

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by the SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG president and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and the SHFG's mission. Stephen P. Randolph served as The Historian of the U.S. Department of State from April 2012 through December 2017, where he was responsible for the publication of the Foreign Relations of the United States series. He delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference in Shepherdstown, WV, on March 23, 2018.

Managing Change: The Origin and Recurrent Transformations of the *Foreign Relations of the United States Series*

Stephen P. Randolph

Thank you, Zack [Zack Wilske, president, SHFG], for this extraordinary honor, which I regard as the most significant recognition I have ever received—in large part because it is an award decided by my colleagues in this wonderful organization, colleagues who share a conviction of the importance of federal history and our role, across so many organizations and so many work programs, in preserving and presenting the history of this great nation.



Stephen P. Randolph

So let me start with my thanks to all here for this extraordinary honor—for your contributions to federal history—and for so many here, for the collegiality and professionalism you have demonstrated throughout our working relationships in the Office of the Historian. And of course, most of all I must thank the members of the Office of the Historian at the Department of State, the finest professionals I have encountered during my career, whose work is being recognized today in this award.

When Zack notified me of the award, it of course set off memories of my time as a federal historian, which began in 1979 on the farthest reaches, perhaps, of the federal history program—as a first lieutenant, flying F-4s in Germany, stationed at Ramstein Air Base and flying in an air defense squadron, defending NATO’s central region. Everyone in the squadron had secondary duties, and mine was as squadron historian, writing quarterly summaries of our deployments, our exercises, tactics, and training programs. I remember sitting at my desk in my apartment in Mackenbach, a little German farm village near Ramstein Air Base, drafting these histories with my ballpoint pen, which were then typed in triplicate by an administrator in the squadron on carbon paper. Obviously, both security procedures and information technology have come a long way since then.

And for those who remember the Cold War as a sleepy interval in which the dinosaurs wandered peacefully through the swamps, my squadron got put on alert for deployment twice that year—first in reaction to events in Iran, and later when the Soviets went into Afghanistan. This was deadly serious for us—though hugely exciting, and a wonderful experience.

So the theme of this conference, “Federal History in Times of Transition,” comes very readily to me. It has been my experience through my decades of federal service—whether in fighter operations, or as a policy planner, or in an academic setting; or as The Historian of the Department of State—that change is constant; that the central role of a leader is to manage change; and that change invariably rests on a foundation of continuity.

And for my remarks today, I think it appropriate to focus on the program I have been privileged to direct for the past six years, the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series, the official documentary record of U.S. foreign relations and diplomacy, and to outline that balance of continuity and change, and the dynamics of change in this massive and fundamental program, now in its 157th year.

Continuity and Change in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* Series

I think all here are familiar with the *Foreign Relations* series, and will agree that the ruby red *Foreign Relations* volumes, and the series as whole, appear to be eternal and unchangeable, immutable and inevitable. What you find on closer examination, though, is that every volume has its own story, and that the development of the

series itself has been remarkably tumultuous, with recurrent moments of crisis and drama and salvation—and transformation.¹

Let me start with the bottom line up front. There are powerful elements of continuity in the *Foreign Relations* series, extending across its long history:

- The most important continuity lies in the fundamental purpose met by the series. It is based in colonial traditions defining the responsibilities of the executive and the legislative bodies, and the rights of the citizenry to information on the acts of the government performed in their name. That transparency is fundamental to a democratic system.
- From the inception of the series in 1861, it has been foundational for any study of this nation's foreign relations, its government structure and decision-making processes, its role in the world, and the evolution of the international system.
- Right from its first days, the series has been an icebreaker for declassification, in various forms, establishing and extending the boundary for government transparency.
- It has been a powerful instrument of public diplomacy, from its first days early in the Civil War, right up to now.
- There have always been, and always will be, perpetual and powerful tensions between security and transparency in publishing the series, and another between the demands of comprehensiveness and timeliness. Both of those tensions have played out constantly in different forms, increasingly complex over time.

But the series has seen changes, every bit as significant and powerful as those elements of continuity:

- Over the past century, there has been a constant increase in the complexity and the aperture of the series, reflecting changes in the structure of the government, extensions in the nature of foreign relations, and changes in the international system.

¹ The account of the history of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series in these remarks is drawn from *Toward Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable: A History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series*, by William B. McAllister, Joshua Botts, Peter Cozzens, and Aaron W. Marrs (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2013). This volume, and a series of short essays discussing key elements of the story, can be found at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus-history>.

- These changes have required the State Department historians to operate in an increasingly complex bureaucratic and organizational environment.
- Meanwhile, advances in technology have enabled the series to reach around the globe and create forms of access unimaginable in earlier times.

The series has undergone four fundamental transformations over the past decades, each building toward the role and reach of today's series, and each associated with leaders who shaped change to support the development and adaptation of the series—to return to our theme, a reflection of the role of leadership in shaping change.

The Origin and Development of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*

As mentioned earlier, the series is based directly on precedents established in colonial times and confirmed in the first days of the newly formed federal government. Congress was understood to have an inherent right to the records documenting decisions on foreign relations; the executive branch was understood to have the right to withhold or redact documentation that could pose a risk to the public interest. Specific grounds for withholding information provided to Congress, likewise, established general security categories still used today. In general, the executive branch would withhold information that, if divulged, might threaten the public interest or national security. Within this general framework, early decisions by the new government established specific grounds for withholding documents that are still in use: records that if divulged might damage diplomatic relations or ongoing negotiations, that might threaten sensitive intelligence sources or operations, or that would expose personal information.

Secretary of State William Seward systematized those practices in 1861, during the opening months of the Civil War in July 1861. Requested by Congress to provide the documentation addressing the secession and our diplomacy with the European powers, Seward instead provided comprehensive documentation of the Department's diplomatic activities. He did so within months of the diplomatic activity being documented, and what's more, he provided that documentation in volumes that were published and made available to Congress, the American people, and the European powers.

We don't have a direct statement by Secretary Seward of his motives in doing so, but we do know that these volumes were used as a powerful instrument of diplomacy, both in Europe and in securing the support of the American people. At perhaps the darkest moment in the Civil War, on March 2, 1864, Seward answered a protest from our minister in London, Charles Francis Adams, over the difficulties these open

publications imposed on him in dealing with his British counterparts. Seward's reply is the best statement we have on his motives and remains a powerful statement of the role of transparency in a free society: "Government constantly depends on the support of Congress and the People, and that support can be expected only on the condition of keeping them thoroughly and truthfully informed of the manner in which the powers derived from them are executed. Mutual confidence between the People and the Government is a condition of our national life."

In reading those Civil War volumes, it is easy to see the effect they would have had on the clarity and effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy. As the war continued, *Foreign Relations* volumes frequently recorded, for example, British parliamentary debates in which the diplomatic documents published earlier were debated in Parliament. For Seward, the publication of these documents provided a direct conduit to the leaders and influential public in Great Britain. Never a self-effacing man, he was thus enabled to reach directly to the British leadership, no longer dependent on intermediaries, and enabled to reach throughout the British political system. The series was a powerful weapon on the home front as well, widely applauded by the domestic press.

The series continued after the war, as an ongoing compilation of the documents of current diplomacy. Volumes were issued within a year of the acts being documented, and actively used by Congress and the Department as an instrument of current policy, legislative oversight, and management. It was an essential administrative instrument for the Department, used as a reference and support for ongoing diplomacy.

During this 45-year period, about one-third of the overall life of the series, the documents were compiled by clerks, the desk officers of the day. There were silent redactions, unaccounted for, taken for the reasons established in the first days of the republic: to prevent damage to the public interest, to avoid risk to ongoing diplomacy or intelligence sources and methods, and to avoid divulging personal information. Again, *Foreign Relations* volumes in this era were working documents, to facilitate the work of the Department and keep Congress informed on the ongoing work of the Department.

The first major change in that system came in 1906 due to print costs. Gradually over the next few years, the series drifted away from its long tradition of near-contemporaneous publication, always expecting to return to traditional uses and audiences. But then the cataclysm of the First World War intervened, with

the vast administrative load on the Department that resulted in further slowing production and finally decoupling the series from current events. Unintentionally and gradually, the series adopted a new set of users and purpose, the first in a series of transformative moments that would shape today's series.

Tyler Dennett and the Establishment of Editorial Standards

The Department appointed its first historian in 1918, with Gaillard Hunt appointed to complete a documentary history of the Department in the Great War. Hunt was a long-term officer in the Department who had earlier written extensive administrative histories of the Department. Once he started work on his World War project he amended the plan, working toward a narrative history supported by documentation. He never completed the project, passing away in 1924, and was succeeded by Tyler Dennett, the first professionally trained historian to direct the *Foreign Relations* series.

Within months of his arrival, Dennett drafted and gained consensus approval throughout the Department's senior leadership for explicit editorial standards, finally approved by Secretary of State Frank Kellogg in 1925—recognizably the foundation for the editorial principles the series still uses today. The "Statement of Principles to Guide the Editing of Foreign Relations" opened with the declaration that "it is recognized that a well-informed and intelligent public opinion is of the utmost importance for the conduct of foreign relations." The Statement of Principles outlined a broad scope for the series, charging the Chief of the Division of Publications with publishing "the correspondence relating to all major policies and decisions of the Department in the matter of foreign relations, together with the events which contributed to formulation of each decision or policy, and the facts incident to the application of it."

The Statement of Principles recognized that omissions to the record might be necessary to protect ongoing diplomacy, specifying criteria for the omission of material. But the new policy emphasized that "there must be no alteration of the text, no deletions without indicating the place in the text where the deletion is made, and no omission of facts which were of major importance in reaching a decision. Nothing should be omitted with a view to concealing over what might be regarded by some as a defect of policy." The scope, criteria for omissions, and editorial standards approved by Kellogg established a fundamental and permanent change in the nature of the series, and set the foundation for today's *Foreign Relations*.

Proving once again the adage that no good deed goes unpunished, the advent of editorial standards and a staff of trained historians responsible for the selection

of documents for publication ensured the sound foundation of the series. But in doing so, these changes made the clearance process much more difficult. In earlier times, sensitive material could be omitted silently at the discretion of the editors, with no accounting in the volume for such omissions. With the new editorial policy, all omissions would be marked, and the standards for omitting material were now precise and demanding.

Clearance issues cropped up both within the Department and with foreign nations. Within the Department, documents related to Iran frequently were contentious and difficult to clear; meanwhile Japan proved routinely reluctant to approve the publication of potentially sensitive documentation. The retrospective volumes documenting the Versailles negotiations raised objections at the highest levels from France and Great Britain in the late 1930s and 1940s. In 1943 these objections led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to side with Prime Minister Winston Churchill in overruling Secretary of State Cordell Hull and delaying the publication of the *Foreign Relations* volume documenting the most sensitive “Council of Four” meetings that had been held at Versailles.

And so, the advent of editorial standards represented a fundamental transformation, essential to the long-term value of the series, but creating a mixed legacy. This vast advance in the quality and reliability of the series came at a price. Time delays and clearance issues became a central and perennial feature of the series.

The Yalta Volume, FRUS, and the HAC: Now for Something Completely Different

This story took a very odd turn with the arrival of the Cold War in the early 1950s, again unexpectedly changing the nature of the series. This part of the story opened in the immediate aftermath of the war, as State Department diplomats turned to the departmental historians for information on the agreements reached in the wartime summits—material that was obviously critical for ongoing diplomacy in the postwar world. In a telling comment on FDR’s style of diplomacy, and the role of the State Department during the war, there were essentially no State Department records of many of the important wartime summit meetings, and so the Department was forced to go elsewhere—to the newly created Department of Defense (DOD) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and to the FDR papers—to compile the record of these wartime conferences.

In late 1952, the Department historians got caught up in the bitter partisanship of the times, with Senate Majority Leader William Knowland demanding publication of the Yalta documentation, which he alleged was being deliberately

withheld by the Department to protect FDR and the Democrats. In this highly charged atmosphere, the Department compiled the record of the Malta and Yalta summits, relying heavily upon the records provided by DOD and the Joint Chiefs to compensate for the lack of State Department records.

Meanwhile, the Historical Office assigned Bryton Barron responsibility for compiling the volume—a remarkable choice, given that Barron was a far-right-wing Republican, later to become an organizer for the John Birch Society. He was convinced that the Department was actively engaged in suppressing the story of Yalta, and in response, he leaked freely to Congress and the press while filing a series of complaints against the Department. In a fitting conclusion, in order to break a partisan deadlock, the Yalta volume reached the public through a controlled leak to the *New York Times* in March 1955. You can find it today on our website, looking remarkably placid and normal given its bitter and dramatic origin.

Facing the scrutiny and complexity of the volume, the bitter controversy surrounding its publication, and concerns for the integrity of the series in that fierce political environment, the director of the Historical Office, Dr. Bernard Noble, convened the first Historical Advisory Committee (HAC) as a means of protecting the integrity of the series. The committee first met in November 1957, as Noble and his colleagues were just beginning to recover from the bureaucratic fallout engendered by the leak of the Yalta papers. But the committee's role and authorities were established by custom, not by law, and would be constant sources of conflict within the Department in the years ahead.

To summarize, this trying and dramatic sequence in the mid-1950s changed the series in fundamental ways, establishing major precedents in two areas: the inclusion of documentation from other agencies, and the advent of the Historical Advisory Committee.

The *FRUS* Statute and its Aftermath

And now we arrive at the last of these turning points, the enactment of the law placing the *Foreign Relations* series on a statutory basis in 1991. This extraordinary event culminated a classic tale of unintended consequences that took place during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

To summarize a very complex and unhappy story: in 1978, the State Department responded to the Carter administration's executive order on classification and declassification policies by creating a centralized office for reviewing historical

records. This was a major departure from the earlier practice of having the Historical Office work directly with desk officers to provide clearance reviews for *FRUS* documents.

President Carter's executive order was designed to further transparency, but the result in the State Department was the exact opposite. The creation of the Classification/Declassification Center (CDC) triggered a triangular "civil war" among the Historical Office, the CDC, and the Advisory Committee that went on for over a decade. Among its more significant outcomes, this bureaucratic conflict created an atmosphere of translucency that shaped the publication of Eisenhower-era Guatemala and Iran volumes. Both of these volumes failed to document major, generally known covert operations, by 1990 leading to a crisis of credibility for the series. The crisis arose at the exact historical moment when the attenuation of Cold War tensions weakened the strength of national security arguments for secrecy, and as the Soviet Union and eastern European nations moved toward new levels of transparency. Meanwhile the State Department refused to provide the Advisory Committee access to the classified documents that were critical to the committee's ability to perform its oversight of the series. HAC Chairman Warren Cohen publicly resigned and took his case to the public and to the academic community. The *FRUS* series came under bitter attack from academics and the media, ultimately triggering decisive intervention by Congress.

That intervention, shaped by Senator Claiborne Pell and his staff, yielded bipartisan approval of a bill signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in October 1991, transforming the series once again. With a stroke of President Bush's pen, the *FRUS* statute clarified issues that had festered since the 1950s; elevated the program from a departmental practice to a legislatively mandated action of the executive branch; and confirmed clear and demanding editorial standards for the Department of State historians.

To summarize the major features of the statute:

- It confirmed in law the editorial standards based on those first established in 1925, adding the requirement that the *Foreign Relations* volumes publish the "thorough, accurate, and reliable record of U.S. foreign relations and significant diplomatic activity."
- It specified that all agencies were required to provide access to their historical documentation for the historians working on the *Foreign Relations* series, and for the HAC. Conversely, the law requires the State Department historians

to document the contributions of all agencies in the foreign policy decision-making process—obviously an essential provision as the series documents the development of foreign policy in the modern U.S. political system.

- The law established declassification processes specifically for the series, enabling the historians to work directly with the declassification authorities in each of the agencies being documented, and work through the never-ending complications of declassification in face-to-face negotiations.
- The statute clarified the responsibilities and authorities of the Advisory Committee, which had been subjects of intense debate since the advent of the committee in the mid-1950s.
- And finally, the law confirmed the 30-year timeline, earlier set by President Ronald Reagan, from the events being documented to the publication of the volumes presenting the relevant documentation. This feature of the statute embedded into law the long-existing tension between the comprehensiveness of the series, and its timeliness, and establishes an essential forcing function for every aspect of the production process.

So, the *Foreign Relations* series emerged from its decade-long journey through the valley of darkness as a government-wide program led by the State Department, with the law now clarifying the role and nature of the *Foreign Relations* series and dispelling the controversies that had hung over the series for decades. Given the situation over the previous decade, this was nothing short of a miracle.

Implementing the *Foreign Relations* Statute

It has now been over a quarter of a century since the passage of the *FRUS* law. The first few years after the passage of the law basis were necessary to work out the administrative and security aspects of the law's provisions—establishing working practices with other agencies that enabled access at a practical level, and establishing equally detailed norms for declassification processes. None of this makes for exciting reading, but everyone involved with the federal history program will recognize the importance, and the complexity, of these tasks.

During that period, a more fundamental problem arose, one that pre-existed the statute but was not addressed directly in its provisions. Since the 1950s, State Department historians had faced recurring declassification concerns with the intelligence community, especially with respect to documenting covert actions with major implications for U.S. foreign relations. The failure to document such actions in Guatemala and Iran were among the triggers for the action by Congress in 1991, but the statute did not directly address this issue. By the mid-1990s, the issue of

documenting these operations, often a critical component of U.S. foreign relations, threatened to paralyze the series.

In a remarkable triumph of public policy, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tom Donilan, then “dual-hatted” as Secretary of State Warren Christopher’s chief of staff, negotiated an agreement among the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Department for general principles of inclusion for covert activities in the *FRUS*, series. In the years that followed, Donilon’s successor Jamie Rubin worked assiduously to institutionalize processes for reaching policy-level decisions on acknowledging covert actions, and for establishing declassification guidelines for those actions on which acknowledgement is approved. The High Level Panel process, as it has come to be known, has evolved in practice over the intervening 20 years. But it remains the U.S. government’s only established process for systematic review and declassification decisions for this sensitive material, and has enabled the U.S. government, at the policy level, to reach decisions to acknowledge about 60 such actions over time. This is invariably a protracted and very careful decision process, and rightly so.

During my tenure as The Historian over the past six years, the Office of the Historian has prioritized two major lines of action with respect to the series. First, we have instituted management practices essential to sustain the rate of production necessary to meet the statutory 30-year timeline. The *Foreign Relations* series is a work of great scholarship, but it is also a highly complex management program, with about 75 volumes in work at any given time. Over these six years we have published 56 volumes, a record high level of sustained production for the series, and expect to work our way systematically, over time, back to the 30-year line while sustaining the quality of the series.

Our second line of action has been in the world of digital publishing. We now publish our material initially on our website, available to anyone in the world with internet access. Moreover, we are in the end game of a long-term program to publish the *Foreign Relations* back catalog in that same data base, back to the origins of the series in 1861. This is an incredible resource for those teaching or researching U.S. foreign relations, and a matter of great pride for the office. As with all our work on the *Foreign Relations* series, this line of action has demanded vision, management, and scholarship of a high order.

Closing and Summary

As many here know, I have spent the last six years explaining and advocating for this series in every setting I could find. But the best explanation of the *Foreign*

Relations series I ever encountered came from a gentleman running a jewelry store on the California Coast. I was visiting there with my mom, who being a mom, asked me to explain my work. I went through the explanation, and he gazed at me, and paused, and finally said, “You’re setting the boundary stones.”

He had been studying scripture the night before, the Proverbs of Solomon, going back three millennia—“do not move the boundary stones that your ancestors have set in place.”

In the work of our office, as with the work of all here in the world of public history, we are setting the boundary stones for the understanding of this nation’s role in the world, markers that will stand forever. It is work demanding the highest levels of scholarship, management, and commitment to this nation, and it is work that will remain a proud memory for me through the rest of my days.

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Thanks to Josh Botts for his careful and thoughtful review of several drafts of this paper. Any errors that might remain are the sole responsibility of the author.

Picture credit: U.S. Department of State

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