The Last Word:
Making History Together with the National Archives

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When historian Eric Foner spoke in 2015 at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) about the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction, he observed that a historical narrative may seem inevitable to readers after it is written, but as events unfold, participants often must act decisively and quickly on partial information or in an environment filled with unknowns. Throughout my career as a federal archivist, a government historian, and a middle-manager participant in and observer of senior-level decision-making, I have seen officials act in just that way. People do the best they can based on what they know.

Foner is right to say that history doesn't feel like history while we are living through it and that retrospective analyses of past events may reflect many different interpretations. Even the meaning of a phrase or a sentence may be disputed among researchers. In my opening paragraph, for example, does my use of "participant in" refer to my being the decisionmaker about an operational issue within the government? Or someone who provided analysis and historical summaries that others used in making a decision? Or someone who has played both roles, with additional context needed to show which applied? If this were oral history rather than an essay, an interviewer would have the chance to ask me that. Unlike in the past, social media now gives us opportunities to explore what others mean when they speak or write.

As scholars who do archival research know, piecing together what happened and why during past events depends on how individual researchers interpret what is on the page or screen. New information can change how we look at issues. In 2018, David S. Ferriero, archivist of the United States (AOTUS), made these observations in an interview about NARA's Remembering Vietnam exhibit:

> Eric Foner, in his book *Who Owns History*, writes, "History always has been and always will be regularly rewritten, in response to new questions, new information, new methodologies, and new political, social, and cultural imperatives." Our job at the National Archives is to ensure that the public has access to the information they need to do that job of rewriting history. As classified information is declassified, as presidential papers are reviewed and released, as records that have never been researched before are used, that story will continue to be rewritten.

> Foner does answer the question, "Who owns history? Everyone and no one—which is why

the study of the past is a constantly evolving never-ending journey of discovery." As a librarian and as the archivist of the United States, my job has always been to support that journey.[1]

In the April 2019 issue of *Passport,* archivist Bob Clark shared his perspective on his former employer in "The National Archives Has Lost its Archival Way."[2] In that essay he raises questions about digitization efforts and expresses concerns about former president Barack Obama's decision to forgo a traditional NARA-administered presidential library and museum. While the Obama Foundation will build and administer a privately run museum, NARA will hold the born-digital and paper records of the Obama White House in one of its archival facilities. Access will largely be digital. NARA still is working out if, when, and how researchers might have access to paper records in special cases where that is necessary and how to take in related records from former administration officials.

Actions taken by the National Archives in 2011 and 2012 provide context for why Clark and I view some of the questions he raised in his essay differently. On October 27, 2011, the Berlin Crisis 1961 conference at the National Archives opened with welcoming remarks by AOTUS David Ferriero. A keynote address by a Georgetown University professor, the late William R. Smyser, preceded panels on the building of the Berlin Wall. Smyser served in Berlin in 1961 as an assistant to Gen. Lucius Clay, then a special advisor to President John F. Kennedy. He set the scene by drawing on his perspective as an academic and a former foreign service officer who witnessed construction of parts of the Berlin Wall. He described driving through the Potsdamer Platz as a representative of Gen. Clay—the last official able to travel freely between sectors during the Cold War—just as the barriers between West and East Berlin went up.

The former foreign service officer described the impact on those on the ground who watched events unfold and decision-makers in Washington. Both were uncertain of the outcome but were determined to serve the United States well, and both debated how best to do that. Smyser's remarks added texture and context to the newly declassified Kennedy administration records that were made available electronically in 2011.

Officials of NARA's National Declassification Center who worked with equity holders on the records releases also served as event coordinators and helped host the conference. Attendees received CDs with electronic versions of the newly declassified records along with their programs for the conference.

A month after the NARA Berlin Crisis 1961 symposium, on November 28, 2011, President Barack Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum on Managing Government Records that pointed to the present and future use of records administered under the Federal Records Act (FRA).

The memorandum declared that records transferred to the National Archives under the FRA would "provide the prism through which future generations will understand and learn from our actions and decisions." It also stressed that efficient management and retrieval methods were essential while records are active:

> When records are well managed, agencies can use them to assess the impact of programs, to reduce redundant efforts, to save money, and to share knowledge within and across their organizations. In these ways, proper records management is the backbone of open Government.

> Decades of technological advances have transformed agency operations, creating challenges and opportunities for agency records management. Greater reliance on electronic communication and systems has radically increased the volume and diversity of information that agencies must manage. With proper planning, technology can make these records less burdensome to manage and easier to use and share.[3]

President Obama directed the archivist of the United States and the head of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to issue a Records Management Directive focused on efficiency, accountability, openness, and "transitioning from paper-based records management to electronic records management where feasible." In August 2012, AOTUS Ferriero and the acting OMB director, Jeffrey Zients, issued the Managing Government Records Directive (M-18-12) to the heads of federal agencies and departments. This directive created a much-needed process to modernize technologically and conceptually the handling of temporary and permanently valuable information and records, including email, under the Federal Records Act. Obama's own official records, as well as those of designated White House Executive Office of the President components, would come into the National Archives under the Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978 as he left office.

The first use of email within a White House organizational unit dates to the IBM Professional Office System in the 1980s. In some government offices, punch cards or cassette tapes enabled some forms of technologically assisted typing in the 1970s. Microcomputer use came later. The use of Local Area Networks and email became widespread within the federal government in the 1990s.

At the same time, the White House records managers, whom many historians know through White House Central Files subject classification markings on carbon copies and original correspondence, explored using technology to enhance filing and retrieval. By 1990, they were using optical scanning and CTRACK, an electronic correspondence management system. Since then, electronic records management applications have replaced some government filing cabinets filled with paper files. As changes occurred in records creation, presidential staff and officials in federal agencies depended on records managers and information technology staff to provide ways to retrieve information and records for ongoing government business.

On December 6, 2012, the National Archives posted on its website a November 2012 report to the president by the Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB) on "Transforming the Security Classification System." Recommendations included using technology to aid in the review of national security classified materials and making changes to the culture of security classification.

The White House and NARA actions between 2011 and 2012 that I have described here have a through line: the use of technology and revision of traditional practices to expand access, reduce costs, and increase efficiency. I attended several briefings at the National Archives on all these initiatives as they began. What stayed with me from the December 2012 PIDB meeting at NARA was the concept of "safe harbor" in cultural change. The PIDB's Recommendation 6 on decisions by officials with authority to classify material for national security (or not) stated that "agencies should recognize in policy and practice a 'safe harbor' protection for classifiers who adhere to rigorous risk management practices and determine in good faith to classify information at a lower level or not at all."

When Barack Obama left office in January 2017, news reports pointed to the establishment of a traditional NARA-administered presidential library and museum. NARA prepared for that kind of library during a transition that included the preservation of electronic records for future access as well as the transfer of paper records of the type I helped move out of the White House as a National Archives employee in previous decades. But in May 2017, NARA announced a new model for presidential libraries with the Obama Presidential Library, which would provide digital access to PRA-administered records. The former president had decided not to build a traditional library to house the small percentage of White House records that weren't born-digital. However, the private Obama Foundation would administer a museum outside the NARA framework and provide funds for digitization of paper records held by NARA.

Since then, the National Archives and the Obama Foundation have issued information sheets that address some of the questions raised in 2018 and 2019 by stakeholders, including historians and other researchers. On social media, I have explained that NARA took legal custody of the Obama records as he left office. I have emphasized that Obama's archival materials will be processed under the same statute and regulations used for the records of his predecessors, starting with Ronald Reagan. Some readers of news reports about digitization took "unclassified" to mean "uncategorized" rather than not requiring national security restriction. However, the electronic filing and retrieval methodologies that served officials while the president was in office will form part of the basis for researcher access to NARA's digital Obama Presidential Library.

In April 2019, Dan Cohen, who is vice provost for information collaboration, dean of the libraries, and professor of history at Northeastern University, wrote about how the Obama Presidential Library unit within the National Archives is already digital. His essay opens with links to a February *New York Times* article ("The Obama Presidential Library That Isn't") and reactions from historians (Robert Caro) and a *Washington Examiner* columnist (Phillip Terzian).[4]

Cohen, who is also the founding director of the Digital Public Library of America, observes that "the debate about the Obama library exhibits a fundamental confusion. Given its origins and composition, the Obama library is already largely digital. The vast majority of the record his presidency left behind consists not of evocative handwritten notes, printed cable transmissions, and black-and-white photographs, but email, Word documents, and JPEGs. The question now is how to leverage its digital nature to make it maximally useful and used."[5]

It is important to consider context for the virtual federal Obama Presidential Library. As Cohen points out, the NARA-administered physical Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum holds some 45 million pages of archival records.

But that scale pales in comparison with the record of President Obama's White House: 1.5 billion "pages" in the initial collection, already more than 33 times the size of President Johnson's library. I use "pages" because the Obama Foundation has noted that "95 percent of the Obama Presidential Records were created digitally and have no paper equivalents." The email record alone for these eight years is 300 million messages, which NARA . . . . estimates amounts to more than a billion printed pages. In addition, millions of other "pages" associated with the Obama administration are word-processing documents, spreadsheets, or PDFs, or were posted on websites, apps, and social media. Much of the photographic and video record is also born-digital. There are also 30 million actual pages on paper, which are currently stored in a suburb near Chicago. Given the likelihood that a decent portion of this paper record actually came from digital files—think about all of the printouts of PDFs, for instance—only a miniscule portion of what we have from Obama's White House is paper-only.[6]

Presidential and federal records aren't maintained without structure under the control of the creating workplaces for four or eight or thirty years, then turned over to the National Archives to be transformed into an artificial collection-after-the-fact for researchers to use. They are used for business purposes within a logical structure while still in the custody of the White House and the executive agencies and departments. While researchers won't see ribbon or carbon copies with the handwritten White House Central Files category markings used on twentieth-century records, the visible parts of the Obama White House recordkeeping structure may provide context and connections for researchers to use and explore.

The National Archives that I know has not "lost its way." The archivist, David Ferriero, and the employees in his care are continuing the same journey their predecessors began in 1934. The officials I know in person up and down the ranks remain dedicated to sharing historical knowledge. And they are committed to doing so as effectively and efficiently as they can in a period of limited budgets and rapid technological and cultural change.

NARA officials are creating new paths for carrying out the archive's mission not because of changes in values or goals, which remain the same, but because the creators of records have embraced new tools for business communications in recent decades, just as they have in the corporate and academic worlds.

As Dan Cohen notes, it is worth considering how best to make born-digital and digitized materials "useful and used." NARA is exploring various options for doing so within this new model for presidential libraries, just as it has since 2010, when it began its efforts to improve its web presence and online catalog, to modernize and increase transparency in the records management process, and to use technology to aid in archival processing and declassification efforts.

We are not facing the crisis that Fred Kaplan foresaw when he wrote, in a 2003 essay for *Slate*, about "The End of History." Kaplan predicted recordkeeping chaos and voiced his fears about what would happen if there no longer were pages to turn in paper file folders. NARA's ongoing efforts to preserve and make knowledge available provide all of us who care about archives the opportunity to make history together by gathering in "safe harbors" to talk through our perspectives on the issues with goodwill, inside and outside NARA. NARA has also given us the opportunity to draw on our individual experiences and skills as we embrace exciting chances to face present and future challenges together.

Notes:
1. *New York Times*, Vietnam '67 email newsletter, January 9, 2018, Clay Risen Q&A with David S. Ferriero not published on website. *NYT* newsletter link shared by the National Archives Foundation https://twitter.com/archivesfdn/status/950858020656906245, and Maarja Krusten, https://twitter.com/ArchivesMaarja/status/951176967004487685 and quoted by Maarja Krusten at *Archival Explorations*, January 28, 2018, https://archivalexplorations.wordpress.com/2018/01/28/the-years-teach-much-the-days-never-knew/,
2. Bob Clark, "The Last Word: The National Archives Has Lost its Archival Way," *Passport* (April 2019): 92–95.
3. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records
4. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/arts/obama-presidential-center-library-national-archives-and-records-administration.html.
5. Dan Cohen, "Obama's Presidential Library Is Already Digital," *Atlantic* (April 4, 2019), https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/obamas-presidential-library-should-be-digital-first/586693/.
6. Ibid.