

HISTORICAL
PROGRAMS
IN THE
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

A GUIDE



Society for History in the Federal Government



Society for History in the Federal Government
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INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND AGENCY MANAGEMENT

Government decisionmakers unacquainted with the history of their organizations are comparable to amnesia victims who do not remember people, places, and events in their past. Often, these officials' lack of institutional memory affects their perceptions of the character and mission of their organizations and the past pattern of agency decisions. But the most effective managers and agency heads use history in making decisions. The reliability and usefulness of that historical information will depend significantly on the existence of an agency historical office staffed by professional historians.

By providing an institutional memory, the historical office satisfies several basic agency needs: policy related research; written and oral histories; advice on records management; support of research by outside scholars; and a source for information for the agency, the Congress, the media, and the public. In addition, a historical office can provide a context for an agency's mission, permitting its staff to understand their own objectives in light of the agency's traditions and place in American history.

Top officials and program managers, who operate best when they have accurate background information, should be the prime beneficiaries of an agency historical office. Professional historians are trained to search for recurring patterns; they can determine whether a situation is unique and whether a historical analogy is appropriate or misleading.

In providing assistance to scholars outside the agency, historical offices also support a fuller understanding by the educated public of the agency's role and how it has fulfilled it. This kind of assistance takes the form of the production of reference tools, like publication of collections of agency documents, biographical directories, and guides to agency papers in the National Archives or other repositories, and the provision of reference services to researchers interested in government programs.

The passage of time often gives an aura of inevitability to program structure and operations. Historians are concerned with identifying the reasons why events happen and distinguishing between inevitability and managerial choice. A full understanding of institutional history will enable program managers to identify where change is desirable and possible and where it will meet with resistance.

Historians are often the only agency employees who in a timely fashion can provide objective, accurate information on past events, policies, regulations, and decisions. Professional historians are trained to assemble raw historical facts from a variety of sources; to analyze them within their wider historical context; and to present them in a concise, understandable, and meaningful manner.

The Society for History in the Federal Government has prepared this pamphlet to describe the many ways in which federal historical offices can serve their agencies. Its goal is to inform senior officials about the special services which historical offices can provide. The Society believes that all federal agencies should have historical offices and has as a primary goal the creation of such offices in agencies which do not have them. Through this booklet and through direct consultation, the Society offers advice and assistance to agency administrators considering the establishment, expansion, or redirection of their historical programs.

Note: This introduction draws on the following sources, among others: Alan M. Kantrow, "Why History Matters to Managers," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1986), 81-88; Richard Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986); and George T. Mazuzan, "Countering Doublethink: Doing History at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission," *The Public Historian* (Summer 1985), 35-42.

INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

One of the most important tasks of federal historical offices is the researching and writing of institutional history, which deals with the organization, programs, and projects of a specific unit of government. Institutional histories provide accessible and accurate accounts of what has been done in an agency or department. They make available to current managers an organized, shared institutional memory, giving them a logical ground on which to proceed.

Institutional history also establishes a time line which links facts and puts them in context, provides a basic explanation of the evolution of the agency's mission and structure, and facilitates evaluation of the organization and effectiveness of specific programs. Institutional history, which analyzes both successes and failures, can be very useful to assist managers in making decisions. It can help acquaint new officials with their organization and provide headquarters managers with an understanding of field activities and projects. Other applications include providing the factual information required by legal and legislative staffs, building employee morale, supporting internal training programs, and serving as a source for congressional liaison and public affairs offices. Equally important, published institutional histories can educate the general public about federal agency operations.

Institutional history programs can be operated on a limited or comprehensive scale, depending on agency resources and requirements. The scope, type, and cost of the program can be adapted to fit the needs of the organization. Institutional histories may be created by in-house historians; for example, *Controlling the Atom: The Beginnings of Nuclear Regulation, 1946-1962*, by historians at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and *GAO History, 1921-1991*, a survey published by the General Accounting Office History Program. Some institutional histories are written under contract, like *Crisis Contained: The Department of Energy at Three Mile Island*, which provided the Department of Energy with historical analysis and perspective on an important contemporary issue, and *Takeoff at Midcentury: Federal Civil Aviation Policy in the Eisenhower Years, 1953-1961*, written for the Federal Aviation Administration.

Producing a comprehensive agency history is a major undertaking that requires the allocation of substantial resources over a significant period of time. Agency heads need to understand that a historian at work on such a project will be so engaged for a number of years.

Historical offices also prepare monographs focusing on specific aspects of agency history. *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury*, published by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration History Program, is a scholarly account of an important aspect of the space program. More than 50,000 copies of the volume have been sold. Other examples are *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests: 1964-1980*, written by the historian of the Forest Service, *Planning and Organizing the Postwar Air Force, 1943-1947*, published by the Office of the Air Force Historian, and short histories by the historian of the Internal Revenue Service on the agency's San Francisco District Office and the Detroit Computing Center.

Some federal historical offices prepare continuing series providing detailed historical narrative and analysis of agency history. One notable example is the multivolume *United States Army in World War II*, prepared by the United States Army's Center of Military History. Staff historians at agencies with sensitive national security responsibilities often write classified histories specifically for internal use. Some large agencies, particularly the military services, have formal field historical programs which contribute, among other functions, to their organization's history programs.

HISTORICAL REPORTS AND POLICY RESEARCH

In addition to writing comprehensive institutional history, many federal historical offices prepare more specifically focused reports and papers. Historical reports may provide a general overview of the agency's history, an outline of the history of major policy initiatives, or a detailed account of important individual programs. They may serve as reference documents, briefing tools, or sources of organizational and statistical information. Some are used only internally by agency executives, others are published for open distribution. An example of the latter type is "Eroding the Color Line: The Soil Conservation Service and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," published in *Agricultural History*, a scholarly journal.

Sometimes written at the request of top-level executives, the reports are by professional historians who have acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the agency's records from writing institutional histories as well as from answering requests for information. For example, the *Institutional Origins* pamphlets prepared by the Department of Energy History Division explain the history, goals, and achievements of the predecessor agencies and programs brought together in 1977 to form the Department of Energy.

Policy research is a very important special form of historical report. Policy research focuses on special events or a series of events in an effort to provide decision-makers with insights on the past. Such insights may be drawn from existing institutional histories, but usually policy research studies are developed on specific topics in response to a direct request from agency managers who want to understand the past as an aid to making current decisions. Such studies might focus on past agency reorganizations where further organizational change is being considered; how to deal with Congress on budget and other issues; the effectiveness of an organizational unit when its future is under consideration; or how the agency has dealt in the past with a currently pressing issue. Agency heads who use their history programs for policy research, and consider the contents of this research when making decisions, are using history in a critically significant way.

DOCUMENTARY COLLECTIONS

The compilation of documentary collections is an important function of some federal historical offices. These collections may trace a particular event or series of events, outline an agency's work over an extended period, or focus on special topics. Usually issued in printed volumes, they present original documents in a convenient, usable form.

Documentary collections perform several important services. They give agency managers an authoritative record of specific events and problems as well as a comprehensive view of the agency's full history. They provide primary material for scholars, stimulate further research and publication, and inform the general public. In addition, they serve as a vehicle for declassifying and releasing documents on a systematic basis. By printing documents in their historical context, such collections allow policymakers to speak for themselves.

A notable example, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, prepared by the Office of the Historian, Department of State, constitutes the official record of United States foreign policy and diplomacy. Currently covering the years 1861 through the 1950s, the series now totals well over 300 volumes and is the most extensive publication of diplomatic papers in the world. Historians preparing the series search White House, State Department, Department of Defense, and other agency records as well as private collections to find sources which best reveal the formulation and conduct of United States foreign policy. The issuance of a *Foreign Relations* volume often represents the first time that documents on a particular subject or period in United States diplomatic history have been systematically collected, declassified, and presented in one place. In November 1985, the President of the United States strongly endorsed the *Foreign Relations* series as "the proper vehicle for systematic official disclosure of the major documentation regarding American foreign policy in its proper historical context," and the State Department Authorization Act for 1992 includes a section establishing a 30-year timetable for publication of volumes in the series.

Another example is the "Historical Series" of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's executive hearings, prepared by the Senate Historical Office. These volumes complement the State Department series by showing how the Foreign Relations Committee has considered important events in the years since World War II.

A third example is the multivolume series, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, published by the United States Navy's Historical Center. These volumes trace the formation and operation of the first United States Navy; they show its contributions to the winning of United States independence and illustrate the importance of sea power, with its implications for the present era as well as for the eighteenth century.

ORAL HISTORY

Oral history involves interviews by historians with persons who have participated in or witnessed events or activities important in the history of an agency. Oral history helps fill the gaps in written agency documentation and provides behind-the-scenes information about what happened to create the current system. It can give the "hows" and "whys" in explaining past actions and a personal perspective not found in other records, thus encouraging both understanding and appreciation of an agency's development and accomplishments.

The oral history programs which exist in most federal historical offices represent the full range of the uses for this type of record. As the Society for History in the Federal Government reported to its membership, "Oral history is a vital part of federal historians' efforts to document historic actions, decisions, and experiences. Oral history is focused, specific, and differs from the written historical record because it is the product of an interaction between the historian [interviewer] and the donor [interviewee]."

The interviews by professional historians that are the heart of the process range in length from an hour to several days. Their purposes can vary considerably. For example, annual interviews by historians of the

Army Corps of Engineers seek to document the experiences of one individual in one assignment. A series of such interviews can provide a changing profile of the work, thereby giving someone entering a tour of duty a record of the problems and successes of his or her predecessors.

Short interviews can help document an important event; for example, several federal agencies have interviewed persons who worked on the development of the first atom bomb. Longer interviews, such as those conducted by the Senate Historical Office, document the interviewee's entire life from birth through education to retirement, but with principal emphasis on his or her Senate experiences. The written records of scientific and technical agencies are particularly difficult to interpret without complementary oral history records. The Navy Laboratories Archives, for example, has a collection of over 200 interviews covering naval research and development during the past quarter century. The Center for Cryptologic History of the National Security Agency has an extensive oral history program covering former directors and senior officials as well as operators and technicians involved in cryptography.

RESEARCH COLLECTIONS, RECORDS MANAGEMENT, AND FOIA

Many federal historical offices play a major role in the maintenance of agency records. They maintain research collections containing copies of documents and other materials useful in preparing histories and special studies and in responding to reference requests. Such collections provide agency officials with immediate access to documentation on a wide variety of issues of contemporary importance. Some agencies collect personal papers of prominent officials, while others, such as the Navy, encourage the donation of such materials to the Library of Congress or other outside repositories.

Their constant research and reference use of agency records make historians expert advisors on questions relating to records management, especially records retention, retirement, and disposal. Also, historians can

help top-level agency managers organize, maintain, and properly preserve personal files and materials.

The records functions of federal historical offices have gained increased importance since the passage of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966. In most federal agencies a special office handles FOIA requests. However, historical offices engaged in writing classified histories, such as that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, may also recommend which documents can be declassified for FOIA release.

Requests from scholars engaged in long-term research projects or from attorneys involved in discovery constitute the major portion of FOIA work in many agencies. Historians can expedite processing these requests by assisting FOIA offices in locating documents and supplying factual data relating to the material requested—for example, whether individuals associated with the documents are living or if information in the files has been released previously in another context.

Historians can also function in a liaison capacity between the public and FOIA offices. Working closely with the Bureau's Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts Section, the Federal Bureau of Investigation historian, for example, developed a set of guidelines to assist scholars, journalists, and others in submitting accurate and realistic requests. These guidelines have been published and distributed within the agency, to archives and reference libraries, and to public researchers. The historian also advises the FOIA office on which processed files might be expected to generate widespread interest and should therefore be placed in the Bureau's FOIA Reading Room.

REFERENCE SERVICES

Providing research and reference services in response to requests from within the agency, from other government organizations, from scholars, and from the public is an important function of most federal historical offices. With knowledge of and ready access to agency records and published sources, historians can provide accurate, timely replies. Dissemination of such information internally can be very helpful to staff dealing with current problems, drafting position or policy papers, writing speeches, preparing testimony, or otherwise engaging in the decisionmaking process. Timely and accurate communication of historical information in response to outside requests can demonstrate, sometimes in small but telling ways, the value of the agency. Some military historical offices maintain special sections to handle a large volume of reference requests. Usually, however, historians provide reference services in conjunction with their other responsibilities.

TRAINING

As the repository of institutional memory and traditions, federal historical offices sometimes provide in-house training to employees. Federal historians often give background lectures or briefings on current topics and agency history. For example, the historical office of the National Security Agency provides materials on the development of cryptology in the United States, lectures to cryptology students on the history of communications intelligence, and background briefings to senior officials on the history of crisis management. The Senate Historical Office participates in an orientation program for new senators. Federal historians also organize and participate in conferences and seminars relating to their agency's activities, within the agency or in interagency and external professional settings. These sessions promote the work of the organizations, broaden the education of their staff, provide greater agency visibility in interorganizational situations, and enlighten the general public on the work of the federal government.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND MUSEUMS

Improved public relations and more effective efforts to comply with federal historic preservation law are among the potential rewards of strong historic preservation and museum programs. Preservation of sites and structures and museum collections that document programs and development can foster understanding and appreciation of agency achievements. For example, the United States Marshals Service collected equipment carried by Deputy Marshals during the rioting preceding James Meredith's enrollment as the first black student at the University of Mississippi. Combined with photographs of the event, the collection provided a strong visual image of Marshals Service functions. Similarly, the Army Corps of Engineers gives visitors to the Old Lock Pump House on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal a dramatic demonstration of the long-term importance of the Corps in the development of inland waterways.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 requires federal managers to consider historic preservation when making decisions about properties within their agencies. In addition, the act established the National Register of Historic Places as the federal inventory of historic properties judged worthy of preservation. Historians can play a key role in effective use of the National Register, which serves as a planning tool in the process of carrying out the mandate for historic preservation. For example, the Naval Medical Command historian provides historical interpretation for employees and the public about its building, the former site of the United States Naval Observatory, which is on the National Register.

On a practical level, historic preservation contributes tools for analyzing building maintenance problems while knowledge of original materials and technologies supplies valuable clues about the most effective and efficient ways of maintaining structures.

Some agencies maintain museums which portray their history through artifacts, permanent and special displays, and other media. For example, the Marine Corps Historical Center maintains the Marine Corps Museum at the Washington Navy Yard and the Marine Corps Air-Ground

Museum at Quantico, Virginia. The National Institutes of Health supports the DeWitt Stettin, Jr., Museum of Medical Research at its headquarters. Some agency museums focus more broadly on aspects of the history of the United States related to the agency's mission. Agency historical programs can be instrumental in the development and maintenance of such museum displays.

AGENCY ANNIVERSARIES AND NATIONAL HISTORICAL EVENTS

Historians use their research and writing skills to produce materials and displays commemorating agency anniversaries and national historical observances. During the mid-1980s, for example, many federal agencies, through their historical offices, prepared for the bicentennial of the United States Constitution and the establishment of the new federal government. Among the many projects relating to the bicentennial was a series of colorful booklets portraying signers of the Constitution having a military background, prepared by the Department of the Army Center of Military History. *A Short History of the U.S. Department of State, 1781-1981*, prepared by the Office of the Historian, Department of State, is an example of a publication commemorating an agency anniversary. The historian of the United States Mint contributed extensively to preparations for the observance of the Mint's 200th anniversary in 1992.

For a detailed description of a major recent bicentennial, see Charlene Bangs Bickford, "A Celebration With Substance: The Observance of the Bicentennial of the United States Congress," in *The Public Historian*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), 63-75. This essay reviews books, exhibits, and films, most of them written or prepared by federal history offices or other federal units, relating to the 200th anniversary of the Congress.

ESTABLISHING A FEDERAL HISTORICAL OFFICE

There are several basic steps in establishing a historical office; variations will occur, depending on the agency, its mission, and its concept of the need for historical services.

1. **Determining the need:** this initial step requires careful formulation of a rationale for establishing the office.

2. **Outlining functions:** the agency should determine in general, within the context of its own needs, the basic functions which the office is expected to perform.

3. **Determining the location of the office:** the office should be placed organizationally in the agency where it can best develop the agency's historical resources and needs; preferably this should be high enough in the structure to assure that the historians have ready access to top administrators.

4. **Appointing the initial staff:** the initial appointment should be that of a chief historian, preferably an experienced professional with managerial, research, and writing experience, at a senior level; this person should select at least one associate, and more if the functions of the office so require; secretarial service should also be provided.

5. **Provision of office space and a budget.**

6. **For Advice and Assistance:** For suggestions on resource persons, the Society for History in the Federal Government may be contacted at the address provided on the inside back cover. The Society would be pleased to provide a team of senior federal historians who can give expert advice and guidance on the establishment of history programs.

Another source for guidance and assistance is the *Directory of Federal Historical Programs and Activities* (4th edition, Washington, 1990), prepared by the Society for History in the Federal Government and co-sponsored by the American Historical Association and the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History. The *Directory* is available through the American Historical Association (202) 544-2422.

Advice and assistance in establishing a historical office can also be sought from the heads and professional personnel of existing offices in various agencies.

The Society for History in the Federal Government, founded in 1979, is a nonprofit professional organization to promote study and broad understanding of the history of the United States government. To achieve this goal, the Society brings together historians, archivists, curators, librarians, editors, preservationists, and others interested in government history. Members include federal employees, university faculty and students, independent consultants and contractors, and interested citizens.

For information about the Society for History in the Federal Government or advice and assistance in establishing a federal historical office, please contact the Society's president at Box 14139, Benjamin Franklin Station, Washington, DC 20044.