

Editor's Note

Welcome to our 2016 edition of *Federal History*. As I searched for a possible connecting theme in these articles, I was impressed by their topical diversity. Three of the articles ultimately deal with policy making but in entirely different areas of governance. The topics range from military intelligence to economic regulation to government sponsorship of scientific research. I soon realized that the absence of a common theme is the real story, as the articles' diversity reflects the vast, complex role the federal government has played in our nation's past. Our task is to explore as many aspects of that story and from as many perspectives as possible. Also, these diverse studies testify to the vitality of the field, with contributions from experienced federal historians and new scholars. This ongoing interest and debate about federal history is heartening.

We begin with the 2015 Roger R. Trask Lecture, delivered by Victoria A. Harden. How fortunate we have been to have had Dr. Harden as a champion for public history since her start as a historian at the National Institutes of Health in 1986. She has been recognized for her contributions by numerous organizations, including the American Historical Association and the American Association for the History of Medicine. She traces her evolution as a federal historian during the early years of the digital age, through a time of profound transformation in the historical profession. Ultimately, her talk goes beyond the personal, beyond her creative exploration of the advantages of digital technology for historical work. She points to broader changes: quantification and the emerging specialization in the profession starting in the 1960s, mistrust of political history, and the widespread discounting of federal historical work that has discouraged graduates from seeking private and government positions. Harden believes that advocacy of federal history is as important as ever. It is essential, she urges, that federal historians, through their work and organizations, promote understanding of the special and essential role of government historians. It is an eloquent plea born of a lifetime of engagement in those issues.

We're glad to feature an interview with Elizabeth Barry White of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Her current work there and in several capacities at the U.S. Department of Justice to prosecute Nazi war crimes perpetrators epitomizes the highest standards demanded of federal historians. Supporting such

high-profile cases affecting the punishment of human rights violators requires special interpretive skills, meticulous research, and careful preparation. These tasks include compiling evidence in Eastern European and U.S. archives, preparing documents for professional court witnesses, and even curating special exhibits. Her responses provide an especially dramatic picture of the value of the federal historian, both here and internationally. Importantly, we also gain insights into how historians can be essential players in agencies such as the Justice Department as they quickly adapt to evolving policy demands.

Thomas A. Reinstein reexamines how military intelligence was evaluated and employed during the Vietnam War, especially by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Reinstein takes a relatively unexplored approach by delving into the Secretary's personal policy predilections and efforts to retain cabinet influence as factors determining his use of intelligence reports. These considerations guided his changing positions on the bombing campaign known as Rolling Thunder. The article's focus on personal considerations in policy making adds complexity to our views of decision making but also raises very serious concerns about the flawed nature of those processes and the dangers of miscalculation at the highest levels of government.

Brandi L. Schottel and Barbara Karn discuss a very recent story about the new science of nanotechnology and the careful and clear-headed efforts to regulate it. Nanotechnology offers great promise in numerous applications, including national security, but can also raise far-reaching health and environmental concerns. This story of incremental discussions and debates of the regulatory guidelines for the new technology, informed by Dr. Karn's experience at the center of those discussions, offers a good look behind the scenes at modern science policy development in government. We learn of the government's essential legal and financial roles, but also much about the interaction between concerned scientists, the National Institutes of Health, and the White House. In this case, that collaboration was a success.

Dustin R. Walker's study goes to the very heart of our modern mixed economy. He focuses on the debates concerning deregulation of the home mortgage industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s during a period of financial uncertainty. He examines the lines of debate by two federal commissions in their differing recommendations on the role and extent of government regulation. President Richard Nixon's adoption of the Hunt Commission's positions for deregulation effectively ended the unique role of savings and loans that dated from the New Deal. Walker finds that in the ideological rush to free market solutions, deregulators lacked an

appreciation for the regulatory underpinnings of the nation's prosperity in the post–World War II economy, concluding that deregulators “misunderstood the intricacies of the postwar housing and savings markets.”

Jill Frahm highlights the contributions of women telephone operators to the war effort in World War I. Not only did they excel and make a difference, but they paved the way for the expanded roles of women during World War II. The story offers insights into that era's general expansion of women's roles in society. Frahm traces how, in the heat of battle, U.S. officers cut through social conventions of women's limitations to demand that battlefield success come first. They employed specially trained women operators to gain advantage at the front lines, and the women did not disappoint.

In our Resources and Research feature, Claire Prechtel-Klusken introduces us to the records of the Bureau of Pensions, specifically from the Special Examination Division and Law Division. These generally untapped records reveal much about the operations of that federal office in the 19th century—both its bureaucratic and management procedures and the work lives of its agents. The records also hold evidence of the human drama of the pension story, from the suffering and dependence of applicants to the varieties of fraud. We appreciate anew the centrality of federal history for American studies.

These articles challenge us to rethink critical areas of research, reflect on the circumstances of government policy making, and discover unexplored records. But beyond the historiography, I am delighted with the diverse nature of the scholarship, and am pleased that *Federal History* continues to advance the SHFG's overall mission of highlighting the essential work of federal history offices and federal historians. My thanks also to our reviewers for their comments and to assistant editor Judson MacLaury for his careful readings of these texts.

Benjamin Guterman
Editor, Federal History

