

# Government Historical Offices and Public Records

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THE FORMATION OF THE FEDERAL RESOURCE GROUP of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCC) has led to publication of the first extensive survey of government historical offices and their functions.<sup>1</sup> It will come as no surprise to those who examine the results of this survey that over 70 percent of the historical offices reported that they write formal institutional history, or that over 50 percent also write annual reports for their agencies. What may surprise both historians and archivists is that 70 percent of the offices reported that they also evaluate current agency records and select them for preservation, while over 80 percent prepare and maintain chronologies and bibliographies. In other words, many government historical offices are deeply committed to preserving and providing access to the records of the federal government.

This NCC survey of historical activities confirmed the information obtained in a different fashion—through private interviews and public testimony—by the National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials (Public Documents Commission). Summarizing the information gained by this commission thus provides an excellent means of amplifying the results of the NCC survey while illustrating to both historians and archivists the important inter-relationship between the writing of institutional history, the keeping of records, and the accessibility of those records to scholars.

The following discussion will include only those offices concerned with records and documents. Many other historical offices such as, for one example, the office in the National Park Service, are important to their agencies and the public; but their concerns lie outside the scope of this study.<sup>2</sup>

## *Department of Defense*

The Department of Defense (DOD) now has the most extensive historical program in the federal government. Perhaps this is because, as Maurice Matloff,

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<sup>1</sup> American Historical Association, *Directory of Historical Programs of the Federal Government*, American Historical Association, 1978.

For information on other activities of historical offices, see Walter Rundell, Jr., "Uncle Sam the Historian: Federal Historical Activities," *The Historian*, vol. 33, no. 1 (November 1970): 1-20. For information on advisory committees to government historical offices, see Richard W. Leopold, "Historians and the Federal Government," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 44, no. 3 (August 1975): 373-85.

<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that the historical offices in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Geological Survey have not been established long enough to be included in this study.

chief historian of the Army's Center of Military History, noted, military men are particularly sensitive to history; they prepare for the next war by exploring the past and thus have an acute sense of the importance of their own history.<sup>3</sup>

There are six history offices in DOD: one each for the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines; one for the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and one for the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

The largest historical office in DOD is the Army's Center of Military History. The center has a staff of over one hundred, but not all of them work in Washington. The Army Military History Research Collection (containing both archival and manuscript collections) is at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The Air Force History Office is much smaller. The Washington staff numbers approximately thirty, half of whom are historians. Air Force archival and manuscript materials are held at the Albert F. Simpson History Research Center at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. The Naval Historical Center in Washington includes the history office, archives, and museum branch all in one location. The center has a staff of approximately seventy-five, of whom only fifteen are historians. The remaining staff members are archivists, museum specialists, librarians, and supporting personnel. The Marine Corps History and Museum Division staff is also largely concerned with archival and museum work. Only seven or eight historians and officers of the staff of approximately fifty actually write history for the Corps.

Although there is general agreement that records managers in DOD are competent, each of the armed services has a history and museum section which is deeply involved in the entire archival process. Each office keeps varying degrees of control over its own records. The Army and Air Force have perhaps the least control, for they only advise the records managers when consulted. The Navy and Marine Corps have the most control because they physically maintain records in their own archives. In addition to participating in the decisions of the records managers, the Naval Historical Center keeps for its own use certain categories of records, rather than sending them to the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) under the usual retirement schedules. These include records that reflect naval strategy and policy making, the records of the Chief of Naval Operations, and the records of naval attachés.

Most policy-making records of the Marine Corps are contained in the records of either the Chief of Naval Operations or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, so the Marine Corps historical office largely concerns itself with operational records. It either holds all such records itself or controls those that have been retired to NARS.

However, none of these offices regards the management of the archival material as an end in itself. Their participation has to do with preservation, but even more with providing easy accessibility to the records for themselves and for future researchers.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information on the historical offices discussed in this paper was supplied by the following individuals: Alfred Goldberg, Robert J. Watson, Vernon E. Davis, Maurice Matloff, Robert Coakley, Detmar Finke, William Strobbridge, Henry Shaw, Stanley Falk, and Dean Allard, Department of Defense; David F. Trask, Frederick Aahndahl, and John Pruden, Department of State; Richard Hewlett, Department of Energy; Wayne Rasmussen, Department of Agriculture; Jonathan Grossman, Department of Labor; Monte D. Wright, of NASA; Nick Komons, Federal Aviation Agency; Abe Bortz, Social Security Administration; and Richard Baker, U.S. Senate Historical Office.

The enormous number of records accumulated by the armed services would be of little value without some orderly way of providing access. Thus each historical office seems primarily concerned with various ways to make these records useful to themselves and to the public. For the most part they have chosen to write declassified institutional history based upon the still classified records of the services. These histories are carefully footnoted as to sources. In general, by the time the histories are published, the records are open and researchers either can use the citations within the military histories to do additional research or simply use the histories themselves as source material. By writing history soon after the events described, the historians feel that they help preserve historically important documents and are better able to take advantage of oral interviews. Thereby they produce for the services interpretive history of a superior quality for the creation of an institutional memory. Thus the Army has written eighty volumes on the United States Army in World War II. The Air Force has published a seven-volume history on the Air Force in World War II, and the Marine Corps has also written a multi-volume work on that war. The Navy does not write as much institutional history. The Navy staff does, however, edit and publish history written under contract; and occasionally the staff publishes manuscripts provided by outside scholars. The Navy's list of publications includes a number of documentary collections, bibliographies, and archival guides to its own collection.<sup>4</sup>

The historical offices of the armed services make substantial contributions to the collections of personal papers in public archives. Each service makes an effort to collect the private papers left by its senior officers. The papers, journals, and diaries of senior Army and Air Force officials can therefore be found at the Army Military History Research Collection at Carlisle Barracks and the Albert F. Simpson Center at Maxwell Air Force Base. The Naval Historical Center makes a particular effort to obtain the papers of the retiring Chiefs of Naval Operations by agreeing to accept them with donor restrictions. Naval archives now contain the papers of every chief since World War II, except one. The Marine Corps also encourages senior officials to leave papers, but will accept no restriction on them. There is, of course, a difference between the papers of an officer involved in operational matters and one who has been at the center of policy making.

In conjunction with the collection of manuscripts and the writing of history, each office participates in the collection of oral histories. The Marine Corps, for example, now has a collection of 4,500 tapes from the Viet Nam war.

Although military historians in academia benefit from the information provided by armed service history offices, each of the offices regards itself as primarily concerned with the needs of its service. The service academies make use of the institutional histories, and senior officers can often be found at the research centers. In addition, some of the history is security classified and is used exclusively as an internal tool for decision makers.

Two smaller historical offices function inside DOD with quite different goals. The historical office in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) writes in-

<sup>4</sup> *Naval History Division Publications in Print* (Washington, D.C.; Government Printing Office, March 1976); *United States Air Force History: A Guide to Documentary Sources* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1973); *Publications of the U.S. Army Center of Military History* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977).

stitutional history in the form of special studies for the secretary. Because the office is small, academic historians are often hired on contract to aid in the research and writing. Information in the special studies produced by the OSD historical office is security classified and written only for internal use.

Although the OSD historical office leaves record keeping to the records managers, the historians there gather a highly selective group of record copies for their own use. Unfortunately, they do not have an opportunity to evaluate the office files and papers of departing secretaries or, for that matter, the other senior officials who come and go rather frequently in DOD. The office, however, does augment the record with oral interviews.

The historical office for the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) had its roots in a request by the Joint Chiefs in 1945 for a history of their activities during World War II. It was, however, the mid-1950s before such an office was established, staffed with professional historians rather than military officers. The historians there write classified history and research the answers to the countless requests coming to the JCS from the White House, congressional committees, and high-ranking military officers.

The body of records pertaining to the JCS is small compared to the operational records of the services. The historians are always informally consulted by the records managers and feel that the records are well cared for. In the recent past, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs would take his papers with him when he left office, although he often deposited them in a collection such as the one in Carlisle Barracks. Recently, however, chairmen are regarding their papers as office files and leaving them behind. Declassified records from the JCS are now in NARS. There is also an unpublished history of the organization of the JCS which is carefully footnoted and which the historical office regards as a potential tool for access.

### *The Department of State*

The State Department historical office is perhaps the best known of all government historical offices because it is responsible for the volumes which comprise *Foreign Relations of the United States*, (*FRUS*). In addition to publishing the documents needed for a comprehensive record of major foreign policy decisions, these volumes contain careful citations of sources that lead historians to other related records in the department's archives. As David Trask, director of the historical office, has noted, "Historians of American foreign relations—whether they deal with the formulation of foreign policy, the execution of foreign policy, or both—must perforce begin with an investigation of the appropriate volume in the *Foreign Relations* series."<sup>5</sup>

The historical office in the State Department does not participate in record keeping. Unlike DOD, State has always had a central file system and since 1973 has had an automated data system to collect records and provide the instant retrieval of them. In addition, the departmental secretariat provides for the rec-

<sup>5</sup> David F. Trask, "Testimony Before a Hearing Held by the National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials," January 12, 1977. The commission records are in Records of Temporary Committees, Commissions, and Boards, Record Group 220, National Archives.

ords management of the files of the Office of the Secretary of State. The historical office does, however, participate with the records managers in evaluating the files of senior officials before their retirement. Proceeding largely by persuasion, the historical office has contributed to retaining within the department the files of some senior officials who might have otherwise kept their important files or deposited them elsewhere.

Although only one-fifth to one-quarter of the work of the historical office is directly concerned with State Department requests, the publication of *FRUS* provides the department with the machinery for one of its most sensitive duties, the orderly declassification of its records. Here the historical office and the department combine their efforts: the office compiles the documents, the desk officers in the department provide the review of these documents. Indeed, declassification of sensitive documents in military records, presidential libraries, and even private manuscript collections is often keyed to State Department decisions and the publication of *FRUS*.

### *Department of Energy*

The historical office now working in the Department of Energy (DOE) had its origins in the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The office then moved to the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), and it now finds itself with the added responsibilities of DOE.

Richard Hewlett, who became the historian for the AEC in 1957, successfully realized his conception of the function of historical offices there, and is now transferring his ideas to the newest department in the cabinet. Hewlett strongly believes that every mature government agency needs an institutional memory. The creation of that memory is essentially the function of the historical office. Therefore, he sees his job, and the job of most government historians, as the writing of history. The AEC historical office decided from the beginning that it would not write any classified history; it writes unclassified history based on classified records. The citations to the records then prove valuable to historians when the records are declassified.

In order to write good history, historians must be able to obtain records. The AEC had an executive secretariat which included the historian's office and which efficiently collected records. ERDA, however, did not have a centralized system of record keeping. Therefore, the historical office created its own archives by assembling the copies of records it regarded as the most important for the documentary history of ERDA. In addition, the office had an arrangement whereby all forms indicating the retirement of records to the agency's records center came to its attention. Records regarded by the historian as having possible future value could not be destroyed without his knowledge. DOE has an executive secretariat, which will include the historical office, and a centralized system for keeping records in the Office of the Secretary.

When ERDA and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) were created, the old AEC records were divided between the two agencies on the basis of function. Thus most of the operational files remained with ERDA. The first group of those files, containing both classified and unclassified material from 1949-51, will go to NARS this year.

*National Aeronautics and Space Administration*

Twelve histories have already been written about National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) projects. The staff of the historical office is quite small, so most of the history is written by professionals under contract. NASA encourages historians writing for it to publish articles based upon their work in order to encourage peer review of the institutional history being written and to spread information about the work of the agency.

The historical office is as concerned about keeping the records as about writing institutional history. In fact, the staff of the historical office includes an archivist who works with the federal records center on a continuing basis. Through the use of a record form system much like the one used by the historians in ERDA, the historical office obtains copies of important NASA records for its own archives. This smaller, more select group of records has proved invaluable to those writing about the space program.

*Department of Labor*

The historical office in the Department of Labor is one of the smallest in a cabinet level department. The historian, Jonathan Grossman, working with two assistants and some part-time employees, admits to a preference for writing history rather than keeping records. Nevertheless, his office contributes an invaluable tool to the accessibility of the department's records. In 1962, it instituted a card-file index system to the office files of the secretary of labor. The file is now complete from 1913 (the year in which the department was established) to the end of the administration of the previous secretary. When a secretary leaves the department, the historical office conducts an inventory of his records and begins the annotated index.

The historian is selective about the additional index files he keeps, usually limiting them to a newly created bureau. Originally these card files were instituted for the exclusive use of the department. However, the indexes are now open to researchers who are usually told about them by staff members of NARS.

The Department of Labor historical office also collects oral interviews from present and former senior officials. A shortage of staff, however, has prohibited use of the interviews because many of the tapes are not yet transcribed.

*Department of Agriculture*

The chief historian of the Department of Agriculture, Wayne Rasmussen, has been in that department for forty years. The historical office currently has a staff of approximately fifteen, of whom only five or six work in the office on a full-time basis. Ten members of the staff are historians. Nevertheless, the historical office has, over the years, provided a flood of documentary publications and compilations of statistical studies which few individuals would have the means to compile independently. In addition, for researchers in the field of agricultural



history, the office contains certain bibliographic files, so that researchers come to that office even though no documents or records are kept there.<sup>6</sup>

### *Senate Historical Office*

The only historical office now in the legislative branch is the Senate Historical Office, established in 1975. During its brief lifetime, this office has been unusually effective and has proved to the skeptical the impact of a small but innovative historical office. The office has a staff of five: two historians, a photo-historian, a researcher, and a secretary. It was given a mandate to perform two primary functions: to provide research assistance on the history and traditions of the Senate, and to achieve some control over the records of the Senate and former senators, records now scattered throughout the United States.

Official papers of the Senate are housed at the National Archives and in various storerooms around the capitol while the personal papers of former senators are scattered through innumerable libraries and state historical societies. A bibliography on Senate history containing 1,000 items has been published and a catalog of the locations of the papers of all former senators has been compiled.

The historical office is also working with individual committees of the Senate in an effort to rationalize access to closed committee records. In many instances records remain closed and in storerooms because no one has taken the time to review them or make decisions concerning their future. So far, the historical office has provided valuable aid to seven committees. In general, the office prefers the role of advising, coordinating, and implementing projects that can be completed by others. It does not collect documents and records.

In addition to aiding access, the office is attempting to aid in the preservation of historically valuable material. The historian has met with new senators or their staffs in order to discuss the problems of record keeping and has also worked closely with those senators who have announced their retirement. Efforts to contact the defeated senators were not quite so successful.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the House of Representatives does not have a similar office, although a proposal for such an office was submitted to the leadership in 1976.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Forest Service, a division of the Agriculture Department, also has a history section.

Although there are no other historical offices which operate for cabinet level departments, there are historians who perform similar functions for other agencies. The Federal Aviation Administration, for example, has a historian involved in writing the history of civil aviation. There is also a historian in the Social Security Administration. Although he does not write history, this historian has compiled indexes, bibliographies, and over one-hundred oral interviews with the pioneers of social security.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard A. Baker, "Managing Congressional Papers: A View of the Senate," *American Archivist* 41 (July 1978): pp. 291-296. Baker is Historian of the Senate.

<sup>8</sup> Garrison Nelson, "Reclaiming the Past of the U.S. House: Proposal for the Creation of the House Historical Office." This paper was prepared in November 1975 and sent to the National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials, by the clerk of the House of Representatives. It is in the records of the commission, RG 220, National Archives.

*Conclusion*

Several conclusions can be drawn from this brief summary of historical offices and records. It seems clear that wherever there are historical offices the accessibility of records is greatly enhanced, both for the agency and the researcher. Historical offices, of course, do not and should not perform the same functions as NARS. Proper preservation of the records of the past requires the cooperation of the agency records manager, who collects them; the agency historian, who understands them; and the archivist at the National Archives, who cares for them.

The magnitude of the task facing a researcher who wishes to use the ever growing accumulation of government records in order to examine public policy is awesome. It is made considerably easier for those who use records from departments with historical offices. It is probably no accident that more is written on subjects concerning the Department of Agriculture than on subjects concerning the Department of the Interior; or that footnotes in the most scholarly of publications will cite the printed reports of the departments of Commerce or the Treasury, but not the records.

Historians and archivists, then, should encourage the creation of historical offices in the federal government. At the minimum, every cabinet level department and the House of Representatives should have a historical office charged with preserving the institutional memory and providing the necessary tools for access to public records.