

One Man's Hopes for His Society, His Profession, His Country

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IT IS APPROPRIATE, I think, that on the eve of the Bicentennial of American independence, the Society of American Archivists should meet in Philadelphia, the birthplace of independence. A part of my remarks tonight will relate to ways in which I think we as archivists can make a significant contribution to the Bicentennial, and a part will deal with some of the great issues and problems and opportunities that confront our profession as we look toward the third century of our nationhood.

As your president during the past year I have had occasion to give thought to some of the problems confronting the Society of American Archivists, to broader problems of our profession, and finally to some major national problems which we archivists suddenly find on our doorstep. So I should like to share with you some of my hopes for my Society, my profession, and my country.

Let me speak first of our Society. I do not have to remind you that this is a difficult time for the Society of American Archivists. This is a time of transition. It is also a time of hope and opportunity. A little over a year ago the Society took a major step forward when for the first time it engaged the services of a full-time executive director. It chose well in selecting Ann Morgan Campbell. Her energy and skill have been put to good effect in furthering the objectives of the Society, in bringing more services to the members, and in laying the groundwork for still more. Two major grants of approximately \$100,000 each have been obtained from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Your officers and your Council are working hard to make your Society more responsive to the needs of the membership, but it takes time. They need and merit your support—by your active participation in committee work, by prompt and faithful payment of your dues, and by your encouragement of your fellow archivists to join and support the Society. At this time there is a particular need for continuing growth in membership. Our membership policies and our attitudes as members ought to be inclusive, not exclusive. We must take the necessary steps to demonstrate that we want and need state archivists, records managers, Canadians, and our friends from the academic community to be a part of our Society. And I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate you for your far-sighted, if difficult, action in providing for associate memberships on a reciprocal basis to those who are not practicing archivists but who wish to associate themselves with our Society.

While the Society has made important strides forward during the past year, as always its agenda for the future is long. I should like to mention a few of the more important items on that agenda.

In 1972 at the International Congress on Archives in Moscow, your then president, Charles Lee, joined with me in extending an invitation by both the Society of

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American Archivists and the U.S. National Archives and Records Service to hold the next quadrennial congress in Washington, D.C., in 1976. This invitation was accepted. During the past three years a great deal of hard work has gone into planning and preparation for the congress—and we think it is going to be the best one yet. As a major Bicentennial event, we think that the umbrella theme, “The Archival Revolution of our Times,” is an appropriate and provocative one. Since the Society of American Archivists will be meeting concurrently with the congress, you will all have an opportunity to observe and participate in an international archival gathering. As an important part of its contribution to the congress, the Society of American Archivists sought and received from the National Endowment for the Humanities a substantial grant to defray travel and other expenses for speakers at the congress, translation services, and the like.

During the past year Maynard Brichford and his *ad hoc* committee to plan a publications program for the Society have done excellent work in assessing the needs of the profession, establishing publication priorities, and developing an overall plan. What remains now is for the plan to be implemented. The two essential ingredients are some publishable writing by more of us, and money to pay for actual publication. I know that we need an expanded publications program, and I have confidence that we can find a way to have one.

Closely related is the problem of education and training. A number of my predecessors have placed this problem on the urgent agenda of the Society of American Archivists. I regret having to do so again. It is true that more courses are being offered by more institutions than ever before. But to what extent has the Society had a significant part in this development? Is it not more than anything else a reaction to the cry for alternate careers in history, occasioned by the abysmal state of the job market for young persons with graduate degrees in history? How many of the teachers of these new courses have themselves had significant archival experience? There is still a need for a sound and comprehensive professional curriculum to be offered somewhere. I believe it would be well received and oversubscribed.

All of us who were at last year's annual meeting in Toronto had our sensitivities heightened to the continuing and accelerating problem of thefts from archival institutions. During the ensuing months this has been a high priority concern of our executive director, and I know you share with me a feeling of great satisfaction that the National Endowment for the Humanities has responded to our initiative in this area. Our Society now has underway an archival security program which I am confident will be of great assistance to all of us in curbing the curse of theft.

The last, but by no means least important, item on the future agenda of our Society that I shall mention has to do with the role of women and minorities in the archival profession. In recent years a great deal of progress has been made in achieving equality for these groups in the Society of American Archivists itself. The Society has been democratized in many ways, and women and minorities are now making important contributions to the Society at all levels. I'm afraid, however, that when one looks at the situation in the working place, in our institutions, we must admit that we still have some distance to go. A few months ago the Society released a very thorough study by Mabel Deutrich of the role of women in archives. It revealed that given an equal educational base, women were paid less than men, held proportionately fewer management-level jobs than men, and took longer to reach them than men. I suspect that a comparable study of racial minorities would show a similar situation. I suspect that it would also show that there is a disproportionately low number of Blacks, Spanish-speaking Americans, and other racial

minorities in professional archival positions. It is true that the Society of American Archivists cannot dictate to archival institutions about such matters, but it can set an example; it can collect and disseminate information; it can keep the pressure on. And it should do so, not because it's a popular thing to do these days, but because it's right.

Now I should like to turn from our Society to our profession. Our profession is larger than our Society. It can be argued that this is regrettable, and I would agree up to a point. I hope the time will come, and come soon, when the gap in size is much narrower than it is today. In the meantime we can all take comfort in the fact that those archivists who are not members of the Society of American Archivists are not necessarily "unchurched."

I refer here, of course, to the rise of the regional archival organizations during the last several years. They came into being in part for economic reasons, and in part because the pastoral and evangelistic roles of the Society of American Archivists were not given the priority they deserved. Be that as it may, the new regional organizations were founded, and have grown and developed, in response to a genuine need. They are playing a most important role in our profession. They are a breeding ground for new talent, and hopefully an incubator for SAA memberships. They are abler than is a national organization to stay close to their members, and to concentrate on members' basic and practical needs. As they do this, I sense a growing sophistication, in their meetings, their publications, their other activities. I wonder, on the one hand, if this will not tend to lessen the conceptual gap between them and the SAA. On the other hand, if this trend continues, will their role become more duplicative of the SAA? And will that, in turn, create the need for a second generation of populist archival organizations? A final question is this: is the archival profession large enough to support such a development? I obviously don't know the answers to these questions, but I have posed them in part to illustrate the importance of these groups to our profession and the need to develop a close and mutually supportive relationship between the regional groups and the Society of American Archivists.

I should like to turn now to what seems to me to be a major opportunity for the profession. As you know, last December President Ford signed into law an amendment to the legislation governing the National Historical Publications Commission. Its membership was enlarged to include two members each from the Society of American Archivists and the American Association for State and Local History. The authorization level for appropriations was increased from \$2 million to \$4 million annually, so that it could make grants for the preservation, description, and greater accessibility of historical records of state and local governments, and manuscripts in nongovernmental institutional custody. (I should mention here that although as yet no additional funds have actually been appropriated, the commission has voted to set aside a small part of its appropriations from fiscal years 1975 and 1976 to get the program underway.) Finally, the name was changed to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, reflecting its new responsibilities.

As most of you know, this legislation was not inspired by the National Archives and Records Service—although we in NARS certainly did not oppose it—but by certain members of the Society of American Archivists and other interested professional organizations. In its final form the program did not have the configuration or the size that some had hoped for. But it does represent an important beginning, and its potential for assisting our profession, and those whom we serve, is very great

indeed. It provides an opportunity not to do something for the federal archival establishment, but to breathe new life into state and local government archives and nongovernmental manuscript collections—and to coax out of hiding new matching nonfederal resources for preserving and making more accessible our nation's documentary heritage. Archivists all over the country will have an opportunity, through the State Historical Records Advisory Boards being established, to play a direct role in setting priorities for project funding and for seeing to it that the funds are well spent. The commission itself has made clear its conviction that grants should be made only when the records involved will be open to all on an equal basis. This can be powerful leverage in behalf of the greater accessibility of research resources.

I'm certain that a great many of you have given thought to an appropriate Bicentennial role or project for your archives. I'm equally certain that there are many appropriate Bicentennial activities that have come to mind and are being implemented. I'd like to suggest one more. And that is a new archival approach to the younger people of our nation. We have obligations to them as well as to advanced graduate students and scholars. These responsibilities relate closely to our place in the community in which our institutions are located.

Often we find our institutions situated in the inner cities where deprivation, both economic and cultural, is a way of life. At the National Archives we are trying to do something about that by working with the District of Columbia Public School System in the preparation of teaching units for various levels, even as low as the fifth grade, where pupils are first exposed to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the formation of the federal government.

We are not now and probably never will be at a point where we can fling open the doors to schoolchildren and have them riffle through the original diplomatic despatches of the Department of State during Jefferson's era. But I think we have an obligation to make certain that the schoolchildren of this country know that such records exist, that they know that what they read in their textbooks is based on an *interpretation* of those records, that if they suspect that they are being hoodwinked they know there is a court of recourse—not just the library, where they will find *more* secondary sources and interpretations—but the archives and manuscript repositories where they can track down the original thought, the original concept, that has been modified advertently and inadvertently by historians over the years.

When we talk to the kids we don't just tell them that Blacks served in the American Revolution; we show them the pension files of some of the many Blacks who served in the Continental Army, and let them read for themselves the self-evaluation of the individual as to his status. We do not tell them what Jefferson thought about the slave trade, and how his ideas were watered down in committee; we show the students the drafts of his writings, and how they were amended or otherwise changed in committee, and what the final result was, and then perhaps bring out a letter of Jefferson's in which he complains about how his objectives were foiled because of sectional differences.

Now, we cannot expect that after being totally ignorant of archives for the first eighteen years of their lives the youth of the nation will suddenly turn to our repositories as sources of information once they enter college. Our colleagues the librarians have done a magnificent job in putting inquisitive youth in touch with information that they need to make some basic intellectual evaluations, and we can learn from their innovations. I believe that now is the moment to reexamine our consciences regarding our duties toward all of our society, a totality to which we have a

moral obligation. For some of us the attainment of our professional goals has meant indulging in the luxury of retreat from the problems of society, and the circumscribing of our responsibilities into a concern only with our profession or our private lives. And yet we are servants of the public. Our responsibilities are, or should be, to the public—of our own community, of the state, or of the nation.

The men who fought the American Revolution and gave their lives and their fortunes and their sacred honor to establish our nationhood *had* a public commitment. The reawakening of that commitment among us all is a more fitting way to celebrate the Bicentennial of this country's birth than are all of the publications, exhibits, intellectual writings, parades, and reenactments that the mind of man can devise. If we can succeed in accelerating the trend toward a more free and open society, then perhaps we will not have to wait for the *tr*icentennial to declare that all men are truly created equal and must have equal opportunity to develop, unhindered by social encumbrances or cultural malnutrition.

I hope that my Canadian friends, and other members of the Society of American Archivists who are not citizens of the United States, will forgive me for dwelling so much on our Bicentennial and on other matters that will follow that are peculiar to the United States. But so much has happened during the past year or two and will probably transpire in the years just ahead that has important archival implications for this country, of a legal or statutory nature, that I feel I would be remiss in omitting it. And because so often in the past there has been a transference of public concerns from one of the great North American powers to another, it is just possible that some of these matters will find their echo on other sides of the border in the years ahead.

We are living in a time of statutory and emotional paradox—if not outright contradiction—on the question of access to public records. Although this is most obviously apparent on the federal level, there are similar and concurrent developments in state and local government. And, if history is a teacher, we can look for state and local governments to adapt and adopt the federal initiative in the months and years before us. I refer, of course, to Executive Order 11652 on classification and declassification of national security information, and to the Freedom of Information Act and the amendments to it enacted last year, on one hand; and to the Privacy Act of 1974, on the other.

A major thrust toward greater access to government records is the declassification program authorized and mandated under Executive Order 11652. I'm pleased that certain officials of the National Archives and Records Service were given an opportunity to work with the drafters of the executive order. I can assure you that this is a much better document, more responsive to the needs and rights of citizens and scholars, than it would otherwise have been. From its very inception archivists have played an important role in its implementation. The Interagency Classification Review Committee, established by the executive order to monitor and enforce compliance with its provisions, includes the Archivist of the United States among its members, a role that has been delegated to the deputy archivist during the more than two years I have had the honor to act as its chairman. Furthermore, NARS, primarily through the presidential libraries, has utilized with frequency and success in behalf of scholars the mandatory review procedure requiring agency review of classifications applied to particular bodies of records. And we have administered vigorously and successfully a massive declassification program for older classified materials that has opened up 175 million pages of records since 1972.

It is true that some would advocate a shorter period of closure for classified mate-

rials and would alter the mechanisms for making the system work. I believe that there is merit in these suggestions. There is legislation pending that would supersede the executive order and place the program on a statutory basis. Unfortunately, some of the changes suggested in proposed legislation would create an administrative nightmare and a bureaucratic boondoggle. But in my judgment our declassification efforts in the past few years have made a major contribution in opening up the workings of government to the citizen and in releasing vast quantities of research material for scholarly use.

Another major thrust in the direction of providing greater accessibility to federal government records is the Freedom of Information Act. First enacted in 1966, it required agencies to make available on request identifiable records that did not fall within nine exempted categories. For the first time, the burden of proof was on the withholder rather than the requester. Then last year a series of amendments was enacted over a presidential veto. The amendments narrowed somewhat the exempted categories, allowed recourse to the courts when security-classified documents are involved, made possible broader and less specific requests, and placed very severe time limits on federal agencies in responding to requests. I find myself in sympathy with the basic concept of the Freedom of Information Act because I believe that most government activities can or ought to be able to thrive in the sunshine, because I know that undue caution and bureaucratic inertia have made it difficult for citizens and researchers to get early and reasonable access to records, and because I think it is right that the burden of proof for withholding ought to be on the withholder, not the seeker. I must say, however, that while I believe there should be time limits placed on the government to produce or deny requested records, I do feel that the present statutory time limits are unnecessarily and unrealistically severe. Given the size, complexity, and geographical dispersion of the federal government and its records it is sometimes impossible within ten days (or even within the additional ten days allowed under unusual circumstances) to be certain that all records on a broad subject have been found, let alone reviewed and access decisions made.

This, of course, points up the need for better and more specific control over records in an agency—better records management, if you please. It is just possible that the Freedom of Information Act amendments will come to serve as important leverage in securing better records management in the agencies, as well as a catalyst which will make both archivists and records managers more aware of their interdependence.

If I may voice one other regret, it is that requests made to the National Archives under the Freedom of Information Act tend to place researchers and archivists in an adversary position, and if we should receive too many such requests it may penalize researchers who do not cite the act in making their requests, because of the stringent time limits we are required to meet under the act. So I would appeal to researchers to use this new right with circumspection and with a regard for the rights of others. I believe it is fair to handle all requests on a first-come, first-served basis. We will try our best to get opened any materials to which the Freedom of Information Act exemptions do not seem to apply. If those efforts do not achieve results satisfactory to the requester, then of course he or she is justified in resorting to action under the act.

And in the long run, if the Freedom of Information Act is to work for the benefit of American society, if government is to become more open and responsive and still create a full, rich record of its activities that will be of value to future generations, we must have a decrease in the mistrust that manifests itself in labeling every honest

error, misjudgment, and failure as a conspiracy of evil intent against the citizenry. Goodness knows that at this time there are reasons why this feeling exists, but it is nevertheless a fact that most public servants are devoted to serving the public; and if in doing so they have occasional but unintentional lapses, it ill serves the public interest for them to be held up to public scorn and castigation. There is no better way to make a good public servant a cautious and ineffective one, or to drive him from the public service. As archivists, as well as citizens, we have an important stake in re-creating a climate of mutual trust and respect between the public and its servants.

I should like to turn now to the Privacy Act of 1974, a measure whose basic thrust would appear to be in a direction opposite to that of the declassification program and the Freedom of Information Act. I believe that most of us would agree that the citizen has certain very precious rights to privacy, that these have sometimes been violated, that they have not always been well defined, and that the computer has made it both easier to violate privacy rights (intentionally or unintentionally) and more difficult for the citizen to know of such violations or to do something about them.

The time had undoubtedly arrived for the Congress to step in. But some of us who were monitoring the initial legislative initiatives in this area were horrified by certain provisions of some of the early bills that were placed in the hopper. The definitions of "personal information" were so broad that we would literally—not figuratively, but literally—have had to close the National Archives to all researchers. To meet the public notification requirements within the specified time limits would have required an appropriation of \$4 billion, and a staff of 260,000—roughly the same number of employees as now staff all federal agencies in Washington, D.C. The National Archives and Records Service would suddenly have become the third largest agency in the federal government, with employment exceeded only by the Department of Defense and the U.S. Postal Service. Now I want you to understand that I'm a good enough bureaucrat to welcome additional resources for my agency; but this was ridiculous! Obviously, it was not the objective of well-intentioned legislative sponsors to cause these results, and we were able to gain for the National Archives an exemption from the most onerous requirements of the law as eventually enacted. Furthermore, early provisions that the Privacy Act apply to all units of state and local government were dropped in the final version.

Even so, compliance with the act is proving to be very difficult for federal agencies because it contains many loose and conflicting definitions which will require clarification and refinement in the courts over a long period of time and, very possibly, legislative amendments. Both processes, while probably necessary and unavoidable, are fraught with perils not only to archivists and users of archives, but to posterity. It seems to me that there is a very real danger that vocal segments of the public will become so obsessed with the right of personal privacy that many records of great historical value, records which should indeed be closed for long periods of time to protect the rights of living persons, will be closed forever by law.

A balance between the public's right to know and the citizen's right to privacy must be found. A line must be drawn. Archivists have been drawing such lines, sometimes on an *ad hoc* basis, for a long time. We have an important role to play in this area as the future unfolds. We must be willing to assume these responsibilities, and carry them out wisely, with sensitivity, and with exquisite discretion.

Finally, archivists have an important responsibility to fulfill in the work of the Public Documents Commission. The Society of American Archivists has statutory

membership on the commission. I am confident that there will be archivists on the staff of the commission. There will be a great deal of professional and technical input to the commission, I trust not only from federal archivists but from all segments of the profession. The Public Documents Commission will have many delicate issues to weigh before it makes its final legislative recommendations to the Congress. Among the questions that should be raised and answered are the following:

- Should the papers of all federal officials, some federal officials, or no federal officials be considered in the future to be public property?
- If the answer to that question is “some but not all,” to which classes of officials should the new rules apply?
- Are elected officials different from appointed officials?
- Assuming that some such papers are to be made public property, the question arises, “What kind of public property?”
- Are they to be federal records subject to the Freedom of Information Act, or will they constitute a new and peculiar species of public property which would give the creator at least a limited role in determining conditions of access to them?
- Is it possible to divide or segregate public and private materials accumulated in the files of public officials and apply differing concepts of ownership or access to each category?
- What effect would a public ownership law have on the willingness of an official to keep a full and rich record of his activities?
- What effect would such a law have on the official’s individual rights or, in the case of elected officials, political rights?
- How would such a law be policed?
- Where would the papers of public officials be eventually deposited?
- If not all of them must be kept in federal custody, what shall be the ground rules, the criteria, for deposit elsewhere?
- Must everything be kept?
- If not, what shall be the criteria for disposal?

It is high time that the issues implicit in these questions be resolved. It is of utmost importance that great care and sensitivity be used in their resolution, else great damage can be done to the effectiveness of our most important public institutions and to the future availability of a full and valuable historical record.

In summary, my colleagues, we are at a time in our history when records and archives are news. The fact that this nation has emerged as it has from the political travail of the past two years depended so often on good records faithfully kept. It has been a trying time for some archivists, and some of them have performed their duties with exemplary courage. Certainly we have some stirring challenges ahead of us. Let us take advantage of the situation not in a petty, or parochial, or bureaucratic sense, but for the benefit of scholarship and for the betterment of our country. Let’s do the right things in history’s behalf. Let’s take the long view, the broad view, the deep view. Let us demonstrate the essentiality and the maturity of our profession. This may not place us on the popular side of every issue of concern to our profes-

sion. We must take the prudent course nevertheless, realizing that a snap judgment is not the right way for an important archival decision to be made. And we must be patient and resourceful because we shall be dealing with vexing and complex problems.

In doing these things, let us communicate with our colleagues and our critics in the academic world. We can learn from them and they can learn from us. The AHA-OAH-SAA Committee on Historians and Archives has proven to be a most useful forum for discussion of mutual concerns, but let us not hesitate to open new channels of communication with users or potential users of archives and manuscripts whenever such channels can be helpful in solution of common problems. Let us cease to look only inward at matters peculiar to our own profession, our own institutions, important though they are to us. Let us look outward and move forward, confidently, to meet the challenges that surely await us.