

# The Long-Range Implications for Historians and Archivists of the Charges Against the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

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I WANT to say first that I am not going to read a paper but am merely going to use a few notes to guide me as I go. It seems to me that this is an appropriate time for some informal remarks, a time for uttering a few home truths among one's friends. I do hope there will be time for you to ask questions after I have finished.

I do not propose to spend any time rehearsing the facts of the incident that is the occasion for this session. The facts are adequately dealt with in the ad hoc joint committee report, which I hope all of you will read. It is appropriate to begin this discussion by reminding ourselves that libraries and archives are operated by human beings, not by angels. This being the case, librarians and archivists occasionally make errors, or people dislike the manner in which they have performed some aspect of their work. In the normal course this may lead to a complaint. If the complaint reaches the ears of the responsible administrative officer of the institution (which frequently is not the case—often persons who think they have been aggrieved harbor their resentments and go away to tell their complaint to others, not to those responsible for managing the institution), an attempt is usually made to investigate the situation that led to the complaint and, if possible, to rectify the situation if the complaint proves to be valid.

The present case had its origins in exactly this kind of a complaint—a feeling on the part of a user of the Roosevelt Library's resources that he had not been properly treated. But it at once

The author, a past president and Fellow of the Society and associate librarian for manuscripts and archives at Yale University, delivered this talk at the Society's December 29, 1970, luncheon meeting during the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. This article, a slightly revised version of his remarks, was made from a tape recording.

became apparent that this was not an ordinary complaint. This was not a case involving a man who thought the staff had been lazy or incompetent or indifferent or careless. The first unique aspect of the case was that the aggrieved person believed there had been a deliberate, planned, systematic attempt to damage him by withholding documents, a connivance that the Library staff entered into for its own selfish purposes. There later proved to be additional unique aspects to the complaint. The original complaint did not remain the sole complaint. As one watched with astonishment, the original complaint grew into a vast complex of charges directed not only against the Library but also against its parent institution, the National Archives, against Harvard University Press, and finally against the American Historical Association and the ad hoc committee that the AHA and the Organization of American Historians had appointed to investigate the charges. Later, and this too was unique, a group of historians signed a letter that was printed by the *New York Times Book Review*, repeating the original complainant's charges.

As an interested observer of this bizarre turn of events, the first thing that occurred to me was that the men who had signed the letter to the *New York Times* could not possibly have realized the seriousness to archivists and librarians of the accusations that they had made. I am familiar, as are all of you, with the way in which charges of unethical conduct against historians are handled by fellow historians. When historians are charged, as they occasionally are, with theft or mutilation of papers or with plagiarism, their colleagues do not rush to write letters to the *New York Times* about it. Quite properly the necessary investigations are carried out in great secrecy behind closed doors. The matter is kept and settled within the historical family because it is realized that such charges can blacken a man's name, destroy his reputation, and ruin his career. Hence historians greet charges of this kind against their fellows with the greatest caution, reserve, and skepticism, and they certainly give the matter no publicity until there has been a thorough investigation. Obviously there was no realization on the part of the reputable, kindly, honest gentlemen who had signed the letter that they had not given professional archivists the benefit of the same standards used when historians learn of charges against academic colleagues. The majority of those men had had no previous relationship with the Roosevelt Library, had never set foot in it, had never corresponded with it, and had no knowledge of the matter except what they had been told by the complainant.

Yet they did not hesitate to sign a letter that did grievous damage to a hard-working, conscientious group of archivists and librarians.

The second thing that struck me with great force as the case progressed was the nature of some historians' reactions to the understandable indignation of the accused archivists and librarians. The accused institutions and persons produced documented rebuttals and refutations, which, not to put too fine a point on it, show that the distinguished scholars were in many respects talking through their hats. When this became clear—when archivists told historians that in some aspects of the matter they simply did not know what they were talking about—there was an interesting reaction. I got the definite impression from my correspondence that some historians regarded archivists' rebuttals and rejections of historians' views as a kind of servile insurrection, the leaders of which would have to be dealt with summarily *pour encourager les autres*. Another indication of this attitude was that when the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians decided to set up a joint committee to investigate the charges, charges against an *archival* institution for having allegedly committed improper *archival* practices, it did not even occur to them, it did not even swim into their ken to include a trained archivist on the investigating committee. It is now recognized that this was an error. Provision has been made to ensure that if such a case should arise in the future, archivists will have a representative on the investigating committee.

After discussing the matter with my archival colleagues, we agreed that the chief reason for the situation that had developed as a result of the case is that historians and other scholars simply are not aware that in the last generation we librarians and archivists have greatly increased in numbers; have developed strong, healthy professional societies with our own codes of ethics and professional standards; and have, we hope, attained a new dignity and a new sense of our own worth. In short, archivists and librarians no longer regard themselves as people who come in by the servants' entrance. Rather, we think of ourselves as partners in the great enterprise of research and writing in this country, an activity in which we work jointly with other scholars who are engaged in the undertaking. It therefore came as a shock to learn that although we ourselves have been taking these things for granted, there are in some segments of the scholarly world persons who do not. For an essential fact about this case is that it has been pushed and supported by persons who, apparently, far from regarding archivists and librarians as their

coworkers in scholarship, regard us rather with deep suspicion and distrust. Yesterday there was a fine address delivered by Prof. Richard W. Leopold, chairman of the committee that wrote the report on this case. [See "A Crisis of Confidence: Foreign Policy Research and the Federal Government," in *American Archivist*, 34:139-155.—ED.] He used an expressive phrase to describe what I have just been talking about. He spoke of it as a "crisis of confidence." That is an apt phrase for a crisis of confidence has indeed arisen from this obvious manifestation of distrust.

As the case progressed and it became clear that there was very grave doubt about the validity of the charges, one began to hear from many persons, usually orally: "Well, after all, the men who have supported these charges don't really take them very seriously. The fundamental fact in this whole case is that there are many people in the academic world who distrust the Federal Government. They also dislike and distrust the Eastern establishment and are merely using this case as a means to vent their general dislike and distrust of the Government and the establishment."

One scarcely knows how to deal with statements of this kind. Speaking as one who for 34 years worked for the Federal Government, I know that the Government, like all bureaucracies, must always be carefully watched. On the other hand, I must say that one cannot make valid generalizations about an organization comprising everything from the Fine Arts Commission to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the Smithsonian Institution. To me the generalization, "you can't trust the Federal Government," has just about as much meaning or validity as the statement, "I don't trust anybody over 30 years of age." It just cannot be taken seriously. If such feeling exists it must be recognized as a social phenomenon, but it is a very lame justification for the charges that were made. The same is true of the statement that the charges resulted from a dislike of the Eastern establishment. We heard some mention of the Eastern establishment in Prof. Robert R. Palmer's address last night. Again, how does one deal with that kind of a justification for charges of this sort? Does the fact that Franklin Roosevelt was born in Dutchess County make the Roosevelt Library part of the Eastern establishment? Is that sufficient justification for impugning the integrity of the Library staff? Perhaps when the Richard M. Nixon Library that is to be built on the California coast is added to the Hoover Institution that is already there, we may have the beginnings of a Western establishment helping to redress the balance. I know of no other way of

dealing with the Eastern establishment argument insofar as the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library is concerned.

But I must pass on to the more serious aspects of the question of distrust, the really poisonous element in this case. Distrust breeds distrust. If we should ever reach the point where most archivists and scholars do not trust each other—if they should come to believe they must watch each other carefully and document their actions with each other—it will be bad for archivists, but it will be disastrous for historians. Consider what I mean. The whole process of conducting research in contemporary history rests not on careful textual study of a handful of documents but on reading vast quantities of papers. I will not give you a lecture on the exponential increase in governmental records and in the bulk of personal papers. You all know about it, and you all know that doing research on the history of any aspect of U.S. affairs during the last 30 or 40 years requires the researcher to go through great masses of material. That fact requires a mutual trust between the man who is doing the research and the man who is furnishing the records. The historian doing research on the United States in the 20th century cannot go into an archives and make out a call slip for each sheet of paper he wishes to examine. He must ask the archivist to furnish him with large quantities of material identified by a broad collective identification or description. The archivist who gives him the material cannot take time to make a list of each sheet of paper that he puts into the researcher's hands. He must deliver book trucks of papers and trust they will all be returned. But the whole point on which the present case turned was whether the staff at the Roosevelt Library could furnish documentary evidence that six specific letters were indeed among the hundreds of documents that the complainant examined at the Library. If archivists and librarians come to believe they must be able to produce documentary evidence of every piece of paper given users of their collections in order to protect themselves against charges of misfeasance or malfeasance, a situation could easily develop that would destroy the effective working relationships between archivists and researchers now existing in most depositories.

Some of you may have worked in European manuscripts depositories and in a few in this country where you are required to make out a call slip for each individual letter or document you want to use and where you are not permitted to have more than five or six documents at one time. After reading those five or six you return them, see that your receipt is countersigned, and then make out

five or six more call slips for another five or six documents. In this way everybody knows precisely what is received and what is returned, but research that could otherwise be accomplished in days or weeks takes months or years. These are the kind of procedures that mutual distrust between curators and historians creates. Their widespread adoption in this country would be very bad indeed for historians and for the progress of historical research.

Another unique aspect of the case is the claim by the chief protagonist that he suffered severe financial damages as a result of alleged malfeasance or malpractice by the staff of the Roosevelt Library. He claims he had invested many thousands of dollars in preparing a book that was destroyed because six letters were deliberately withheld from him. It is his contention that the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, the National Archives, or the Government owes him compensation for the full amount he invested in preparing the book. This is a new kind of claim that certainly opens new vistas. In recent months I have heard a number of persons say, and only half in jest, that if this case becomes a precedent librarians and archivists had better think about taking out insurance against malpractice suits. If we are going to be held financially responsible for the failure of a man's book or article because of an alleged failure to deliver a document or documents to him, we had better give serious thought to the best methods of protecting ourselves against such suits. Perhaps you think I am conjuring up a fantasy, but the fact is that the present complainant has publicly stated that he is entitled to financial compensation.

I emphasize again that distrust is the dominant theme in this picture. Its existence is revealed in various ways. The committee that did such a careful, elaborate job of investigating the incident soon decided not only to look into the incident itself but also to investigate the whole area of the operation and management of the Library. As a part of the investigation it determined to find out whether there were other dissatisfied users of the Library. It asked scholars who had been at the Library to report to it any complaints that they may have had about their treatment there. You will find the complaints received set forth in considerable detail in the report. (In my opinion this part of the report would have more significance if the Roosevelt Library's record had been compared with that of other libraries or archival institutions, giving some basis for measuring the quality of its services. Anyone who sets out to solicit complaints about libraries will always have plenty of respondents. Under the circumstances the number who complained was remarkably small compared with the number

who praised the Library or had no complaint to make.) Some of the complaints were based simply on suspicion, expressed along such lines as: "I had a feeling that there was more material there than I was shown." Or, "I had a feeling that another researcher at the Library was being shown a great deal more material than I was." The point is that these feelings (which were not reported to the Library Director at the time) were based on mere suspicion. Although they could easily have been shown to be without a factual basis, the feelings of mistrust were communicated to others. Baseless allegations of wrongdoing were made and believed without giving the institution against whom they were made an opportunity to disprove them. There seems to be a peculiar psychological principle at work here. Again it must be said that scholars will uncritically accept stories about librarians' or archivists' wrongdoing, stupidity, error, or incompetence in a way that they would never accept other kinds of evidence.

Having been involved with archives and manuscripts work for more than 30 years, I have become thoroughly familiar with a certain type of young scholar who comes to do research. After he thinks he knows you well, he begins to complain about his professors and faculty advisors—how his progress has been delayed and his career damaged by an incompetent, prejudiced, or indifferent professor, or even by a malicious one; how his thesis has been held up by niggling criticisms that have cost him a year's salary or a good position. One recognizes this type of scholar immediately. Whatever one may think of him, one certainly does not wholly and uncritically swallow everything he says. Historians are supposed to have some training in the critical evaluation of sources; they should apply that training to all evidence, oral or written. Is it too much to ask that scholars use their training in the critical examination of evidence when they hear complaints about archivists or librarians—that they do not at once accept the facts as described and what they hear as the whole truth?

As I am sure you know, there are vast collections of manuscripts in the Yale University Library, many of which have been there for a very long time and have been cited in footnotes of innumerable books and articles. People frequently come in to ask for documents that have been mentioned in published footnote citations. It disturbs me very much, as my staff knows, that sometimes we are unable to find the documents. This does not happen frequently, but I dislike it to happen at all. About a year ago I began to keep a record of instances in which papers that had allegedly been used in the Yale University Library were asked for and were not found. I



now have five documented cases of such incidents during the past year. In each instance we spent a great deal of time looking for a paper that was supposed to be in the library but were unable to find it. I eventually found that in at least four of the five cases the error was not ours, but the historian's footnote. One letter that had been described in a publication as being in the Yale University Library was actually in the Harvard University Library. Another letter is in the Yale University Library but is in a different collection than that cited in the footnote. We had one case of an eminent scholar, now deceased, who years ago went abroad and acquired photostatic copies of certain papers that interested him. Later he published an article in a rather obscure journal, based in part on the photostats, and his footnote citation simply said "photostats in Yale University Library." Sometime ago a young man who had read the article came in and asked to see the photostats. We had never heard of them, knew nothing of them, and turned our place inside out looking for them without success. The young man went away after making some rather rude remarks to junior members of our staff. Investigation eventually showed that the man who wrote the article had apparently decided to donate the photostats to the library after the publication of his article. But he had never gotten around to doing that. The photostats were still in his personal file cabinet, although the footnote in his published article, of course, still reads "photostats in Yale University Library."

I do not tell these stories to prove that historians make mistakes. We all make mistakes. I cite these cases only in justification of my plea so that when you hear an archivist or librarian accused of error or incompetence, you will not at once assume that the aggrieved person's story is entirely true. Is it too much to ask that you think it possible the person who is telling you the tale may be at least partly mistaken? Please think it possible that there may be more to the matter than the aggrieved person knows or understands and that the archivist or librarian whom he has accused may have quite a different version of the incident. I ask this because it is this kind of thing—spreading stories of this kind—that breeds the mutual mistrust that can be so damaging and has been so damaging in the present case. All I ask is that historians use their training in the evaluation of evidence when they hear such charges, just as they habitually use their training in the evaluation of other kinds of evidence.

Another unusual aspect of the Roosevelt Library case is the charge that archivists have failed to keep historians informed of what they are doing. There is some comment on this matter in



the joint ad hoc committee report, which contends that not enough attention has been given to publicizing the work of the Library among historians. The committee agreed that though the Library did not deliberately make a secret of its plan to publish the three *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs* volumes as had been charged, sufficient effort was not given to publicizing the project, even though the project had been officially announced many years before in the annual report of the Administrator of General Services. I suppose there is a certain amount of validity in the thesis that publishing a statement in the annual report of the Administrator of General Services is as good a way of keeping it a secret as can be found, but I have mixed feelings about the notion that it is the duty of archivists to keep historians continuously aware of what they are doing. That historians and other scholars should know what is going on in the archival field is, of course, a consummation for which we devoutly wish. But I fear that it is a will-of-the-wisp because although you can lead a horse to water, you cannot make him drink. Historians are like practically everyone else; they do not readily absorb information unless they have an immediate and strong incentive for doing so. Archival agencies that send out streams of information about what they are doing find that the information does not penetrate the consciousness of those to whom it is addressed unless it has an immediate and direct bearing on an individual's work. The whole enterprise of the accumulation and management of archives and manuscripts and the scholarly use that is made of them has become far too vast a business for anyone to be able to keep in mind all the developments, even in one field. Non-archivists become interested in learning about a particular archival development only if it has an immediate and direct bearing on their own work. Time and money spent in trying to keep everybody informed about what is going on everywhere is almost certainly going to be wasted. On that point I hope you will forgive me if I recite an illustrative anecdote. When the Archivist of the United States decided to open for research part of the papers of John F. Kennedy now deposited at the Federal Records Center at Waltham, Mass., he decided, partly as a result of the charge that the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library was keeping its operations a secret, to issue a press release formally announcing the opening. This press release was almost universally ignored; very few newspapers paid any attention to the announcement. Having failed to obtain the desired publicity for the event, Dr. Rhoads took a further step. At great expense he sent every graduate department of history in this country a copy of the press release, additional information about the parts of

the J. F. K. papers that were being made available for research, and general information about the Kennedy Library. All this took place more than a year ago. About a month ago I received a letter from an eminent historian whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years, saying, in effect, that he had heard that some people were being allowed to use some parts of the Kennedy papers and inquiring as to the truth of this report. In reply I sent him a copy of the press release and other informational materials that had been sent to his own department of history so long ago. As it had obviously never come to his attention, I thought it would be interesting to learn what had happened to the packet of papers when it reached his departmental office. Being a very conscientious man he replied in due course to the effect that he had made inquiries and had been told by the departmental secretary "that kind of junk comes in here every day and I probably tossed it into the wastebasket." I am very much afraid that most of the information archival agencies send to departments of history receives approximately this kind of treatment. The remaining alternative would be to try to carry out selective mailings aimed in each case at those persons who might be interested in the particular matter dealt with, which would be a difficult undertaking. In any case it is perfectly obvious that the mere fact that historians do not know what is going on in an archival agency is not proof of a deliberate effort to keep it secret.

But I want to get back again to the matter of mutual distrust between archivists and historians, the most painful aspect of the whole affair. It is important to remember that archivists and manuscript curators think they have been doing an exceptionally good job in working with and for scholars in the last 15 or 20 years. During these years we have seen departments of history send graduate students to us in unprecedented numbers to do research. Archivists and librarians have watched the swelling number of graduate students coming through their doors with some alarm, for their own staffs and their capacity to deal with the students have not been increased proportionately, and the graduate faculties dumping the large number of students into our laps have shown little interest in getting the increased resources that libraries and archives need to care for them properly. Further, these have been the years during which the rapidly increasing ease of photoreproduction by means of microfilm and electrostatic copies, though greatly easing the research burden of scholars, has tremendously increased the workload of the staffs having charge of unique and rare materials. A larger and larger proportion of our time has been devoted to caring for

and handling the requests of those who wished photocopies of manuscripts, with a resultant decline in the amount of time spent in properly caring for our holdings. Finally, right or wrong, veteran manuscript curators and archivists have been unanimous in their feeling that the graduate student researchers using their materials have been somewhat less than adequately trained in research methods and techniques. It is the consensus, in fact, that the training graduate students now receive in research methods and techniques is inferior to that given the prewar generation of graduate students. This lack of training has further increased the drain on the time of manuscript curators and archivists. Because we believe we have been fairly successful in coping with these unprecedented difficulties, archivists have thought they have been earning a considerable measure of respect and appreciation from the scholars whose students they have been helping. It has come then, as a particularly bitter surprise to learn that in some cases, far from being held in respect, we are regarded with suspicion and mistrust. It is this shocking realization that has done so much harm.

I can think of no better way of closing these remarks than to read to you the last paragraph of the comments that I prepared for the American Historical Association on the report of the ad hoc committee:

A basic requirement for effective historical research and writing is the maintenance of a cordial and cooperative relationship between historians and archivist-librarians. It is my conviction that this affair has done damage to that relationship. The damage results not from the fact that complaints were made, but from the suspicion with which they were suffused and the manner in which they were presented and argued. Perhaps the most startling aspect of this whole case is the vivid and revealing light that it casts on usually unspoken sources of tension and misunderstanding between some scholars and those who have responsibility for the care of the materials that scholars must use. Usually these tensions and misunderstandings have their source, as this report shows, in a simple lack of knowledge on each side of the basic facts of the other's occupation.

Lack of knowledge can be remedied, and it is to be hoped that we can now set to work to repair that lack, an endeavor that will be joined by all who are interested in the health of historical scholarship in this country.