

Roger R. Trask Lecture

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by 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 SHFG's mission. Edward C. Keefer has worked in the Historical Office of the U.S. Department of State for 34 years, where he edited 25 volumes in the Foreign Relations of the United States series. He served as general editor of the series from 2002 to 2009. He then joined the Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, which in 2017 published his volume Harold Brown: Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge, 1977–1981, in the Secretaries of Defense Historical Series. His second volume on Caspar Weinberger is forthcoming. He delivered the Trask Lecture on June 2, 2022.

What Federal Historians Do

Edward C. Keefer

I would like to thank the Society for History in the Federal Government for honoring me with the Roger Trask Award. When I was told I was nominated I naturally reflected on my career. What was it that distinguished me? I spent 34 years as a researcher, editor, and the general editor of the Department of State's documentary series *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS). I then followed with 14 years at the Secretary of Defense's Historical Office researching and writing authorized histories of individual secretaries of defense. In all, I have spent almost 50 years as a federal historian. Then, it dawned on me, I won this prize for longevity.



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I must have learned something during this almost half century. My career has been to document and explain U.S. national security and foreign policy. It's what I know, so it's what I will talk about today.

First, what do we as federal historians provide to the American people? Most obviously we offer transparency and accountability, two crucial pillars of democracy. We document and explain what officials of the federal government have done on behalf of the American people and with their taxpayer money.

Of course, transparency has been the hallmark of the *Foreign Relations* series since its inception in 1861. Since 1992 the Department of State is legally required to provide the public with a true and accurate record of U.S. foreign policy relations and decisions. This has not always been easy. During my time at State the FRUS series faced a crisis when it failed to account for covert actions in foreign relations. After hard negotiations, representatives of CIA, the NSC staff, and State historians worked out a system to document significant covert operations without exposing still-classified sources and methods. It is not a perfect process, but it is virtually the only one of its kind in the world.

Other challenges faced the FRUS series. The proliferation of players in national security policy required research in multiple federal agencies. Cost was always a factor. Hiring 40 or so historians to produce 35 to 45 volumes for each presidential administration is a substantial investment. I do not have to remind you that in hard times the beady eyes of budget cutters are drawn to historical programs. Not so much for the money their demise could save, but because they are an easy target for those who do not appreciate the value of history. These bureaucrats fail to recognize the importance of transparency and accountability.

One of the most difficult challenges FRUS faced was integrating the Nixon presidential oral tapes for 1970 to 1973 into the series. The huge number of Oval Office conversations were of poor audio quality, without attribution to who was speaking, and they ranged over a dizzying array of topics. We tried to locate the relevant tapes and transcribe them ourselves, but realized we needed help. The State Department financed transcribers who worked in cooperation with the National Archives. The more they did, the better they became at it. Still, it was a monumental job.

The tapes added enormously to the documentary record, although they were not without controversy. The FRUS volume on South Asia for 1971 reproduced some very uncomplimentary taped remarks by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger about Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Its publication occasioned a raft of media comment, temporary anguish at the Embassy in New Delhi, and more downloads of the volume (mostly in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) than of

any other one with the possible exception of the Cuban Missile Crisis volume. I also got some personal blowback. Henry Kissinger complained to me that Oval Office “chit chat,” as he termed the Nixon tapes, had no place in FRUS. I mumbled something about the need to document the complete historical record, but I did not convince “Doctor K.”

This crucial mission of shedding light on the federal government’s workings, warts and all, is important. It is true of all federal historical publications and programs. Whether explaining the partial core meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979, documenting the attack on the Pentagon on 9/11, or the history of nuclear force reductions after the Cold War, federal historians do primary research in federal records, conduct oral interviews, and employ all the tools of good scholarship. They don’t pull their punches. The result is evidenced-based history with well-reasoned conclusions.¹ Our work is almost always available online without copyright. It has a multiplier effect as it reverberates in the wider fields of academic and popular history. We federal historians till the soil, plant the seeds, harvest the corps, and then give away the bounty of our labors.

In addition, federal historians play an important role in the declassification process. While we don’t have declassification authority, publications such as FRUS, the *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series*, the *Histories of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, or other histories using classified materials push the envelope of declassification. They identify and submit key documents for declassification review. In effect, federal historians are the first advocates for release of formerly classified material. While the process can be long and often agonizing, the success rate is good. Our declassified historical products are an opening wedge for further research. In the case of the Pentagon’s Secretaries of Defense histories an added benefit is that footnotes provide valuable insight into a complex and convoluted Department of Defense (DoD) historical record-keeping system.

There is another major role for public historians that I experienced in my career: as provider of historical background and context. Academic historians have long contended that if policy and decision makers had accurate historical accounts and

¹ Examples include J. Samuel Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Alfred Goldberg et al., *Pentagon: 9/11* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2007); Joseph “Pat” Harahan, *With Courage and Persistence: The United States, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine and the Num-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Programs* (Washington: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, 2015).

context they might make better choices.² Here is clearly potential fertile ground for federal historians. During my time at the State history office its record of success in influencing policy was mixed. I was involved in many rush-projects to provide historical background and context. We hoped to inform, if not influence, policy decisions. The Historian at State received such requests from either the president, his assistants at the White House, or the secretary of state. Their requests often sought to justify a decision already made or about to be taken, or to collaborate a conviction already held. Two examples will suffice.

During the lead-up to the first Gulf war in 1991, State's history office received an assignment from the White House. President George H. W. Bush claimed that Saddam Hussein was worse than Hitler. You might remember that President Bush viewed the Iraqi dictator through the lens of his World War II experience and equated Saddam with Hitler. The White House instructed us to find historical evidence to prove the president's assertion. It was hopeless. With the exception that Hitler released diplomats in occupied countries and Saddam initially held them hostage in Kuwait, we could find little to confirm Bush's assertion. We had to inform the White House that Saddam, for all his atrocities, was not worse than Hitler, who was in a league by himself.

The second example is more significant. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the George W. Bush administration—that is “Bush 2”—debated how best to transition from an occupation of Iraq to a civilian Iraqi government. Secretary of State Colin Powell asked for a rush study of previous occupation administrations of defeated powers and what made them successful. We looked at post-World II occupations of Japan, Germany, South Korea, and the UN occupation of Cambodia. Some basic facts emerged. These successful occupations were long, often taking many years. They also benefited from the existence of previous figurehead leaders around whom the people could rally. In Japan it was the emperor; in Cambodia Prince Sihanouk. Furthermore, in Germany and Japan the defeated military forces initially played a role in keeping order and maintaining civil society. We informed Powell of our conclusions and suggested that the occupation of Iraq would require a U.S.-led civilian government that would oversee the transition to an Iraqi government over a period of years. Our study matched the views of Powell and his advisers, although we were unaware of it at the time. But our advice clashed with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's insistence on putting an “Iraqi face

² Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Use of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

on postwar Iraq” as soon as possible. By an Iraqi face, Rumsfeld apparently meant Iraqis closely associated with the Pentagon and Washington. Powell sent our memo to Rumsfeld who dismissed it with sarcasm. As he recalled in his memoirs, “Powell sent a memo from the State Department historian labeled ‘informative.’ The paper argued that any occupation would take ‘time.’ That was apparently Colin Powell’s position on the matter.” Also in his memoirs Rumsfeld maintained that a better model for Iraq was the decision in 1945 not to impose a military occupation on liberated France, which was rallying around De Gaulle.³ France equals Iraq: now that is a bad historical analogy. Of course, the Bush administration opted for a brief interim U.S. occupation government under Paul Bremer. The Bremer administration is generally considered to have made virtually every wrong decision it could.⁴ The result was many years of hard fighting by U.S. military forces in Iraq to achieve even a semblance of the Iraqi government Rumsfeld envisioned.

I do not suggest that these two examples indicate that governments officials do not appreciate and use historical background. Many of you in the audience, no doubt, can recall when policy makers have benefitted from historical context provided by your agency historians. In my experience, speechwriters at State, Defense, and the White House regularly requested historical context for speeches, which often commemorated important historical events. The requesters relied on historical offices to provide the accurate raw material and historical background. President Bill Clinton’s four speeches on the beaches and cemetery at Normandy on the 50th anniversary of D-Day, for example, cited the personal accounts of those who took part in the invasion. The historical offices of State and the Uniformed Services produced accounts based on letters written home by service members about to hit the beaches. Clinton’s speechwriters weaved them in, often word for word, into a heartfelt presidential celebration of that monumental event.⁵

Historical offices and federal historians also provide useful historical information to the public. The histories of U.S. past conflicts written by federal military historians recognize and honor those who served. I am reminded of the Defense Department’s *Honor Bound*, a searing personal history of POWs in North Vietnam and Southeast Asia, which was reprinted by the Naval Institute Press and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.⁶

³ Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011), 484, 490.

⁴ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco, The Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

⁵ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 1:1041–1046.

⁶ Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: A History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Washington: Historical Office: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998).

Publications and papers by federal historians not only commemorate, they educate by explaining the role that federal agencies have played in the development of U.S. political and governmental history. They also provide federal workers with the opportunity to learn more about the history and mission of the agencies for which they work. The Pentagon's *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series* or its Acquisition Histories have both educated the interested public and provided understanding to DoD leadership and their staff of policies choices that their predecessors faced.

As I said at the beginning of this talk, my experience has been limited to my time at State and Defense. I only know of work in the rest of the public history profession by its sterling reputation. I wish to acknowledge the work of federal historians, archivists, curators, librarians, and practitioners of public history. They have made lasting contributions to this country and its citizens. I would like to add a parting observation. The old days of academics belittling government historians are long over. Some of today's best historians work for the federal government. They relish the opportunity to undertake hard research in federal records. They have the opportunity, access, and time to do the job properly. Their research, writing, and conclusions compares favorably with any history produced today. Furthermore, as academic jobs in history decline in number, federal and public history programs continue to offer promising nonteaching historical careers.

Let me say in conclusion that my work has been challenging and rewarding. I am proud to have been a federal and public historian for 48 years. On behalf of the all the members of the SHFG community, I gratefully accept his award.

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