it was the right opportunity, I will leave for posterity to decide. On the record so far — the record of accomplishment in coming to grips with the problems I have mentioned above and of other problems created for archivists and records management specialists by contemporary records — I believe it was the right opportunity.

At any rate, whether or no, I directed Oliver Holmes, then our Program Adviser, to prepare a letter calling the attention of the Chairman of the Commission to the need for a "task force" to consider Federal records management problems, some of which were outlined in the letter. Mr. Holmes, in his article a year ago, stated that "It was not supposed . . ." that a task force study would have much practical effect, other than to draw attention to the problem and point up the alternatives.[5] For myself, I supposed that the study would have at least a fifty-fifty chance of accomplishing three things: Strengthening the then existing Budget Bureau staff working in the field of current records management; providing a statutory basis for agency programs; and finally, strengthening our case in the National Archives for the establishment of a number of strategically located Federal Records Centers. Since I knew that certain influential figures in the Budget Bureau also were behind the formation of the task force, I felt it had a fair chance of success.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 347.

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We both reckoned without the dynamic personality of Ed Leahy. The letter was dispatched, the task force approved, and I confess here and now that I recommended Leahy to head it up. The report he prepared has been the subject of much quibbling about style and statistics, and not a little misunderstanding. It was what Ed called an "action" document. It was not the kind of report I might have written, or that many others might have written. On the other hand, it did succeed in its purpose — it stimulated action — better, I am sure, than the report I might have written. The question is: Has it been the right kind of action?

In practice, we have found it possible to alter and perfect and refine some of his recommendations, particularly those relating to the content of new legislation. There were other matters, such as the title of the person in charge and the name of the over-all organization that would supervise the Federal records program. I won't bore you with the gruesome and perhaps bureaucratic details of our disagreements. When the Commission itself, sitting as the final authority, recommended the establishment of a new and unique governmental organization — the General Services Administration — it was quite inevitable that the National Archives Establishment would have to be transferred to it. The alternative, if there was such a thing, was to disclaim the years of effort to make the National Archives a "general service" agency of the Government in the records field. This we could not and did not do.

We have now been a part of GSA for some 15 months. We have gained immensely from this association in resources, facilities, authority, and prestige in the field of Federal records management. Since as Archivist I must look at the entire records problem, and look at it sometimes in crass and material terms, these resources seem quite helpful. Our appropriation in this fiscal year 1951 is approximately 2½ million dollars, as compared with approximately half that much for fiscal year 1948. The increase is being applied largely to the establishment of Federal Records Centers in Washington, D. C., Chicago, New York City, and San Francisco. I assure you, in this connection, we are finding it quite advantageous to be in the agency that controls space and equipment for the Government.

Looking at the Federal records problem as a whole, we have every prospect in GSA of bringing order and intelligence into the management of Federal records, improving their quality as well as decreasing their quantity, and — what is at the heart of the matter — assuring the preservation of those that are worthy of being preserved. We can do this, and we can also save the taxpayers some

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money, with our records management program. We are going to see that records having insufficient value to be maintained in perpetuity by the taxpayer are destroyed. We are going to get into the gadgetry of record-making and record-keeping, and cut the flow of the taxpayers' money into this field. I may be wrong in saying that I, as Archivist of the United States, have an interest in such problems. But I think I will prove to be less wrong than those archival officials who do not face up to the Gargantuan problems posed by contemporary record-creating mechanisms and organizations.

What happens to our archival role as a cultural organization in the process? That question has disturbed some of us — but I should add rather emphatically, for *some* years. I am quite proud of the fact that I am an alumnus of the stack areas in the National Archives — the places where records are kept and handled. I am not unfamiliar with the bouquet of vintage vellum. Therefore I ask myself, what are the conditions under which an archival institution can fulfill its cultural and educational purposes — whether these be to serve scholarship or the Government itself?

First, assuming of course you have a building and a significant body of archives, one must equate the words "institution" and "staff." The staff — past, present, and future — makes the institution. And from here on I am speaking particularly of that part of our professional archival staff that is responsible for the preservation and use of our holdings in the National Archives Building. What, then, are the conditions under which this archival staff can fulfill its cultural and educational purposes?

In any governmental organization, the process that is called "administration" is likely to come in large doses. In the development of scientific and scholarly work, the emphasis must be on the individual — his initiative, competence, productiveness, and reputation in his field. I therefore postulate first of all that a minimum harassment with internal administrative paper-work is important. Ever since I have known them, the professional record-keeping units of the National Archives have been encumbered with too much "administration." We are trying to cut it down, within the inevitable limits set by program and budgetary planning and supervision.

Secondly, the staff at some point in its development should cease to be hard-pressed and preoccupied by the sheer physical aspects of work incident to the large-scale accessioning of records. Inevitably, during the decade 1937 to 1947, this was the largest task confronting the National Archives. We had to appraise, select, and accession the backlog of 150 years of Federal records. Because of space

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shortages in other agencies during the depression and war, it was done too hastily. We have accessioned records, unavoidably, that should not be in the National Archives Building. More serious — for we are constantly reappraising and refining our holdings — we have accumulated certain habits. It was a real big spree — that accessioning spree from 1937 to 1947. Lack of space, perhaps very fortunately, is forcing us to taper off. We are learning to say "no." The establishment of records centers enables us to say it in good conscience. We need no longer assume responsibility in the National Archives Building for records that are unscreened, too recent, too active, or of dubious enduring value. We have not done much of that but we have done some; we need now do none. The energies of our National Archives staff can be turned to the tasks of digesting, arranging, describing, preserving, publishing and otherwise assuring the usability of the riches we have gathered together these past 15 years.

Finally, this staff — and now I am speaking particularly of the cream of the staff at the higher supervisory and professional levels — must be freed as much as possible from the burden of solving all the records problems of the Government. I have spoken of this briefly above. During the war, rightly and necessarily because there was no one else to do it, our best talents within the National Archives were diverted to the task of carrying the gospel of good records management to other agencies of the Government. The establishment within the National Archives and Records Service of a Records Management Division, together with the passage of the Federal Records Act of 1950 — requiring all agencies to undertake a records management program — will relieve archivists in the National Archives itself of much of this burden.

The development of the National Archives as a cultural institution, serving not only the world of scholarship but in a broad sense the Government itself (for the Government also requires the advice and knowledge of its own past experience) — this development can proceed as rapidly as our staff is willing and able to go. For my part, I shall see that the professional spirit is nourished and strengthened with all the energy and resources and imagination I can muster.

One final word about the new Federal Records Act of 1950, and then I shall desist. This Act had the support of the President, the Budget Bureau, the Administrator of General Services, the Comptroller General, the National Citizen's Committee for the Hoover Report, Ed Leahy, Phil Brooks,[6] and the Archivist of the United

[6] President of the Society of American Archivists.

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States. For the record, I should say that the support of Leahy, if not decisive, should certainly be heavily weighed, since he carried with him the backing of the Citizen's Committee.

The Act was passed unanimously by both the House and Senate. It has many good things in it bearing upon archival administration — some provisions we have felt necessary for years. We are preparing a paper explaining the various provisions in the Act and showing changes from previous legislative enactments. Most of you will see copies of this paper in due time, so I shall not go into detail.

There is one matter, however, I wish to mention briefly. I have great hopes that the National Historical Publications Commission, with the expanded functions, membership, and the permanent staff authorized by the new law, will play a much more significant part in our affairs than it has in the past. I expect the Commission not only to be active in determining the character and extent of documentary publications of the Federal Government, but to become a channel through which we can encourage and support State and local archival and historical activities.

The functions of the Commission, as now set forth, are to "make plans, estimates, and recommendations for such historical works and collections of sources as it deems appropriate for printing or otherwise recording at the public expense"; and to "cooperate with and encourage appropriate Federal, State, and local agencies and nongovernmental institutions, societies, and individuals in collecting and preserving and, when it deems such action desirable, in editing and publishing the papers of outstanding citizens of the United States and such other documents as may be important for an understanding and appreciation of the history of the United States." I do not expect miracles overnight from the reactivation of this long-dormant Commission. I do expect that slowly, over the years, it will establish itself as an important source of inspiration and aid both to historians and archivists and, above all, as a common meeting ground for these two professional groups. As the archival profession develops its own body of knowledge, qualifications and responsibilities, it must increase — not lessen — the sources of contact with the historical profession and other scholarly groups. There is no ingrate like the child who spurns his parent — or, for that matter, the parent who spurns his child. The offspring may get older, but the family resemblance is still there; and, we hope, the family spirit.

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