

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview

Subject: John Constance

Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds

August 10 & 24, September 7, and October 6, 2023

[BEGIN RECORDING PART ONE - August 10, 2023]

Stephanie Reynolds: All right, so I've got the recording started. First, I just want to say thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project, documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts of events. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I'm based out of the National Archives Facility in Denver, Colorado. I'm assisting the agency Historian, Jessie Kratz, in this important endeavor. Today is Thursday, August 10, 2023. And today I'm speaking with John Constance, whose career and accomplishments spanned 35 years from 1972 to 2007. Okay, John. So could you just start out by telling me where you're from and what your educational background is?

John Constance: Absolutely. And thank you, Stephanie, for taking the time to do this. I am originally from Catonsville, Maryland, which is a small community outside of Baltimore. I had a public high school education, graduated from Catonsville High School, and went to the College of William and Mary in Virginia. I had an interest in history from the get-go. And obviously, Williamsburg was a place that helped facilitate that interest over a period of years. I got a bachelor's degree in what we called "government," political science everywhere else, in 1972. While I was at William and Mary, I was an intern in the Office of the Archivist of the United States for the National Archives for two summers. I later got a master's degree—a master of administration with a specialty in public administration from George Washington University. So that's my education.

Stephanie: Oh, okay. So you are highly educated.

John: Well, that's a matter of opinion. But nevertheless. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: So what were you doing then on your internship?

John: I came into the National Archives actually through GSA [General Services Administration], their then-parent organization. I had a neighbor in Catonsville who had become a public affairs officer for GSA and had heard me complaining about my summer jobs as a telephone installer and working on a survey crew out in the hot sun of Baltimore. I was really in search of

something that was going to be more career-oriented and more along the lines of something I might eventually want to do. And Doug—Doug Brown was his name—Doug referred me to the GSA summer intern program. The application process involved interviewing with each of the GSA services; the Public Building Service, Federal Supply Service, etc. And one of those services back in those dark days was the National Archives and Records Service, at that time, NARS.

So I did a day of interviewing in Washington. The way the process worked was you would interview, and they rated the interviews. You rated who you would be most interested in working for. And my number one choice was the National Archives. And so eventually, through a couple of blips and iterations of that process, I was hired by GSA as a summer intern with the National Archives in the summer of 1971, which was the summer between my junior and senior years at William and Mary.

I reported that first summer to Herb Angel, who was the Deputy Archivist of the United States. Herb is significant in National Archives history in that he and Everett Aldredge were two guys who worked for the Department of the Navy in the Second World War and actually came up with a concept of records management. They were the two who even coined the term “records management.” They did it for the Navy, coming out of the Second World War. And as you know, Stephanie, it was the Second World War that exploded the amount of paperwork and the amount of documentation that was coming out of the United States Government. And they were the ones that really took on that challenge.

And so Herb came to the National Archives, worked in records management for a number of years, but eventually was chosen as Deputy Archivist of the United States. And he was the one that I had interviewed with and was my first supervisor. And the two things that I must say that I learned from Herb Angel were, even to a lowly intern, give meaningful work. And also let all of the senior staff know that you support them and that when you're speaking to this young, lowly intern, you're actually speaking to the Deputy Archivist of the United States, by extension.

Herb had a meeting of all of the top echelon of the National Archives in his office. He introduced me, and he explained that one of the things that he had wanted for a long time was a three-ring binder that could sit on his desk and have all of the key measurements—we call them "metrics" today. Back in those days, there was no such thing as that term associated with accountability. But Herb had a vision that he wanted to be able to open that book up each month and tell where each office of the National Archives was as far as their progress. And so he wanted me to interview each of the offices, let them come up with what those key metrics were going to be and develop a system whereby all of that information would flow through to the Deputy Archivist of the United States. It was a big deal. I mean, I'm a junior in college. I'm

not 21. I'm 20 years old. And so it was heady stuff for me. And he made it known in the meeting, "I want your full cooperation with John." And so there I was. And that was my deliverable that first summer. And that's what I delivered.

Stephanie: Wow, that must have been a huge confidence booster. You know, still being in college and being given this responsibility. And they trusted your experience, your skills, everything that you're providing.

John: Yeah, I tried to remember that in my career whenever I had a young, new person coming on board or, you know, I hired interns at various points in my career. And I always think back to that meeting and say that, you know, every person has skills and every person has worth, even if they don't have experience, and that it was really my job to pay that forward to those that had come after me, because you're right, it was a huge leg up in terms of my career.

Stephanie: Yeah, I've heard a lot about the importance of mentors, too, within the agency and providing that experience and helping them move up within the agency, so I could see how that would be really important.

John: It was. And it also helps your confidence longer-term, because when you're an intern, I've always told people that you start at the top of the organization and work your way down. I started in the office of the Archivist of the United States, but the beginning of my real career is a good illustration of that fact.

At the end of the second summer, I really had liked my time at the National Archives enough to stay. So I went to see the then-acting Deputy Archivist of the United States, Jim O'Neill, and said, "Jim, you know, I would really like to stay here and have a full-time job." And he said, "Fine, I'll check with personnel and we'll go from there." Well, it was the Nixon administration and things, you know, were not fulsome, shall we say, in the federal government in terms of finances. And so there were a limited number of jobs at the Archives.

So I got a phone call from Judy South, who was the head of personnel for the Archives at the time. And Judy said to me, "John, I heard from Dr. O'Neill, and I just have one question for you." And I said, "What's that?" And she said, "Can you type?" And again, my ego at that moment shifted into protection mode, I think. And I thought to myself, oh, she just wants me to type my application. Well, no. The next thing that she asked me—I'll never forget these words—she said, "How fast can you type?" And I thought, Oh, oh, oh, no, no, here we go. I'm sitting here with a four-year education from the College of William and Mary. And I'm being asked to be a typist. Oh, no. So, I said, "Well, I guess I can type fast enough. I've never actually timed it." So, she said,

“All right, we'll give you the test to be a clerk typist,” you know, GS whatever it was, GS-2 at the time.

In that second summer, I had been working on a project with the National Audiovisual Center, which no longer exists as a part of the National Archives. But it was a group that sat out in Suitland, Maryland, at the records center. And what the National Audiovisual Center was, it was a concept of taking films and other audiovisual materials that have been produced for training or for public information or for specific uses by the federal government, and setting up a business that would market those materials for sale or rental to schools, to businesses, to state or local governments. So we'd take these films and repurpose them for use outside of the federal government. Fascinating concept.

I worked on a project to create a computerized catalog for the Center. And I'd made some contacts and some friends out there. So as I'm sitting there perusing my future as a clerk typist, I contacted Glenn McMurray, who was the head of information for the National Audiovisual Center, and I said, "Glenn, I've got a problem. And that is I want to work for the National Archives. But it looks like the only thing available for me downtown is a clerk typist job." And he said, "Why don't you come to work for us?"—the most lovely words that I'd ever heard spoken.

Glenn was not the greatest administrator in the world, which he would admit were he still alive and sitting here. So in terms of budget or a position or all those little details, he turned that over to his staff and said, “Get this guy hired.” So that's what happened. My first permanent job with

the National Archives was a GS-5, working in the information department of the National Audiovisual Center. I was the supervisor of the keypunch staff, which was composed of seven women who sat all day and typed keypunch cards that were being created for information reports on sales and rentals by the National Audiovisual Center. Also, they would eventually input the data that became our first computerized catalog. So there I sat, never having typed a keypunch card in my life, and I had very little knowledge of computers or anything else for that matter. And, I had no idea how to supervise a staff. And there I was, the first day, bright, shining, hopeful, supervising the keypunch office and just thanking God that I wasn't typing myself. [LAUGHS] That's how I started out.

Stephanie: Wow. Where did those videos come from? Did we request copies from the agencies, or were these accessioned records?

John: They were not accessioned records. They were on a different track. Let me give you an example from your background at the National Park Service. All of the national parks

throughout the country, as you know, have orientation films. When you go to Antietam or you go to Gettysburg or you go to any national park, the first thing that happens is you're escorted into the dark and the air conditioning, and they turn on an information film to orient you to the history and the context surrounding the site and to give you enough background for you to go out and experience the site with that kind of history under your belt. They were all produced in Harpers Ferry at the Interpretive Design Center for the National Park Service, and I called on Carl Degen one day in my later career in accessions for the National Audiovisual Center. And I said, "Carl, we've got this operation, and your films are exactly like what we're distributing right now from NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration]." We had a huge collection of NASA's information and educational films, and I said we'd like to get into the distribution business for you and put your films in every school in the country. Typically in those days, they were 16 millimeter films. And so we would sell 16 millimeter films or rent 16 millimeter films, depending upon the needs of the user. And we wrote a contract with Carl. And again, these were not on the accession track for federal records, though there was the other group, the parallel group working for the motion picture division for the National Archives that was doing that on their record schedule when it was appropriate to retire them.

We were kind of a different and independent player, and that whole system was set up under the National Archives Trust Fund as a revolving fund operation that, when we sold the films or rented the films, the money for that came back to us through the National Archives Trust Fund, and we used that as a budget to hire staff, to rent space, to do everything you would do as a business. And so for 12 years of my career, the first 12 years, I progressed through positions of increasing responsibility with the National Audiovisual Center.

Stephanie: So I had not heard about this center before. How did this come to be? I mean, this doesn't seem like something that the agency would do. How did it fit into NARA?

John: It starts out with a guy—a lot of times in federal agencies when you have this kind of a one-off operation, when you trace it back through history, there's usually a salesman involved. And the salesman in this case was a guy by the name of Jim Gibson, who had been in the federal film business. He had been a public affairs spokesperson. He was one of the first voices of Smokey Bear. Jim was nowhere and everywhere in the federal government. And this was a vision that he had of how all of this material that's being produced, millions of dollars worth of audiovisual materials were being produced by the federal government each year being used for their specific purpose, and then going back on the shelf to gather dust until they eventually were accessioned into the National Archives. And Jim said, "That's not right. We really ought to be able to set up a business operation that would see that all of those wonderful federal films got out to the public." And he pitched this to the National Archives and to the National

Archives Trust Fund Board. And they said, "Okay, let's go ahead and do it." And since it was under the Trust Fund Board, it was very much of a dotted-line kind of office under the NARS Executive Director. And back in those years, the position was—it's kind of now Chief of Staff—in those years it was called Executive Director of the National Archives. Walt Robertson was that Executive Director. And this was kind of a dotted-line off of Walt Robertson's office and his responsibilities. We were very independent. Jim was the first director, and when he retired, he hired a guy by the name of Jack McLean, who had been the head of the Naval Photo Center in Anacostia where they produced all the films for the United States Navy. Jack was a retired lieutenant commander and came to work for the National Archives as the second Director of the National Audiovisual Center. And so that was the way it happened.

Eventually, the National Archives some years later decided to work out a deal with NTIS, the National Technical Information Service, which was part of the Department of Commerce, and lock, stock and barrel, the whole operation went to the Department of Commerce. And it is still to this day part of the Department of Commerce in what is now a new iteration of the old National Technical Information Service. Their mission was somewhat similar in that they took federally funded scientific research and marketed it, you know, provided the publishing and marketing of that in a way that the Government Printing Office was not interested in doing. So NTIS was created really for scientific information, developed at the expense of the American taxpayer, that would then go out and be distributed this way. And so some years later, after I left and under a new Archivist of the United States—I can't quite recall right now who it was—but anyway, the decision was made to transfer it to NTIS at Commerce.

Stephanie: Interesting. And so they're still marketing some of those same films by the National Park Service and whoever?

John: Yeah. Exactly. I mean, one of the responsibilities I had was accessions and disposal. The disposal, meaning that we didn't actually throw the films away, but when they were outdated or had information that was no longer viable, and most of those would have been under the category of training materials. The Bureau of Land Management created a huge curriculum on how to fight forest fires, how to do it on land, and how to do it by air. And they really were the ones that did all the R&D [research and development] for that. Well, that material, for a local fire department that had a forest nearby or for municipal fire departments or, you know, fire services all over the country, they were very, very interested in acquiring that. So that's an example. But as new techniques occurred or new films came about, or we-don't-do-it-that-way-anymore kind of things happened, we would take those materials out of the catalog and put in updated material. So it was somewhat of a rotation. The Battle of Antietam never changed.

Stephanie: The outcome was still the same. [LAUGHS]

John: The outcome was still the same. [LAUGHS] So that didn't change. But even the Park Service, as you know, when the Park Service would update or upgrade a visitor center, they would often not use the old film and create a new film. And so we were right there to basically take whatever their new title was as well. So . . .

Stephanie: Do you know anything about the establishment of the National Archives Trust Fund Board?

John: I know the original intent of it was to be able to sell copies of records on a reimbursable basis. In other words, I mean, the National Archives realized that at one point in the life of the Archives, it was realized that, oh yeah, sure, we'll send microfilm copies or we'll send Xerox copies of records to people. But wait a second. There's a hunger for that, that we'll never get enough appropriations in order to satisfy. I mean, the public, when they realized that they could get documents from the National Archives, they said, "Oh, yeah, more of those. Let's have some more of those, and we'll have some of these, and we'll have some of these, and we'll have all we want." Well, that's fine. But the Archives realized that they had to set up some kind of a funding mechanism to ensure the fact that we didn't go broke providing those copies. And the National Archives Trust Fund initially was set up in order to be able to receive reimbursement from the public for copy costs that the National Archives was expending in order to provide these copies to the public. And so that's how it was originally set up. That's the how and why of its original establishment. And I think, frankly, that might have been in the 50s. I can't quite recall. But they used to have their own logo, and they had a board that administered the Trust Fund, and they operated very much in and of themselves like a business where they were audited each year, they had financial reports, etc.

Stephanie: So this was before GSA, that you think that this board was created? This Trust Fund was created?

John: No, the Archives was still part of GSA. GSA took over the National Archives in 1949 as a part of the Hoover Commission report.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: The Hoover Commission was created to help organize a more efficient federal government. Archives was independent from 1934 until 1949, when it was swept up into GSA and was part of GSA from '49 until 1985.

Stephanie: All right. I had the wrong beginning date there. So then when you were part of this, at some point, you also became the Chief of Product Acquisitions and Marketing. Is that correct?

John: I did. And we had done the accessioning part. I certainly enjoyed that. And we had a separate marketing department. It was decided at one point to join that together. And as part of that, we eventually got to the point where we were doing about a million pieces of direct-mail advertising per year. And again, this was targeted advertising, going to schools and businesses and municipalities all over the country. It was not without controversy. There were those in the private sector who felt that we were unfairly competing with them in terms of distribution of educational materials. So there was some congressional activity that was associated with that. Barry Goldwater Jr.—not Barry Goldwater Sr., but Jr.—was a congressman from southern California. And it was a number of the associations that were associated with the distribution of theatrical film and educational film that went to him. And so there were hearings on the Hill, back and forth. The bottom line was we survived based on the fact that while our prices were lower, we were distributing a pretty unique product. Our product, yes, it was competing, but it was very, very targeted, and I think Congress at the end of the day, decided that there was probably enough room for the private sector as well as the National Archives in that business. So . . .

Stephanie: What kind of training? Oh, go ahead.

John: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Stephanie: I was just going to ask about the training that you received when you were in that position. Were you learning about filming techniques and things like that?

John: When I got the job in the whole area of accessions, initially—that would have been probably like 1975, I think—Jack McLean was the Director of the National Audiovisual Center. Jack had a very strong background, obviously in film, and decided that I needed to at least know some of the rudiments of filmmaking. And so he did two things. One, he sent me to the Naval Photo Center in Anacostia for a week, and I kind of shadowed the production process, the post-production process, the lab work, all the things that are associated with making a motion picture. I was on the floor when they would shoot the films. I went in and watched the editors edit the films. I followed the process of A-rolls and B-rolls in the lab and, eventually, the print production of actual prints coming out the other end. So I kind of had a whirlwind one-week immersion into that aspect of it.

The most fun thing, though, was Jack also sent me literally to Hollywood. He sent me to Warner Brothers Studios in California, where a guy named Bill Hendricks was an old friend of Jack's. When Jack was head of Navy filmmaking, Bill was instrumental in Marine Corps filmmaking. Bill eventually became the head of the cartoon division for Warner Brothers Studios. And Jack got in touch with him and said, "I want somebody out there to shepherd this guy around for a couple of days and show him the fun side of filmmaking and the fun side of what we do." And so I did that.

I was out there for a conference where we were looking at some possible film acquisitions. But during that trip, Jack sent me to Bill Hendricks, and Bill took me around the back lot at Warner Brothers, and I watched filmmaking. I watched their laboratory operations. I watched their film-editing operations, all of which were similar to the Navy, but on a much, much larger scale. And it was fun. I had a great couple of days, met some interesting people, and it was fun and they were good contacts for the rest of my career. So . . .

Stephanie: Is this when you got to meet Elizabeth Taylor?

John: No, actually, that was a different time. When I was in California, I did get to meet Clint Eastwood. He was one of the people that—we were just sitting on a soundstage one day watching something that's very unique. Hollywood studios—Warner Brothers at the time—had a symphony orchestra, and the full symphony orchestra would watch the projection of the motion picture up on the big screen while the conductor actually conducted the orchestra watching the film and synced what the music would be with what was happening on the screen. That was pretty cool. And so we were sitting on this big soundstage watching that happen when the door opened behind us and some guy came in and sat down. Bill turned around at one point and said, "Oh, hi, Clint." And I thought, Clint . . . let me think. How many people do I know in motion pictures whose name would be Clint? I spun around, almost threw my neck out, and Bill said, "Oh, Clint, I want you to meet a friend of mine [LAUGHS], a quote [USES AIR QUOTES] friend of mine." I met Bill, you know, three hours, four hours before. And anyway, we had a brief—and I'm sure for Mr. Eastwood—unmemorable chat. And that was that.

But the Elizabeth Taylor story—when I also was working for the National Audiovisual Center, I was working for them in 1976 when lots of federal agencies had projects that they were doing for the 1976 bicentennial of the United States. And the Supreme Court had one such project, and it was called *Equal Justice Under Law*. And they were producing a series of educational films about the John Marshall era of the Supreme Court, the first Supreme Court, and *Marbury v. Madison*, and a variety of other key decisions that were made as part of that first court. And they went to WQED production folks in Pittsburgh, a very well-respected film organization, and they got them under a contract to basically produce this series of educational films.

And somebody told the court that, hey, you know, there's this outfit over at the National Archives, and they are in the distribution business. So rather than worrying about distributing it to schools ourselves, call this guy and they'll do it. So we met. I got to work with Chief Justice Warren Burger and Justice Byron White, who was the head of this film project committee. And when the first film cuts were available, I got a phone call from the Court, and they said, "We're going to look at some of the film footage tonight. And the Chief Justice, since you guys are going to be distributing these, thought it would be a nice idea to have you all come over."

So I said, "Well, great." It was very kind of casual. And I said, "Fine, do you mind if I bring John Barta?" I was just accessions at that time. He was the marketing director. I said, "Would you mind if I brought somebody along?" They said, "Well, let us get back to you." And I thought that was odd. So anyway, about an hour later they called me back and they said, "Yeah, that's fine, as long as it's just one more." I said, "Okay." So I went over, and John and I parked under the Supreme Court Building and went up to the East Conference room. And when we opened the door to the East Conference room, it was totally dark, and they'd already started showing one of the films.

So there's a flickering film up to the right on the screen and a 16-millimeter projector running in the back. And you see there are about 20 chairs there. And our eyes were still adjusting to coming out of the light of the hallway into the darkness, and could hardly see where we were going. And Barta and I found two seats and sat down. And when the film came to its conclusion, the lights came on and I looked to my right and realized that I was sitting next to Elizabeth Taylor. And I was not drinking at the time. [LAUGHS] So, I mean, that's the kind of experience that, you know, you think, wait a second. My first thought was, am I in the right room? [LAUGHS] Because I thought there's no way that I'm supposed to be here. I quickly realized that she's sitting next to—and I can't remember if they were married at the time or just dating—but John Warner, who was the head of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, ARBA, before he became a United States Senator. He was the head of the federal government's whole effort on the bicentennial. So Chief Justice Burger had invited him to come over and see this screening along with some other court members.

And draped in mink and sitting next to little old me on this little gray metal chair was Elizabeth Taylor [LAUGHS]. I thought, holy mackerel. So anyway, that was an interesting encounter. I had already met with John Warner at ARBA over soliciting any films that they got as part of the bicentennial for the National Audiovisual Center. So he and I had been in a couple of meetings, and so he knew me, and he leaned forward and recognized me. And I thought, well, maybe there is a reason I'm here. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: So it is the right room. [LAUGHS]

John: Exactly. Exactly.

Stephanie: So did you get to talk to her?

John: As much as she wanted to talk, yes. She was not in the communication mode that night, you know, until someone asked her what she thought of the film. I mean, someone had the brains to say, "Well, Ms. Taylor, what did you think of the film?" And she kind of critiqued the production that she saw, the production quality, and that was value-added. The producers are there, the director is there, that whole staff, I mean, they didn't exactly think that ever in their career they would get a critique from Elizabeth Taylor, but there they were. And so they were wrapt in attention and listening.

So anyway . . . But I will tell you one thing. When John Barta and I walked out of that room that night, we thought it would be a good idea to leave early and not assume that we were really supposed to be there for the entire evening. We left a little early. And as we walked back down through the marble hallway of the United States Supreme Court with the high ceilings and all of the grandeur around us, I don't know whether it was Barta or me, but we broke into that old song from Sweet Charity, "If My Friends Could See Me Now," and we danced all the way to the elevator singing and dancing. [LAUGHS] We both knew that we had just experienced, between spending the evening with most of the Supreme Court as well as Elizabeth Taylor, that this was something we were going to remember all our lives.

Stephanie: For sure, yeah. I don't know how you could forget that one. That's very memorable. I would have thought the same thing. I think I'm in the wrong place.

John: Exactly.

Stephanie: Wow. Yeah. What a great story. So you said that you were supervising, I think, seven staff members. Is that right? I'm wondering how many people were in that center to begin with.

John: At its maximum, we probably had 65 employees. We had a huge warehouse with a big film inventory. And that was the rental operation, the films that went in and out, in and out. So we had folks doing shipping and receiving and all that went into that. We had a finance division that took care of our sales operation. We had a guy that did all the liaison work with the laboratories that we bought our films from in order to either put them on the shelves to rent or to resell. We had, as I said, the marketing group. We had an information staff that published the

catalogs and did that until we eventually figured out that direct-mail advertising, not just the big catalogs, was going to be really the way to go. And so yeah, it was a humming operation and one that operated in the black most every year. I mean, I think by law, under the Trust Fund Board, we were only able to make so much over cost. We were not obviously able to make a lot of money, but just enough to cover our costs plus. And then we operated truly on that basis all the years that I was there.

My last initiative when I was in marketing, I spanned the time where it was all 16-millimeter film to where, toward the end of my time there, videotape was clearly coming more and more online. And I convinced them to make an investment to go into the home video market. And we were pretty successful with it. Basically we targeted the home market with some of the World War II films, documentaries that had been done by the military about World War II, the battles in the Pacific and those kinds of things. This was before the History Channel. And a lot of what's on the History Channel now is kind of driven by that subject matter.

So we got into the home video market and started approaching it that way, with advertisements in magazines, publications, and other things. We had done some airline in-flight magazine advertising already. One of the big series that we distributed was a series of audiotapes that were produced by the State Department to teach diplomats how to speak foreign languages. That wasn't commercialized, at that point, through all of the various means now that you can go online and learn a foreign language. Audiotapes that would teach you foreign languages were something that the government had to create themselves. And the Department of State had created a long series on that. And so we just started to distribute those. And we would advertise those in airline magazines. And the tagline was "Speak like a Diplomat." And so again, it was an audiotape series that we sold for reuse.

Stephanie: So some of these, like the National Park Service, the Forest Service, those films were you basically just taking it and making copies? Or were all of these kind of re-engineered in a way?

John: Some of them had accompanying written materials. I mean, when the agencies realized, it was in the infancy, I think, of public education for a lot of these agencies. NASA had kind of led the way. The people at NASA realized that the future of the space program, I think, was going to really be reliant on their whole public information operation. And they had really led the way in educational materials being produced by NASA. And a lot of their stuff was just kind of a natural to go into those markets. Some agencies would do learning guides, other materials that were then distributed along with the films and the materials. We sometimes pre-packaged things like—take the Park Service, for example. There were brochures and maps about Antietam

or about various national parks around the country, and we would distribute some of that written material along with the films to just kind of broaden the perspective. But for the most part, with those educational materials, we knew that there was a teacher on the other end that was going to figure out how they were going to use this material in their curriculum one way or the other. So, a lot of it was relying on that.

Stephanie: Yeah, it's just very interesting. I had not known that NARA was in that business for a period of time. Do you know when it was transferred over to Commerce?

John: I can figure that out for you at a later time. But no, I won't even guess because it was after I left. I left to come downtown in 1985, and I'd been there 12 years. So I went there in '72, coming out of college and was there until '84, '85, that time frame. So it was after I had left that it was transferred. I got involved in some of the negotiations because of my previous involvement.

Stephanie: I know that you've done a couple of details to other agencies. When did you do the detail for the Department of Education and for OMB [Office of Management and Budget]? Do you remember?

John: Both of those were during my career at the National Audiovisual Center, because both of them involved public affairs. The Department of Education detail happened when the Department of Education was created during the Carter administration, if you recall. HEW, Health, Education, and Welfare, was the structure under which the education piece of federal policy and direction of education was for many, many years. And under the Carter administration, that's when education was broken out as a separate department, and HHS [Department of Health and Human Services] was created in its wake as the remainder of what had been HEW.

So when the Department of Education started, Liz Carpenter was the first head of public affairs for the new Department of Education. And Liz had a connection to the National Archives through the Johnson Library. Liz had been the press secretary for First Lady Lady Bird Johnson during the Johnson administration. And so through those connections, I think it was kind of how the word came back to the National Archives that Liz wanted some help in terms of looking at how their filmmaking would be done or their audiovisual policy would be in terms of the creation of educational materials. And they asked me to come over on a detail and be a consultant to them for a period of time. I can't recall. It was not a year. It might have been four months, five months, and to basically put together a procedures manual in terms of how their whole audiovisual operation, the audiovisual portion of their office of public affairs would be done.

And that was fun. I mean, I enjoyed that. A lot of times, you know, in your career, a change of venue and purpose is a good idea. And I'd been at the Archives or the Audiovisual Center for a while, so it was a new possibility, a new place to work. And contractually, my boss let me go with the promise that I'd be back in a certain number of months. And so in that respect, it was—you know, sometimes in the federal government, you get detailed someplace and it's kind of, shall we say, not the best sign of the future for your career if your agency is willing to detail you for a period of time. In my case, I was lucky enough that it was kind of a win-win. The Department of Education got somebody who had good experience, and I was able to help them out. And when I came back to the Audiovisual Center, I had that much more experience in terms of how a different agency did it. And we obviously had kind of a front row seat in terms of getting their training films that were produced through that process as well. So. . .

Stephanie: And then what about OMB?

John: The OMB detail was in the first stages of the Reagan administration. Ronald Reagan came into government to cut government spending. He famously said—I think it might have been in his inaugural remarks—that the government does not solve problems. Government is the problem. And so those of us who were in federal service at the time thought there was some concern, shall we say, about that approach. And there were a number of task forces that were set up in the federal government to cut out waste, fraud, and abuse. Those were the big three that they were going to do. They primarily worked through the Inspectors General, the IG corps of each agency, to determine where there had been waste, fraud, or abuse of federal money.

There were some broad categories, however, that they decided that they would set up separate task forces, and one of those task forces had to do with what they euphemistically called “Hollywood on the Potomac,” that they weren't really thrilled with the amount of money that was being spent on filmmaking. See also Barry Goldwater Jr. and the whole concept of should the federal government—they were after us on the distribution of films. The question was, should the federal government be producing all these films? Why shouldn't they be using the private sector? Why shouldn't they be using the studios or private film producers in order to produce this? Why do they set up their own filmmaking operations? And that was really the target.

And so I was detailed, and this was kind of not voluntary. The guy that was the lead on this for the Reagan administration, they picked some names in the federal government. My name came up as somebody they wanted on the task force because, you know, if you want to rob banks, you need to know where the money is. And I knew where all the filmmaking was in the

federal government. And if they wanted to cut all this filmmaking, they had to bring somebody in like me to say, "You may want to look over here, or you may want to look over there."

So to say that I was conflicted in that role is the understatement of the year. But no one asked me whether I was conflicted. They brought me in, and I became a part of the task force at OMB. And I was the part that was, yes, working towards cutting filmmaking. I knew that there was a certain percentage of it that was wasteful. No doubt about it. But I also knew that there was a larger percentage that was useful. And so I made every effort to be the voice on the inside saying, yes, there's some problems over here and there's some problems over there, but you don't want to take all of these mechanisms apart, because there are some things that they can do that nobody else can do. There's some expertise that they have that nobody else has, and that to contract out to the private sector, you'd wind up with a director, a producer, and editor, everybody duplicating what was already being done.

And so anyway, the goal though, was to be able to show on paper that we had cut a certain amount of funding from federal filmmaking. That was the goal that was given to the task force. And all I can say is that on paper, at least, we met the goal. Whether an audited outcome could ever be done to show that, yes, federal filmmaking was cut by the same percentages that those reports were presented to Congress or those reports were presented in a very large press conference that we held at the end of the project, I can't say, but it was—once again, I'd never worked in the White House before or any part of the White House. So the six months that I worked there was kind of heady stuff, also that I was working in or kind of near the center of the Reagan administration. And so I met a lot of nice people. I met some smart people who had a different perspective on the world than I did. And, that was good also.

Stephanie: Yeah. Good experience, it sounds like. Do you remember how many people were on that task force with you?

John: It was small. There were probably at most, at any one time, five permanent staff: myself, and several folks from the Pentagon, a couple of folks from the Department of Commerce. I mean, they knew that the vast majority of money in federal filmmaking was being spent by the Defense Department, far and away. An awful lot of that were things that the National Audiovisual Center would never be able to touch because they were, you know, either classified or they were materials that really, really wouldn't translate very well to the private sector.

So I had some experience with Defense Department materials, as I said before, most of which were World War II documentaries and those kinds of things. But what they needed were the experts from the Pentagon, from the filmmaking world at the Pentagon that could help this

task force out and identify where the pockets were that could, in fact, be cut. And so that's where a couple of guys from the Defense Department came into play.

Stephanie: Wow. I mean, I feel like that would be a little uncomfortable if you're doing it within your own agency saying this is what should be cut. That would be very hard. And then I wonder, did they get any kind of flak from that within their own agency?

John: Yeah, I think so. I mean, most of the guys that I worked with on the task force were people not in the hands-on film production world but in the administrative ends of the Defense Department that oversaw those operations. So I think they didn't have to worry for their personal safety when they went back to work. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Well, that's good. [LAUGHS]

John: I don't know that they had a big victory party for them when they came back. But nevertheless, I mean, I think a lot of that process was really identifying the things that most of the agencies already knew, that they had some wasteful spending in these areas. Some of the agencies knew that they had duplication of effort. It was funny in the military; the thing that was the most sensitive was that the Navy and the Army and the Air Force, the Marine Corps, they were all producing some training materials that were absolute duplications of each other. The only differences were the uniforms that everybody had on. I mean, literally. And so those were the things that were driving Congress and the Reagan administration totally crazy, such clear duplication of effort. There wasn't really much to debate regarding that.

So anyway, it was interesting. It was mainly interesting to see—this was the first time in my career that I'd seen the policy world and the political world collide, and kind of how that operated in real time and in reality in the White House. You had career OMB folks that were in the bean-counting world. And they were there before the Reagan administration, and they were going to be there after the Reagan administration. And then you had the political echelon that knew that it was their job to come up with numbers that were going to look good at that press conference. And they were reporting to folks in the White House that knew that their time was limited. And during that limited time, they needed to produce for that administration for their own political futures and for their own involvement in politics and the rest of their lives. At the National Archives, you know, we're enough of a sheltered workshop when it comes to that kind of politics that I had never seen before. And it was helpful to me when I eventually got into congressional affairs work to have seen that and to really understand kind of how that operates and how that operates within the structure of the White House.

Stephanie: Yeah, that's a very interesting point. You got some of that background information that you wouldn't have had otherwise that helps you in the future in the congressional job. In both of those situations and both of those details, do you think that those were valuable experiences and perhaps NARA should be pursuing more things like this? Or what are your thoughts on that?

John: I think it's always good to breathe the air on the other side of the street. I think it's always good, particularly from a career development standpoint, to be intentional about those internships and those opportunities to go out and not get hung up. They have to be contractual. I mean, you have to agree that this person is going to go out and do this work, and they're going to come back on this date. But, as far as the experience of doing that and really understanding—take records management, for example. You know, a lot of times in records management, other parts of the Archives, you say you know what the problems are of the person on the other side of the equation. I mean, do you really unless you've been out there and working in that environment?

You know, the National Archives has been very, very fortunate over the years to bring in people, like yourself, who have been out in different environments. But even, and particularly for somebody who comes in through the archivist training program or something internal, where the agency wants them from birth to death, somewhere in that chain, they really need to get out and experience work in other places in other ways. And I got to tell you, at the time did I think I was gaining anything that was going to be useful to me? I don't know. I mean, I always say that you live life forward, but you understand life backwards sometimes and that so many times in my career I would say, "Well, I know how that works" or "I've been here before" or, you know, "I can do this or I can do that." And I'm thinking to myself, "Gee, how do I know that?" And largely it was through those kinds of details or those other experiences. So . . .

Stephanie: Yeah, those are really good points. Sometimes we tell agencies to do things, but it's easier to tell than to actually implement and know what the outcome of those decisions are, maybe. So yeah, I think it's knowing the other side is really important.

John: I was involved in enough policy work at the National Archives to have seen, a number of times, policy directives that were sent out and only in the light of the violent reaction that you get other agencies reacting to those things that sometimes, not always, but sometimes that was like the, "Oh, gee, we never thought of that" moment. And you want to avoid those. Obviously, the whole Federal Register process with regulations and things are all designed, the Administrative Procedures Act and all these things that, you know, they're designed to avoid that. Sometimes it's crushingly slow. Sometimes, by the time you get the policy out, the question is, do we still have this problem? And, you know, it's maddening, but it's all necessary

in order to ensure that. And sometimes it's not a matter of having the answers. It's a matter of knowing what the right questions are. And unless you've been out there in a different environment, sometimes you don't even know what the questions are, let alone what the answers are. So . . .

Stephanie: Yeah, that's interesting. I'm looking at our time here. I scheduled you for another seven minutes. I wanted to ask about your thoughts on when NARA became an independent agency and separated from GSA. I don't know if you want to talk about that now a little bit or if you want to wait and we can schedule another time, because I know we're going to have to schedule another time. There's so many other things I want to talk about.

John: Why don't we go ahead and save that for the next time? And it will afford me the opportunity, Stephanie, to also take a look at some material that I've got that may refresh my memory, because that starts into an area that I may have some perspective on that might be unique and might be helpful in terms of, frankly, where, in my humble opinion, the Archives went right and sometimes went wrong in terms of that process in becoming an independent agency. And we suffered for a long time as a result of some of the boxes that we didn't check and some of the T's that we didn't cross when we were heading in that direction. So anyway, let me take a look at that, and I'd be happy to schedule again. An hour and a half in my time is not onerous. And it's going to all depend really on what your schedule is. So if you want to arrange some other times now or send me an email, that'd be fine.

Stephanie: Yeah. Let me send you an email with some available dates and times and, you know, we'll see what works for you and then we'll schedule another one.

John: Okay, yeah, that's great. That's great. I appreciate it. You're good at what you do, and I thank you for your questions and your time and look forward to chatting with you again.

Stephanie: Yeah. I can't wait. Thank you so much.

John: All right. Take care.

Stephanie: Talk to you soon. Bye.

John: Bye-bye.

[END RECORDING PART ONE]

[BEGIN RECORDING PART TWO - August 24, 2023]

Stephanie: Okay. I've got the recording going. Welcome back. This is part two of an oral history with John Constance. And today is Thursday, August 24, 2023. And I just want to do a quick recap here of what we spoke about last time. We covered your internship with the Deputy Archivist, Herb Angel; your work and experiences with the National Audiovisual Center; the acquisition and marketing of films; a detail that you took with OMB and the Department of Education; and, of course, your run-ins with the rich and famous: Elizabeth Taylor and Clint Eastwood as well as several Supreme Court Justices. So that's what we went over last time. Did you think of anything that you wanted to add or clarify from last time?

John: No, but I think, and I might have mentioned this, I had the benefit early in my career of some excellent bosses and mentors. And as I look back over my career, that really made a big difference. So for that, I am very grateful.

Stephanie: Yeah, sometimes it takes having some mentors or some really bright people to help you along and get you into those right places, right, who know your skills and where your best fit would be.

John: Exactly. And I've tried to emulate that since then and even in retirement. I'm always looking for folks that need a hand or need some advice, and I continue to find that very gratifying.

Stephanie: I'm sure everyone appreciates that you've helped out. Okay. So kind of leading off where we were last time, we were just starting to get into when NARA became an independent agency from GSA. Do you remember anything from this time? Maybe some of the changes that were happening?

John: Yeah.

Stephanie: What was involved in this sort of transformation?

John: I followed the independence movement kind of from afar. I was still working for the National Audiovisual Center, but I had an awful lot of excellent contacts downtown with people that I had worked with through the years, and through that and through those contacts, continued to kind of stay abreast of what was going on in the independence movement, given the fact that a lot of that was coming out of Congress. And that was certainly a first love for me. I was following from that perspective. I guess the Archives Act was actually passed in October of 1984—that was when the act was actually passed and it was not going to become effective, and the Archives was not going to actually be independent until April 1, 1985. Thus, the

emblem of the National Archives and Records Administration has 1985 down there as the effective date on the seal.

You know, as soon as the bill passed, my mind started kind of spinning towards where I could be next in my career that would be logical for me and also kind of fulfill what I hoped it would be. And that was not just to be part of a satellite of the National Archives at the Audiovisual Center, but actually be downtown and kind of directly in the mix. So I remember at some point in the winter between 1984 and 1985, I made it my business to come downtown and see Adrienne Thomas. And Adrienne Thomas, at that point, was really moving into the role of policy and program management under the new independent agency. She was going to be the head of policy, and she was going to report to Jim Megronigle, who was going to be the Deputy Executive Director reporting to Claudine Weiher, who was going to be the new Executive Director. There might have been some other fancy titles there about Assistant Archivist for Administration is maybe what Claudine's title was going to be.

But in that chain of command, it was clear to me that, number one, I had the most long-term contact in that chain with Adrienne. I had worked with Adrienne literally from the time I was an intern at the Archives. So I came down to see her. The only thing I remember about that day was that it was snowing in Washington and a number of people had not shown up. So it was rather quiet in the building. And I went to see Adrienne, and I just said, "You know, let me just lay it out. I'd really like to be a part of the new independent National Archives, and I'd love to have a role down here." And she was very encouraging from the get-go. And that made me feel very, very good, and she said, "Let me see what we can work out."

Well for the second time in my career, I had pictured a position of some authority, just as I had when I went from intern to a permanent job and was asked, could I type? Well, it wasn't quite that austere, but what they had available for me was a program analyst job, not supervisory. I would come down to work for Michael Kurtz, who was going to be head of program analysis.

Well, I didn't know too much about program analysis, but they knew me well enough to know that my head kind of worked that way and that I would basically be able to learn on the job. And I came down in the spring of '85 to work for Michael. And a couple of things I do remember about that—I remember about this uncertainty every day coming into the office. What in the heck am I doing? And do I really know how to do this? And Michael was very good. He was a very good teacher his whole life. And he was quite helpful to me in that role. So, you know, I can't remember how many months. I mean, it wasn't a lot of months that I was in that job when one of the other supervisors who was on the same level as Michael kind of crashed and burned. His name was John Kelly. And I can't remember what he did or what he said or what happened that kind of spun him out of favor, but the next thing I know, I'm sitting in front of Adrienne

Thomas again and she's saying, "We need your help in running the Directives Management Branch."

Okay, so here we are in something else that I don't know a whole heck of a lot about, but I had written procedures manuals for the National Audiovisual Center and the Department of Education and had a lot of on-the-job training. I went to a bunch of classes. I did a lot of practicums, and I learned how to write procedures—not the most exciting writing in the world, but once again, it works kind of the way my head works, kind of one step at a time, and what's the logical next thing to do and what are your choices and in which direction should this flowchart go? Et cetera. Et cetera. So I took over as head of Directives Management.

Well, the significant thing about that for the National Archives at that moment in time is that here we are a small portion of GSA, and now we are our own independent agency. So all of the reports through the years that have been generated by GSA on our behalf, that we were just a feeder to GAO and the Congress and you name it, all of a sudden, all those reports were our responsibility.

Second of all, we had no procedures on how to do anything from procurement to finance to property management. You know, you name it in terms of what you would have to do to run an organization. We didn't have any of those procedures. So it was going to be the responsibility of this Directives Management Branch to, first of all, establish a system for directives. Second of all, basically start writing this gargantuan, massive volume of how the agency was going to operate and do it quickly, because we were doing all those things on a daily basis but didn't really have any directives or policy to point to as to what we were doing.

We certainly had some of GSA's material. We had picked up some employees from GSA in the transition. None of them were happy. None of them. You know, again, just picture GSA, who is all ticked off about the fact that the Archives was breaking off and being this independent entity. They weren't exactly going to give us the cream of the crop, shall we say, when transition occurred. In fact, they were going to take the opportunity to dump a number of folks that had not been the best. And now there were exceptions, but the people that I had reporting to me were not a chapter in the best and the brightest. So consequently, I had a big job to do and I had some people who were retired in place. And then I had a bunch of old loyal National Archives folks who I knew that I could rely on to do an awful lot of the work, and a portion of the writing I was going to do myself.

I picked up along the way Shelby Bale, who had been a long-time editor for the National Archives. He certainly did not see himself as a directives writer, but he basically knew how to

write. But, you know, he was suddenly going from being the guy who edited *Prologue* and edited scholarly articles to writing an article on how to buy toilet paper and how to control real property. He wasn't very happy. So again, my recollection is that it was a challenging time. But just like any elephant that you have to eat, we cut it into very, very small pieces. We attacked it. We established a system of goals and accountability and timeframes. And within, I think, 18 months, we had ourselves a procedures manual, at least one that was going to serve us until something else or something better came along.

So, as I look back at my career at the National Archives, having been involved in writing that manual, there was nothing that we did at the National Archives for the rest of my career that I didn't at least know something about. I was there when, due to some pretty high-profile thefts of records from our research room, we developed what we coined as the "clean search room" or the clean research room policy, where people were no longer going to be able to bring briefcases in. We set up a system of lockers. Gentlemen had to put their jackets away. Women couldn't bring large purses. You couldn't bring your own note material. And we provided paper and pencils. Et cetera. Et cetera. And so, in terms of writing procedures and writing directives, everything from basic administrative jobs in the agency to things as important as serving records to researchers, I was involved.

So from then on in my career, when I went up the chain in the policy group and eventually ran the policy organization, I pretty much knew all the policies. And when I moved on from there later on to Congressional Affairs and I had to go on the Hill and talk about what the National Archives did, I was always doing it from the basis of something that, once again, when I looked at it initially, I said, "You want me to do what?" to something that when I look back on it in my career, it was a foundational skill and experience that I had that I really didn't appreciate.

The other thing that it did, it taught me how to supervise difficult people. When you've got a staff of people and I had, I guess, 12 people that were reporting to me and at least 4 or 5 of them, the GSA folks, didn't want to be there. You know, they didn't like me, didn't like being shoveled over to the National Archives. They certainly knew why they were there. We knew why they were there. And so consequently, it did teach me a lot about supervising people who are hard to supervise, and that was a valuable experience as well. There were times when I was in the middle of it that I thought, oh, my God, you know, another day of this, and I'm going to climb up there where the eagles are on the corners of the building and jump into Seventh Street. But anyway, it was all quite an interesting endeavor, shall we say.

Stephanie: Do you have any lessons learned from having to supervise difficult people?

John: You know, one of the things about that was I did a lot of listening and they needed somebody to vent to, which I figured out later on they were angry. They felt like they had been betrayed by their former agency that they had put a lot of time into. And everybody has different abilities. Everybody has different skills. And there had not been a lot of attention given to the skills that these people had. When these transitions were made, they just kind of wanted them out and we got them. So listening—and not just listening, but actually hearing what people say to you, I found to be important.

And also, the silk glove along with the hammer—I mean, we had to discipline at least two of those people because of lateness, absenteeism, and insubordination. And so you listen, you listen, you listen, and you try to adjust things, but at the end of the day, it was starting to affect the morale of everybody in the organization that these folks aren't showing up. And when they are showing up, they're not working. So again, I was writing the manual on disciplinary actions, so I didn't have to go too far to find practical examples as we were writing those manuals as to what to do and what works and what doesn't work. And, you know, first letter, second letter, and three strikes you're out kind of thing. So anyway, it was interesting. And I can't say that I was or ever became friends with any of those individuals, but several of them did produce and did help with what the eventual goals were for the office. So anyway.

Stephanie: For these, the manual and all of these policies and procedures that you were helping to create, where did you get the information from? Were you completely starting from scratch or were you starting with GSA's policies and then creating it or gearing it toward NARA? Or how did you go about creating those?

John: For the general administrative functions, I started out looking at what GSA had. They were a big organization, and they were an organization that was not known for their efficiency. So first of all, we had to scale a lot of their policies to something that was more reasonable for an organization our size. One of the things that I still think back on from time to time and laugh about—I had a couple of people that worked for me that came up with a catalog of all of the reports that independent agencies are required to submit each year to go to Congress, to all these other regulatory agencies, and there are literally hundreds and hundreds of these reports that are required every year. And I looked at that list of reports and in talking to our staff, I said, “We don't have the staff to do those reports in a million years.” And I said, “You know what? Why don't we do this? Let's not submit any of those reports the first year and see what happens.” And that's what we did.

And about, I would say of the hundreds and hundreds of reports, maybe for 40 of them the responsible agency followed up with us and said, “Hey, where's your report?” And for those 40,

we said, "Oh, okay, fine. We're working on it right here. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." But, you know, we didn't know what they were talking about. We would say, "Could you send us GSA's report from last year?" And they said, "Sure, we'll send that to you." So through that means, we kind of worked our way through. But there were like literally 500 reports that we looked at [LAUGHS]. This is the lovely grind in Washington, DC, that laws are written, regulations are written from laws, responsibilities of the night watchman in terms of taking care of all these numbers, and does anybody ever read them and does anybody ever care? We found out that in the vast majority of cases, no, but we pared it down through one year of mismanagement. We pared it down to those that were important. So there you go.

Stephanie: So NARA didn't get in trouble for not submitting some of these reports?

John: No, no. And you know, I always thought there was probably some guy on the end of a bunch of those reports saying to himself, "Boy, thank God, I only got ten of these this year." [LAUGHS] So anyway.

Stephanie: So then you were the Director of Policy and Program Analysis, right?

John: Exactly. And I had a couple of people. Then I had, you know, folks that reported to me who ran directives and who ran program analysis. And that was fun. I mean, I enjoyed that job a great deal until I got into Congressional Affairs. I think I enjoyed that job as much as any job because I just had three branches reporting to me. It was a small number of people. I guess our total staff contingent was probably 25 at the top. And everybody worked together. Well, I mean, I can still say that the folks that were my branch chiefs in those years were good people who worked hard, and they really did a good job and so that was enjoyable.

And it really started to lead me in the direction of Congressional Affairs. There was an interesting dual track that also came out of independence. Some of which were good, and some of them were not so good. And the dual track was this—there were some people who came over from GSA or who we received some pretty strong direction to hire, that the top echelon of the agency did not think were the right choices. And I won't go into names here, but we did have an individual that came over as head of Congressional Affairs. Claudine Weiher and, I guess, Bob Warner and then Don Wilson did not feel that they were the right choice. And it was really a big matter of trust because the sensitivity of congressional affairs is such that since it's where all of your appropriations come from, it's where you're enabling law came from. It's where amendments to that law are vitally important for your long-term existence as an agency.

The first element that you've got to have in that relationship between Congressional Affairs and whoever's on top is trust. And that trust wasn't there. So here's the dual track. I became kind of

the shadow Director of Congressional Affairs long before I had the title. I was called in and asked by Claudine Weiher and Don Wilson to do things like track legislation that would be of importance to the National Archives and to identify laws on the Hill that we really needed to know about and really needed to weigh in on, things that had to do with the Government Printing Office, things that had to do with possible mission creep along the lines of the Library of Congress or the Smithsonian or whomever else that would start to pinch our toes, given the fact that we were the new kid on the block. And there was a lot of concern that, in these early stages of the existence of the National Archives, we would be taken advantage of in the legislative process and end up not having either the responsibilities or the money for those responsibilities that we would have.

So I set up a system and, basically, it was a subscription system that you could get in the very, very early stages of database scanning based on keywords that would pop things up that we would be interested in. And very quietly, when things would pop up along those lines, I would go to the front office and talk to them about what was going on, what we thought we would establish, some strategies about what to do about it. And I would quietly, you know, make contact with folks and kind of move those things ahead. While at the same time, the person who was technically the head of Congressional Affairs was going through the day-to-day routine of guests coming to the Archives and showing people around and the mundane kind of day-to-day track with our finance people about our appropriations and those kinds of things. And it wasn't a great surprise to them that there was more going on than just what was coming out of their office. But anyway, I chose not to spend a lot of time thinking about the rightness or wrongness of this and more along the lines of what I was learning and what I was gaining and how much I liked that process.

And at one point, actually, when the individual and the other office kind of moved on, there was some esoteric term, and I can't even remember what it was, but we changed the name of my office to basically include legislative affairs. I think we might have called it Legislative Affairs. I can't remember. I remember arguing with Claudine in particular about what we were going to call it. But before Congressional Affairs was a separate and independent office, it was eventually kind of officially combined with my job in policy and program analysis. But I do remember that in those years, they did not want me to have the whole job because they also, I think, valued my work that I was doing in policy. So I was kind of doing both. But once again, you know, it was a good place to do both given the fact that I was working on the day-to-day policies. At the same time, I was on the Hill trying to explain to people what we did, how we did it, and why we did it the way we did it. So that was kind of a cool transition.

Stephanie: Now this was all before you officially were in Congressional Affairs?

John: Right. And let me tell you, if I could. One of the big mistakes that I've always thought that the agency made in the upper echelons, in coming out of independence—and it took a number of years for the chickens to come home to roost in terms of what caused the agency such upheaval. But it eventually happened, and when it happened, that's how I got the independent job of Congressional Affairs. You know, there was a lot of hubris, for lack of a better term, involved in becoming an independent agency. There were a lot of victory celebrations. There was a lot of beating our breasts and, you know, and Huzzah! Huzzah! We have slain the dragon. We have broken out from our bondage. And, in fact, the buttons that were created as part of independence said, "Free at Last."

Stephanie: Wow.

John: So there was a sense in the agency that this had been a generational battle within the Archives. The shoes didn't fit from day one in terms of being part of GSA—they were the guys that took care of the buildings and grounds and bought the cars. They were the administrative arm of the federal government. And I think the Archives spent an awful lot of time with a great deal of anger about that, and when those chains were finally broken—and they were broken by the most modest of individuals, Bob Warner, who was the Archivist that deserves all the credit. He was the most mild-mannered, kind individual. And he did it with basically his own negotiation skills and his ability to bring people together. He had a cadre of people working for him who were, shall we say, the guerrilla warfare team. And I was kind of on the edge of that after we became independent. But that hubris to say, "We've done this and we're, you know . . ." Unfortunately, in some respects, we just kept on fighting. GSA had been the enemy, and then suddenly Congress and our oversight committees became the enemy.

GSA had been telling us what to do since 1949, and I think suddenly there was a sense that, hell, now Congress is telling us what to do. Who do they think they are? Huh? And that got us in trouble. A couple of the guys really, really had been the behind-the-scenes heroes on Capitol Hill, staff people, very powerful staff, people who had done an awful lot on a day-to-day basis to see that we were going to become independent.

Two of them in particular: Ed Gleiman. Ed was with the House Government Operations Committee. And in all those years, he eventually became staff director and chief counsel of the Senate Committee on Government Affairs. He reported to David Pryor of Arkansas. Ed put an awful lot of blood, sweat, and tears into independence. He was one of the behind-the-scenes guys who really believed in independence, but he realized that the National Archives had not been the best managed place with or without GSA over the years, but thought that Bob Warner was the right man at the right time and could really, really lead us into a very good place and worked very hard behind-the-scenes, along with a cabal of people from the history

world and the federal history world that were kind of behind-the-scenes. And Ed did a lot of that work.

The other guy that did a lot of that work was a guy named Bob Gellman. Gellman, I think, spent his whole career with the Government Operations Committee, again, our oversight committee in Congress—GSA's oversight committee—and then, of course, our oversight committee. And the first thing that we did when we became independent is, I think, we forgot to thank those guys. We had a party. We had pictures taken. We had them up there at the front for all the celebrations. And I remember Ed Meese, who had been a very important part of the President's team in shepherding this independent legislation through for President Reagan. They were all up there, and they all made the picture.

I think it was also John Daniels, whose wife Maygene had been a GSA intern with me and who eventually worked for NARA. John was another behind the scenes staffer that enabled independence. Anyway, they were up there in the phalanx of the photograph, and they all got thanked on that day. But in the days that followed, not only were they no longer thanked, but I think in the minds of a lot of people in the Archives, they became the enemy. They were once again, all of a sudden, "Oh, my God, we're out from under GSA, and now we've got these oversight committees that are all over us in terms of what we're going to do and how we're going to do it." And so a lot of resentment, well, it built over a period of time. And this is months and years, but it built over a period of time.

And finally the last critical mistake was when John Glenn became the chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. John Glenn was our oversight chairman. And John Glenn's baby was the inspector general legislation. You know, all of the Cabinet agencies had inspectors general for a number of years. The State Department, the . . . you know. And I don't know what the origin year was. I'm going to say, I think it was sometime in the late 1970s that all of those folks, you know, received IGs. But anyway, John Glenn wanted all of the independent agencies—not just the Cabinet agencies that already had IGs—he wanted all of the independent agencies to have inspectors general also in order to be the internal watchdogs within the agency.

Well, this was his legislation. He loved it. He felt very proud of it. He got it passed, and it was signed into law in 1988. And then he turned to all the agencies to implement it. Well, I was not at the other agencies. I don't know how the other agencies responded or reacted. I was just at the National Archives, and I can tell you how our upper management responded and our upper management responded in a most negative manner, and with the singular determination that we might just go through the motions. We might look like we were doing this, but I think our top management had no intention of hiring an independent junkyard dog, as these guys

affectionately refer to themselves, to walk the halls of the National Archives and be our internal auditor, an honest-to-God auditor.

So, it's kind of difficult when Governmental Affairs was our oversight committee, okay? John Glenn was our oversight chairman. So whereas maybe an independent agency that was outside of his jurisdiction or someplace else in the government, it wasn't going to be as evident that we were basically playing rope-a-dope here and just going through the motions. The National Archives had a very well-educated workforce.

What that gives you are several things. Number one, if channeled in the right direction, it can really, really make you the best. And I think an awful lot of what has been done at the National Archives has been the best. On the other hand, it also gives you a lot of people with more than an average amount of opinion as to how the agency should be run. There was an ownership in terms of the professional community in the National Archives and, through that ownership, there was always an opinion about the Archivist of the United States, and an opinion about how we were doing our job or not doing our job. There was always an opinion about what we were asking for in terms of funding, what we weren't asking for. And these people were smart enough and sophisticated enough, is probably the more appropriate word, to establish their own channels on Capitol Hill.

The Archives had whistleblowers before I think they even coined the term. We were a hotbed of whistleblowers. And so consequently, when we would do things that weren't really to the letter of the law or with the intention for which Congress had wanted things to be done, there always seemed to be someone within the Archives who would pick up the phone or go to Capitol Hill or whatever, and tell the people who are interested in those kinds of things, the things we were doing wrong.

Well, at some point, in the run-up to implementation of the new IG Act, it was clearly reported from some of our whistleblowers to the Hill what we were doing, that we were playing fast and loose with the implementation of this, and we were not looking for a junkyard dog, but a lap dog—someone in the agency that we could repurpose into our walking, talking mannequin of an IG. And we took a couple of different approaches. I won't go into all the details, but suffice it to say it was really clear that we weren't playing straight with the committee on this implementation, and we named someone as our first IG that didn't really meet the test of what was expected on Capitol Hill.

And we paid for it. We paid for it dearly. Senator Glenn had a staff guy by the name of Steve Katz. And Steve was very sharp. And one of the things you find out about Senate staff—the

United States Senate has 100 senators. They're dealing with the same number of issues, with the same amount of complexity that's being dealt with by 435 Representatives in the House. So if you have 100 people doing the same policy work, legislative work, that you have 435 people doing over on the other side, by necessity, senators typically delegate a lot more authority to their staff. There are big exceptions, particularly in the appropriations world, Armed Services, you know, over in the House. But typically, boy, there were and are some very powerful staff people in the Senate.

And Steve Katz was one of those powerful staff guys. And he knew that we were messing with him. And he was going to see that we were hurt by that attempt, so he developed a request from Senator Glenn to GAO—then the Government Accounting Office, now Accountability or something, whatever they're called now—but GAO to basically do a review of the National Archives and our implementation of the IG Act. And they came in. They had done some of their own work, but I think Steve really was way down the road in terms of what he thought and also knew had happened in this implementation. And he got them to do this report.

I was sitting at my desk. [LAUGHS] One of the things is that when you're the parent agency of the Federal Register, you're also part of the publishing wing of the federal government. The Federal Register and the Government Printing Office (GPO) are kind of joined in a very close working relationship. So the guys at the Federal Register would see things long before anybody else would see them because if something had to do with the National Archives, they had folks at GPO that would say, "Hey, do you know about this?"

Well, I get a phone call from somebody, I can't remember who now, at the Federal Register and they say, "Hey, John, do you know about this GAO report?" And I said, "Well, I know that they've done a review of us and a review of our IG implementation. And this person said, "Stay right there. I've got something to send you." So I said, "Okay." So back in those days, he didn't turn to the computer. I mean, he handed staff this blue-covered GAO report and said, "Run this down the street to John Constance at the main building. He needs to see this, because it's about to be published this afternoon."

I will never forget receiving that report in my office and looking down at the boldface headline that read, "Mismanagement at the National Archives and Records Administration." That was the headline. And I thought, oh, man. So I ran down the hall and saw Claudine and Don Wilson and Jim Megrone and everybody and their brother and said, "Here it is. We've got a problem." So not to lay out all the details, but the explosion was loud. I was still only the legislation guy in the policy office and not officially congressional or public affairs, but I worked together with the press office for what was a pretty miserable couple of weeks. I took Don Wilson into a hornets nest of a meeting with Glenn's staff. We were heading towards a public

hearing, but Don Wilson preempted the bloody next steps by resigning as Archivist of the United States and taking a job with the foundation for the Bush Library in Texas, the George H. W. Bush Library in Texas. I learned more in one month than I had learned in my whole career about congressional affairs.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: And so that was pretty horrible. Claudine Weiher resigned also. I think she went on a long period of administrative leave, and Trudy Peterson became the Acting Archivist of the United States.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: The theme there is, I always thought that it really grew out of the post-independence celebration and then hubris about, boy, you know, here we are with somebody else telling us what to do. And unfortunately, that really is the way things work. And had we continued to befriend Ed Gleiman and Bob Gellman and others, had I—and I will send this out there as a personal failing—had I convinced our upper echelon that I didn't think I had the leverage in those early days that I eventually had, but if I'd convinced them that we've got to get the bad news up there with the good news, it would have really truncated a lot of whistleblowing and really helped us in what was a difficult time—I mean, becoming an independent agency, particularly when it's all you really wanted for Christmas for a long time, and suddenly you got it and, wow, it was a lot more complicated, I think, politically, small P, capital P, both, than the agency thought it was going to be. So there you have it.

Stephanie: Wow. So you think by not continuing to really thank them for their efforts and then us kind of giving the appearance of not following through the IG Act, those were some of the big mistakes that we had made?

John: Yeah, I would say they were critical and close to fatal. I mean, there were some moments that I think a lot of the people that had assisted us in becoming independent were very disappointed. I mean, people in the history community, there were a lot of people that were very, very disappointed in that. What came out of it were several things. One, Trudy Peterson was named the Acting Archivist. When Bill Clinton became President of the United States, he decided that he was going to get hold of the executive branch of government in a rather creative way. He put White House liaisons in all of the independent agencies, certainly. I mean, given the fact that all of the Cabinet agencies had both his appointees at the top, as well as individuals down through the echelon who were Schedule Cs and political appointees, he pretty much knew how he was going to get a hold of the Cabinet agencies.

The independent agencies, particularly one like the National Archives who did not have a political appointee at the top as such, our legislation made it very clear that you were not to be appointed Archivist of the United States for political reasons, that it was going to be basically your professional background that led to your appointment. That has been followed in some following years, not followed in some following years. And that's a whole different discussion for a different day.

But the way Clinton decided he was going to handle this for the National Archives, he was going to park a White House liaison at the National Archives. Our White House liaison was a young woman by the name of Maryanne Smith. And Maryanne came in with a pretty clear portfolio that she made clear to us, that she wanted to be in on everything. She wanted to be in on every decision, every discussion, everything, and she expected to be. One of the fortunate things that happened to me in my career in those years is I hit it off pretty well with Maryanne Smith. My colleague, Mike Gillette, who was head of congressional archives, also hit it off quite well with Maryanne, and he made it known to her that I was competent, had a good heart and was somebody that she could count on (and that the White House could count on) to be a straight shooter.

I already had a good relationship with Trudy Peterson. I worked with Trudy off and on for a number of years, and she trusted me. And she also felt that she didn't know anything about Capitol Hill and was more than willing to take my direction. She had watched me work with Don Wilson and Claudine and everybody in the spin-out from the GAO report and felt that the advice that I had given was good advice. Had they listened to some of the advice that I had given, things would have worked out better. But nevertheless, she knew the mistakes that I had made and that I had admitted to. She knew that the direction that I had suggested was generally true North. And so I already had a good relationship with her.

Well, Maryanne Smith told Trudy at one point, "You know, one thing you absolutely need to do is have a Congressional Affairs Director and a Congressional Affairs Office and not have it part of your policy staff. John Constance needs to be a separate entity as head of Congressional Affairs for the Archives. He needs a separate office. He needs staff. He needs basically to concentrate all of his time on congressional affairs and not do both that and policy." Well, that was absolute music to my ears. Trudy talked to me about it, and she said, "What do you think?" And I said, "Oh, my gosh," you know, I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven, because that's really what I had wanted for a long time. And whether it was that Claudine and the Archivist totally trusted me or wanted me to be busy enough in a variety of different pursuits or, you know, they didn't see—I mean, not understanding what the job could be and what the office

could be for the agency. They always kind of held it back from being an independent office. So anyway, Trudy was kind enough to then, obviously, turn to me. I wrote all reorganizations or my staff wrote all reorganizations. So she said, "Write me a reorganization that basically blasts this out of policy, makes it separate and has it reporting directly to the Archivist of the United States."

Stephanie: Wow.

John: Because Maryanne said that's the only way this will work. "When this guy goes to Capitol Hill, when he opens his mouth, they're going to think that it's the Archivist talking. Well, hell, it might as well be, if they're going to think that anyway. And so let's create an organization chart that shows that that's true." So that's what we did. We wrote that, and I got an administrative assistant and a legislative affairs person who worked for me and then eventually two. And we were on our way. And those are the moments in my career that I thought, wow, it's all been worth it. I mean, I'd always been a political guy. I grew up in a political family, loved politics, loved a lot of things about it. In recent years I've had second thoughts about that! [LAUGHS]

But anyway, I still love things about it, not everything about it anymore. But, I thought, boy, this is going to be fun. And it was. It really was. That was when I started getting up every morning and saying to myself, they are actually paying me to go and represent the National Archives on Capitol Hill, and to try to advance our mission and try to advance our budget and try to explain the inexplicable, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And, I mean, that was great. I mean, that's the portion of my career I feel the most fortunate to have had. So. . .

Stephanie: That's no small feat. . .

John: Yeah.

Stephanie: . . . to explain our mission, and you were talking about the budget. Do you have thoughts on our budget over time? It seems like back then we were kind of, I don't know, flush with money and today it seems not so much. Do you have any thoughts on the budget—and what were your skills to get us more money?

John: Let me suggest this. Let me look, you know, because it would be an interesting story. And I might be one of the few people that can tell you about what that budget history really has been, because I think there is an impression at the Archives now that is reflected in what you said, and that is that we were flush back then. I think that, yes, by virtue of the creation of the

Archives, we had an awful lot of good evidence as to what we needed to do, how we needed to do it, what we needed in the way of consolidation and new buildings and whatever. But the National Archives, as you well know—the record-generating federal government had a big head start on the National Archives.

And so back in those days—and I don't know what the number is now that we quote—but back in those days, it was 5 billion pieces of paper. And so, yes, we had some good appropriation years back then. But the imbalance between the money and the mission has always been stark for the National Archives, in my opinion. If you look at the preservation of all these records and then the expectation of the digitization of all these records, throw in the declassification of all these records and the enormous tsunami of records that are out there, it's always been difficult to rectify our mission with our resources. And time and time again I heard people look across the table at me on Capitol Hill and say, “You know, I get what you're saying. I get what you're saying, but we don't have all those resources to give you. You're a small agency. Yes, you have a big mission, but this government can't afford to do what probably needs to be done.”

Every time in the history of the Archives that we have had a gargantuan task, we have figured out some other way to do it other than through appropriations. Let me give you one example. When the *Pentagon Papers* were released by *The New York Times* and, suddenly, there was this huge scandal involving the Vietnam War and the fact that the source for an awful lot of Daniel Ellsberg's writing associated with the *Pentagon Papers* came from records that were still classified. And so suddenly—this was in the Nixon administration when I was still, you know, a young lad—but I was there when Herb Angel, and a young Bert Rhoads and a couple of other people were musing about where in the world were we going to find the manpower to do this gargantuan job of declassifying all these records? This was like '70—I guess it was in the summer of '71. And I'll never forget, Herb Angel spun around in his big judge's chair, and he looked out at what was the park that was across the street from the Archives, which is now where the Navy Memorial is, and that was a big park with a statue of, I don't know, General Hancock or somebody. And Kann's department store was behind there. And it was a pretty well-known hangout for the relatively small number of homeless people that were in Washington, DC, in those days. And I always remember, Herb looked over into that park and said, "Well, we can start recruiting right there," and got a big laugh in the room.

But what they eventually did is that they went to, I don't know whether it was Fort Meade or someplace, and they got military reserves who were doing summer duty. And they brought these guys in, literally, by the busload at no expense to the Archives. I mean, they went to the Department of the Army. We said we need a lot of people that can read documents. We need a lot of people. We can give them the guidelines. They don't have to have a great deal of skill.

But if they're Army officers, first and second lieutenants or whatever, chances are they've got the educational background or the experience that we need. And I can't remember how many of these people they brought in, but it was busloads. And that's how they started that declassification project that summer under the gun from Congress who had set up some mandates, but not a lot of money for the agency to do it. So once again, it was a classic case of here's the mission and here's the money.

So that's been the Archives problem for years and years. I'd like to think that when I was there—and that's one of the reasons I don't want to get my mouth out over my memory here—but I do think that in the years that I was there and the years that I left, I mean, I think it was kind of the high-water mark of appropriations, at least in that era. We had a wonderful relationship with the appropriators in those years—Mark Hatfield and Ted Stevens and Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Pete Domenici. They were people who really did understand and appreciate what our mission was and were more than willing to help fund that mission. Stevens in particular, about the digital. Mark Hatfield, being a scholar himself, had just written a book about the Vice Presidency and used the Archives for that. Pete Domenici was a brilliant guy and loved the National Archives. David Price of North Carolina was an appropriator on the House side and a guy who had been a college professor, wrote books about the Congress, and had used the Archives extensively.

So we had a very, very good relationship and a good run with a lot of great, great people in those years. And then politics and necessity and the big cutting government waste, fraud, and abuse, and all the horrible things that happened under that aegis in some of the later years, and through no fault of the succession of Archivists of the United States we had or the person I helped hire to be the head of Congressional Affairs, John Hamilton, who is still the head. These guys did a wonderful job over the years. But it is the ebb and flow of Washington politics that either helps you or hurts you when you're an agency the size of the National Archives. So . . .

Stephanie: Okay. So we don't understand all of the intricacies of it, I guess. Yeah.

John: Well, again, I'd be happy—again, not to prolong this in one of the next sessions—but we're at the stage of these interviews that I can start telling some war stories that may be entertaining. But I think that in terms of laying down a little bit more of the history that really is worth laying down, I'd be more than happy to do a little looking at the appropriations profile and make some comments along the way about that. I think John Hamilton is going to be the guy that can tell the real story of the last however many years. That also might be, looking at the old clock on the wall, this might be a good transition point, as they say.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: And between now and the next time, I will once again see what I can do about making this computer work. The sound works so that I don't have to continually have this ceiling fan growing out of my head when we talk. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Yes. That is not a problem at all. [LAUGHS] In fact, my internet went out halfway through our talk, but I've been recording you on my phone. We've got the whole text message from the internet provider and everything saying there's a power outage in the entire area. So . . . [LAUGHS]

John: Oh, my God. Well, again, your smiling face, as still as it was, was still projecting on my phone. So, I mean, one of the ways I worked my way through college was as a radio announcer. And one of the things that radio announcers try to do is make each other laugh when they're on the air, and they do some outrageous things to each other. And I am very adept at just keeping on talking and hoping someone's listening. And so when you went from your video to your still, I thought, okay, here we go. I'm just going to keep on talking and see if I can hear her breathing on the other end. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: That was another reason why I kept saying, "Oh yeah." "Wow." "Okay." "Yeah." Just so that you knew I was still here. So again, technology. It's great when it works.

John: Absolutely. Well, thank you again for your time. And send me some dates when you get a chance. We'll figure out what works.

Stephanie: Wonderful. Yeah, that sounds great. Thank you again for today and enjoy your time. I think you were meeting a friend or something, so enjoy your time.

John: Well, I'm still in the fundraising business for one thing or the other. And I'm going with a friend and someone who he thinks might be interested in one of the causes I'm working on. So anyway, we'll see.

Stephanie: Okay, well, good luck with that. But yeah, I'll send you an email with some more dates and we'll get something set up here.

John: Great. Thanks so much.

Stephanie: Thank you. Have a good day.

John: Thank you, Stephanie.

Stephanie: Bye-bye.

[END RECORDING PART TWO]

[BEGIN RECORDING PART THREE - September 7, 2023]

Stephanie: All right. Okay. So welcome back. This is part three of an oral history with John Constance. Today is September 7th. It's a Thursday, 2023. And I just want to recap before we get started what we covered in our last session here. We talked about NARA's separation from GSA and then your position as the Director of Policy and Program Analysis and also the creation of directives and procedural manuals that kind of helped further down the line in your other positions learning about the agency. And we talked about the establishment or sort of, I guess, NARA's first inspector general and the infamous GAO report, and then the appointment of Trudy Peterson as Acting Archivist of the United States. Then we covered your appointment as the Director of Congressional and Public Affairs and NARA's budget, and that's kind of where we left off last time. Was there anything that you wanted to follow up on in terms of any of those topics?

John: No. I don't think so. I mean—under Trudy, we separated out congressional affairs, and later on, under John Carlin, we added public affairs to congressional affairs. And I had the umbrella responsibility for both of them. So there was a progression there where, initially, it was just congressional affairs. And then later, I took over public affairs as well. So anyway. But no, I mean, that pretty much sums it up. That's great.

Stephanie: Okay. Well, I'm glad you brought that up, though, about the two sides, because I was curious about that, because normally I feel like they are separate. And so I was wondering if it was always like that or at what point—so it sounds like this was just shortly before you took over that position or just after you took over that position?

John: Yeah, public affairs or communications had been something that we had a separate responsibility for when we were under GSA. Obviously, they had a communication shop. We had a communication shop, and there was some coordination there. They never really allowed us to have our own congressional affairs operation when we were under GSA. All of our congressional affairs really flowed through them. And so when we became independent, we then had a congressional affairs shop. I had a predecessor to my role there. And then I moved into that. And then, eventually, we put them together.

There are a lot of precedents for that in the federal government. Oftentimes, they will put congressional affairs and public affairs together under a kind of an external affairs responsibility where, you know, it's based on the fact, I think, that a lot of the skill sets associated with the communications part of it are the same. And you want it to be coordinated. You want what you're saying to the public about your policies and your positions on things, the same as you're saying to Congress. So there's kind of a natural symmetry between the two and there's a need to really have the two together, plus the fact there's a strategic reason to have the two together. I mean, if you are trying to promote the interest of the agency, oftentimes you're working with the press to try to do that. And a lot of times, particularly when there are issues that come up that are controversial, you're getting basically the same questions from Capitol Hill as you are from the press. And so having that coordinated through the same office is kind of an important marriage. So I think that's the reason a lot of agencies do it that way and the reason, really, under John Carlin's tenure as the Archivist that we combined the two together.

When I took over responsibility for Public Affairs, Susan Cooper was still the head of that office and, really, I'd say that shop darn near ran itself by virtue of her expertise, background, and long tenure with the National Archives. She was a very independent player and rightly so. Great judgment and complete commitment. She reported to me, however, and I had kind of umbrella responsibility for both areas. They also then added to my responsibilities the website. Public

affairs had not had the website as their responsibility. So I got that as well when we did that reorganization. So I had both the press office, which I'll equate to that part of public affairs, and I also had our whole web operation and was involved in the redesign of that and really as our growing public face, you know, obviously was through that. So . . .

Stephanie: Okay, interesting. So the website, this was strictly for public affairs? This is what you were kind of reimagining what it would look like and what information would be available there?

John: Exactly. And I want to divide that between the public affairs nature of the website and the research nature of the website. I had nothing to do with the research online, the records online. All of that was separate. But when I say the website, it was essentially the public-facing website that had to do with all of our public affairs operations. Okay.

Stephanie: All right. Yeah, I was going to ask about that, too. So you've already preempted me there. So thank you for thinking ahead. [LAUGHS].

John: There you go.

Stephanie: Also, I think during that time—and correct me if I'm wrong—I think NARA's Archives II facility was opened in College Park?

John: Yes, that's right.

Stephanie: Did you have any part in getting appropriations for that, or how did that work? What were your responsibilities there?

John: I did. One of the things that was very, very unique about the construction of Archives II and the financing of that is that, you know—and again, others can answer these questions probably better than I—but in addition to an appropriation for construction, we literally got an authorization from Congress to sell bonds for the construction of Archives II. The only other building in Washington that had ever been financed that way was the Thurgood Marshall Building. That was the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in Washington that had been financed that same way. And it was done on the bond market in New York, where we were authorized to go out and, essentially, sell Archives II bonds for cash flow purposes. And Congress then backed them up with the full faith and credit of the federal government. And those investors that invested in those bonds were then paid back on a 30-year bond schedule. So it was pretty unique.

Most of my involvement in Archives II were along the lines of, kind of, where Archives II was going to be and how much support we were going to get for the placement of Archives II. I would say that Steny Hoyer, who was the head of our appropriations subcommittee at the time, really became the godfather of the National Archives, largely associated with the construction of Archives II. He was our go-to person in order to negotiate this bond arrangement with the Congress. He was our go-to person who, in turn, went to the Governor of Maryland, William Donald Shaefter, his alma mater the University of Maryland—which was also in his district in College Park—to see whether there was land available on the University of Maryland campus to place Archives II and whether that was possible. Schaefer, a very close associate of Steny Hoyer, as well as Louis Goldstein, who was the head of public works for the State of Maryland, which was a pretty powerful position at the time—you know, they were the driving force with the University of Maryland administration to see that we were allocated that piece of land for, as I recall, if I'm correct, it was a rent-free renewable lease for 50 years or 100 years or whatever it was. The details of that escape me at the moment.

But the land was provided, and Steny Hoyer was really the one that arranged both the land acquisition as well as the financing package. And I was closely associated with him in that regard and worked with his office as well as our budget folks in order to see all that through. Jim Megronigle, who was the Assistant Archivist for Administration in those years, was kind of the

genius behind a lot of this and also did a lot of the negotiation and the work with the bond sellers and the bonding agency that really did that portion of the work. So it was a collaboration between a lot of us at the Archives.

Stephanie: Do you know why they went for selling bonds for creating. . . ?

John: Well, it was going to be a very, very big number. And again, the challenge for the National Archives has always been when you look at our annual appropriation, and you look at projects of the size of Archives II, there's this huge imbalance between the amount of money that we were going to need and the amount of money that our annual appropriation came in at. So I don't remember offhand what the total tab was for the construction of Archives II, over \$250 million as I recall. Suffice it to say, it was a big number, a very big number. And so the way to finesse that was working with Congress to see that the out-of-pocket or the above-the-board appropriation amount that was shown in any particular appropriation year was lower by virtue of financing the building the way we financed it. And that worked to Congressman Hoyer's benefit in order not to have to try to represent a doubling of our appropriation in any one year, which would have been a bridge too far, but at the same time have the money available to build

a 1.8 million square-foot facility, half the size of the Pentagon, you know, for the National Archives.

So I do remember all the statistics: 555 miles of shelving that, if you put it end to end, would go from College Park to Ann Arbor, Michigan. I mean [LAUGHS], all those numbers are still in my mind that, you know, were factoids that we were presenting to Congress in terms of what our needs were. The largest movable shelving installation that had ever been done in the world was done there. And so all of those things cost a whole lot of money and, consequently, creative financing was the order of the day.

Stephanie: Okay. Interesting. In terms of, I guess, getting appropriations and not even just for building that facility, but in general, more broad terms—I know we talked about this a little bit last time. I didn't know if you had anything more that you wanted to add about there being that perception among some staff that we were more flush with money back then compared to what we are today. Was there anything else you wanted to add about that?

John: Yeah. Three things during my tenure that were the driving force for our appropriations—and we were anything but flush in any of these three areas—but the three areas were first, certainly the Electronic Records Archives, or ERA. The ERA initiative, during my tenure, was going to be a big number. It was going to be a half-a-billion dollars that we looked at over a period of years and knew that that was going to be a very heavy lift. When we got the initial

contracting with Lockheed Martin, Lockheed was then able to help me with the lobbying, if you will, for the funding going forward. They had, clearly, a corporate incentive to assist with that. I was not supposed to use the word "lobbying." I was not a lobbyist, although I damn sure was. But there was a big problem with Congress with that term. So, I was working with them hand-in-hand going forward to bring that money in. So that was a big priority.

The second priority was the ongoing priority of the National Archives for preservation, whether it was going to be through digitization or physical preservation of the records or just the sheer fact that those records no matter what we were doing were, you know, deteriorating. I mean, Ken Harris, as he might have mentioned earlier, said to me on a drive up to Capitol Hill one day, "You know, John, it's all eventually going to rot anyway." And I said, "Don't say that. Don't say that, Ken. You know, let's not. . ." And he says, "No." He said, "You know, it's a fact." He says, "Even if you keep this stuff under very, very good environmental conditions, there's a degradation of these records over a period of time that's inevitable." So you're constantly trying to preserve the records, have the best environment, transfer them to another medium, whether it be, you know, back in the day it was microfilm so that the records wouldn't have to be physically handled or used. And then it's digitization, which preserves the records and also allows you to distribute them more widely to the public. But it was that preservation number that was always one that we always felt we were behind on and working on.

One of the things that happened in that world is when Ancestry.com was able to monetize the distribution of records for genealogical purposes. Then they came in, and they did a lot of the heavy lifting that, frankly, the Mormon Church had done before in terms of taking our microfilm and digitizing it and basically getting that out there. So the Archives suddenly was in partnership with some outside entities that had the financial means and also the profit-making incentive to be able to do a lot of that work. So that preservation area was a big deal.

And the third area, closely related to preservation was buildings, whether it be the renovation of the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, the construction of Archives II in College Park, the maintenance of Presidential Libraries, or the building and maintenance of regional archives and records centers. With all of that property, leaking roofs, sinking cornerstones, and all the many things that happen as buildings age, we were constantly working with Congress to address those issues.

The method that I used on the buildings side of appropriations was visits in town and road trips across the country. I took our appropriators to the George H. W. Bush Library in College Station, Texas, the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, and Simi Valley, California to see the Reagan Library. And in addition to traveling our appropriations committee staff to those off-site locations, we brought the members of

Congress who were associated with those states, the members of Congress who were associated with those locations—to those facilities as well. Hillary Clinton, when she was a Senator from New York, we brought her to the Roosevelt Library for an event, and those kinds of things where we got both the staff of the appropriations committees and the members of Congress to visit and put their eyeballs on these locations. And if we had a physical need for renovation or something new, we had the opportunity to get them there and actually show them the site, which was very important to get them informed and excited about what we were doing.

Stephanie: Interesting. So it sounds like there was a combination of large-ticket items that were all coming together at the same time that we needed money for. But it wasn't just telling the appropriations committee that, "Hey, we're great. We need money for these things." You were actually showing them. Do they still do that today?

John: Yeah, they do. Yeah. John Hamilton definitely does that. And again, both the show-and-tell with the records—whether it be in regional archives or downtown at the National Archives or at the Personnel Records Center—and putting people back in those stacks and walking those halls and seeing just the scope of what our responsibility is, is really important. I mean, you can tell somebody about your needs or whatever. But when they, for example, visit the caves in Missouri and actually go underground and see what we've done and the environmental advantages of limestone caves, I mean, you can describe that, but when you take somebody underground into space where tractor-trailer trucks are driving around in what were once caverns, it is pretty amazing stuff. And that's the a-ha moment that you get from these people to say, "Oh my God."

When we developed the Kansas City site and the sites out there, one of the amazing things we would do is you drive by on the interstate and you'd say, "See over there? We've got x millions of cubic feet of records space over there, and you didn't even see it. You know, it's underground." So from the standpoint of being a good neighbor to local communities, you could put a huge amount of storage in very innovative spaces.

And to take members of the appropriations committee there and to show it to them, and with the turnover of the young appropriations staff . . . I know John has done this on a regular basis. This is where in appropriations you feel like you're in the training business, because you've got one person that really has in their mind what a Presidential Library is, what it looks like, what its purpose is, how important it is, you know, and they get a job with a law firm on K Street. Boom, they're gone. And you've got somebody new, 25 years old, who's coming in behind them, and you're saying, "Okay, let's see. We need to get you up to speed with this as well." So that's the cyclical nature of that business as well, where you're always trying to show

a new person or a new group of people, you know, kind of what we do. But that's really the fun part of the job, the show-and-tell, and the show-and-tell with a purpose. But, depending on what they see, it can complicate your life.

I will never forget. We took a group of appropriators to the George H. W. Bush Library in College Station, Texas, before it opened to the public. It was just kind of in its opening stages. And we wanted to show them what a Presidential Library looked like, and I took the appropriators into the building. There is this endless hallway of skids with shrink-wrapped objects as far as you can see down this one hallway. And so I'm getting a tour from the local folks there at the library, and I said, "So what's all this?" And they said, "They're Presidential gifts." And the appropriators looked at it, and said, "Oh, Presidential gifts? What do you mean? Like gifts from heads of state or whatever?" They said, "No. No, I mean, those are in the vaults over here. These are some of the Presidential gifts with less intrinsic value." And the folks said, "Well, what do you mean by less intrinsic value?" And they said, "Well, when a school class does a craft project, and they send it to the President, or when somebody makes a handmade piece of jewelry without really a lot of intrinsic value, all that comes to the White House, and then the White House sends it to the National Archives in Washington for courtesy storage. And then when the Presidential Library opens up or when the President leaves office, we store all of that in a warehouse along with all the records. And then when the library opens up, we transfer all of those non-intrinsically-valued gifts to the library." And these guys looked at each other and they said, "You mean to tell me we take up storage space and air conditioning and shelving and all of that for macaroni art from Mrs. Taylor's class in PS-29 in Brooklyn, New York?" And we said, "Yeah." I said, "Technically, those were at one time the property of the President, and then now, with the Presidential Records Act, the property of the country." And they looked at each other and said, "Damn, this is a lot more complicated than we thought." It was like, well, that's the law, and we're carrying out the law and these, you know, one-hundred skid loads of stuff down this hallway . . . yeah, and it's all. . . . So anyway, they get to see how complicated the implementation of the laws are that they, at one point say, "Oh yeah, all the gifts that the President gets . . ." So . . .

Stephanie: That's really interesting. [LAUGHS]

John: Yeah. Oh, my God. [SHAKES HEAD]

Stephanie: Yeah, you can tell them one thing, but then, yeah, for them to actually see that, it kind of makes that light bulb go off. [LAUGHS]

John: Yeah. And the fact that we'll never have, in a Presidential Library, enough space to exhibit all of the gifts from any one President. . . . Those are always rotated. The Archives gathered all of them at one point in Washington—I say all of them, not all of them, but a sampling of them from various Presidential Libraries for an exhibit in Washington that was called *Tokens and Treasures*. And the reason for that name for the exhibit is that there are some things that are just, you know, tokens, knickknacks and tchotchkes kind of stuff. And then they're treasures that come from the Shah of Iran to the President or whatever that are of incredible value.

There was a portion of that exhibit that also exhibited things that were sent to the President as a Presidential gift that were sent to make a political point. And I will never forget. We had a real spinout with the Johnson family over the fact that in the exhibit case, where we had some of the gifts that had been sent to President Johnson, to LBJ, we had a shovel. The shovel had an inscription on it that had to do with "use this to bury our sons who you sent to Southeast Asia to die for no purpose."

Stephanie: Wow.

John: While it was a real, real statement of the nature of some of the things that are sent to the White House, and it was very illustrative of protest gifts, the President's daughter and the President's son-in-law were special guests that night of the National Archives. They left very angry that we had that on display. So it's a very good example of where our historical integrity at the National Archives sometimes has a head-on collision with ongoing political families, the Johnson family being one that really had an ongoing legacy. Chuck Robb was a United States Senator at the time, and the son-in-law of LBJ. And so you were on a tightrope sometimes, and sometimes you fell off the tightrope. That night was one that I'll never forget. We were definitely off the tightrope that night, though there was no better exhibit of an artifact than that shovel. The curator of the exhibit absolutely did the right thing by putting it in there. But we had some fallout.

Stephanie: Yeah. Well, that's the thing with history though. You should show all different sides, right? Not just one. So it was important that that was there.

John: Well, and LBJ was one of the people themselves that we kind of quoted back to the family very gingerly. LBJ was the one that said, "I want my library to show the history with the bark off," was his Texas phrase. "I want to see it with the bark off. I want to see the real thing." And boy, that was history with the bark off for damn sure, and we lost a little of our own bark that night as a result of it. But it's the way it goes.

Stephanie: You brought up the caves. I was just at Lenexa last week, and that was the very first time that I'd ever been in the caves. I'd heard about them, but going along with what you were saying, you don't really understand it until you're actually in there and see how large they are. We got lost in the cave, so . . .

John: Oh, yeah.

Stephanie: Yeah. So your point of [CROSS-TALKING].

John: Just the scope of a space like that where you literally have tractor-trailer trucks that drive down in there and drive around, and the extra benefit of the dry environment, the cool environment. . . . And one of the other things that we were able to display to the world was the number of environmental awards that we got that we were able to, you know, preserve all those records down there with a very minimal use of HVAC [heating, ventilation, and air conditioning] equipment, because it was all naturally air conditioned, because it was underground. It was cool—summer and winter were the same.

Stephanie: Yeah. Yeah, it was cool. [LAUGHS]

John: [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: So you mentioned President Johnson's family. Do you have any other stories from other Presidential families that you had to work with?

John: The one Presidential family that I had the most exposure to was the Kennedy family. And Senator Ted Kennedy was a very important United States Senator during all of my tenure. And he was, by virtue of the death of JFK [John F. Kennedy] and Robert Kennedy, he was the last one holding kind of the torch for the family and felt a really strong obligation to both history and certainly to the Kennedy Library itself. So his stewardship of the Kennedy legacy and the Kennedy Library were very important.

And given the fact that we held all of the assassination records from the Warren Commission and then the Kennedy Assassination Records Act, that involved the review and release of all those records, we were ground zero for the memory of that day in Dallas that impacted the country, the world, and certainly the Kennedy family. And so for that reason, whenever we were going to do anything associated with those records, if there was going to be a new release of records, if there was going to be a controversial new fact that was going to come out, if there was going to be anything associated with that, there were a succession of Archivists that I worked for—John Carlin, Dr. Weinstein, you know—again, they understood the sensitivity of

that to the Kennedy family and the sensitivity of it to Senator Ted Kennedy. And we never, ever, ever wanted him to be surprised.

So consequently, I had the job of going up and briefing, usually the staff—on one particular occasion that I'll never forget, actually briefing the Senator on some matters—but he had some long-time staff that he relied on for some of the more sensitive matters. And so I typically was briefing staff and not the Senator, but we always were very, very careful in that regard.

I'll give you two examples of some interest. One was during the Clinton administration. Technology had moved forward with the ability to detect DNA and also do DNA tracing. And there were some people out there in the history and science world that petitioned Janet Reno, who was the Attorney General, to try to reopen the matter of some of the things that the Warren Commission had looked at as far as the bullets and the analysis of the actual bullets from the Kennedy assassination, basically to—there were three shots fired that day. One of them hit a curb stone that missed the car entirely. One went straight through Kennedy and hit Governor Connally, who was sitting in the limousine in front of him. And the third shot was the one that was the fatal shot that killed the President. That hit him in the head. The one that went through Kennedy and wound up in Governor Connally was always referred to as the "magic bullet." And there was never total agreement. While the Warren Commission, in trying to figure out how these three bullets kind of were involved, and the three shots that were heard in Dealey Plaza were involved, they always referred to that one that went all the way through as the "magic bullet."

Well, the interest was, is there DNA on that bullet—both Kennedy's DNA as well as Connally's DNA? That was an opportunity to analyze that bullet in a way that had never been analyzed before. And so with the new DNA technology, Janet Reno was petitioned. She felt that it was worth reopening it in order to settle that once and for all. And so it came from the Justice Department to the Archivist at that time, to John Carlin, to carry out that review.

And so there were a group of experts that were assembled. And I won't get them all, but it was from the Academy of Sciences and from, you know, forensics experts and a variety of people were brought together in order to do that. And because of the sensitive nature of it, their very first meeting where they all got together and, as a group, examined the exhibits from the assassination, that was going to be done at Archives II in a conference room under the observation of some staff who were custodians of those records and basically could be observers of everything that was going to be done that day in order to start this process. They had a microscope that they had at the front of the room. They had a panel of the experts. Steve

Tilley, who had the responsibility as the archivist that was involved in all of the Kennedy assassination records, was the Archives guy there that day, and they brought in the evidence.

Well, before this happened, I went to Capitol Hill and met with Senator Kennedy's staff to say it's going to happen, you know. The Justice Department—thank God it was a Democratic President, because honestly, you don't want politics involved in this. But the fact that it was Bill Clinton who appointed Janet Reno, who turned this matter over to an Archivist of the United States, who had been appointed by President Clinton, and I'm going to Capitol Hill to brief the most powerful Democratic Senator in the Senate at the time. It, at least, was all in the same lane. I'm not saying it would have been different otherwise. I'm just saying it was easier, because I was able to go up there and say, "This is the chain of command that thinks this is necessary and has to be done," because the position of the Kennedy family was always to leave well enough alone. I mean, that was always their go-to default position. And every time I ever went up there on a matter associated with the records, that was always the first reaction.

So I went up, briefed the staff. And the one thing that Melody Miller, the long-time confidential assistant to Senator Kennedy, said to me that day was, "Okay, here's the deal, John. We're briefed. I'll let the Senator know, but I can tell you from past experience what the Senator is going to say, and that is, 'Are you, John, going to be in the room when this all happens so that you can come back and give us an eyewitness report of what went on?'" And I said, "Well, I don't know that I have a need to know, but I will go back and report that to my boss, the Archivist, and let them know that that's your desire." So that's what I did. I went back and told Carlin, and he said, "Well, if they want you in the room, you're going to be in the room."

So anyway, I was in the room when the exhibits were opened up and examined—I mean, I can't tell you what it was like to look at the blood-stained clothes and the, you know, all the things and the bullets associated with an event that had changed the world when I was 13 years old. They had one evidence box, one box for the President's suit and tie, and then a separate box for Connally's suit that had been donated by the Connally family to the National Archives and to the Warren Commission. It never really was a big deal or a part of the Warren Commission, but they felt it necessary to have all those things together. And so, the Connally family donated that suit to the Archives. So it's in an evidence box. The two boxes were identical.

Well, we all sat down—there were probably 15 people in the room that observed this that day. Steve opened up the box showing the President's suit and tie and shirt and those things associated with that. It might have been more than one box. I can't recall. But when we moved on to the Connally suit, and they opened that box, all of the scientists that were there started laughing. And I thought, "Well, that's certainly an inappropriate reaction." These not-to-be-

named scientists, you know, are all chuckling. Well, when I looked over their shoulder, what I realized was, Mrs. Connelly, bless her heart, before she donated the suit, she sent it to the dry cleaners. And so it was still in a dry cleaners bag. And the smell of carbon tetrachloride, you know, wafted off this suit into the room. The scientists knew what the rest of us had no idea of, and that is, had that suit been exposed to carbon tetrachloride and gone through dry cleaning, there's no way they were going to be able to find any DNA in that fabric. So they're kind of throwing up their hands and chuckling about, "Well, okay, the party's over as far as us being able to find any DNA off that suit. That's not going to happen."

They knew then that it was going to all have to be from the DNA on the bullet fragments that they were going to have to rely on. And as it turned out, one of the things that we learned, that I went back and reported on the day to the Kennedy staff, is that while today modern handling of fragments and things at the scene of a crime involves people coming in wearing gloves, back in 1963, where DNA wasn't a big deal, blood was a big deal and blood analysis was a big deal, but not DNA. All of the detectives and everybody involved in law enforcement were touching all those bullet fragments over the years with their bare hands. So the amount of DNA that was on those bullet fragments was legion. And that created an inability to single out the DNA of the two individuals they were trying to trace. So, the sum and substance of it, when finally the scientists went away, it just wasn't determined that day in that room. They went away, you know, basically did their work and then came back with a combined report. And they were still unable to absolutely confirm using DNA the "magic bullet" theory. And so that was that.

Stephanie: That must have been something to be in that room when they're getting those artifacts out.

John: I'll never forget it. And one of the things about the integrity of the National Archives and the integrity of the National Archives process that I've certainly thought about recently regarding a previous President and his handling of records, is the integrity within the National Archives, even within the professional integrity of the Archives, of only looking at records on a need-to-know basis. You can imagine the number of people in the National Archives Building who would have been very interested in those exhibits, in that locked vault, and in those gray boxes, being examined and handled by their friends, who they were eating lunch with every day and were their colleagues and never ever saw any of that, because they did not personally have a need to know within the profession.

And so consequently, that was a special day for me in that, first of all, I'm a non-archivist. And second of all, I knew that there were archivists in that room that day that had absolutely never seen those materials because of the integrity of the process within the Archives with national security information, with sensitive information, with very, very sensitive information such as

the Warren Commission, that you didn't have a need to know. There was no way that anybody was going to even see any of those records, let alone handle them or be involved in them. And, I mean, I think that's one of the great things about the profession.

Another occasion I can recount, I was involved in a briefing specifically with the Senator, Senator Kennedy, that was a matter of Jacqueline Kennedy's suit that she wore the day of the assassination, the famous pink suit that she had on and wore in the motorcade and that was covered in a significant amount of the President's blood. And the Kennedy family, obviously, never wanted that to be displayed. They knew its historic value, but they wanted to get it someplace that would hold it and hold it in trust, but not display it. I think they certainly knew that all they needed to do was walk up the street to Ford's Theater and see the derringer that John Wilkes Booth used, and the blood-stained pillow that had been recovered from the President's bed at the Petersen House across the street from Ford's Theater, where he was carried after he was shot and where he eventually died. Those are display items today at the Ford's Theater, many years later.

While they never articulated this, I think they knew that at some point, in the distant future, there will be the public interest to display some of the JFK assassination artifacts, when not associated with the emotional pain that family members of the Kennedys or individuals who experienced that day and are still alive, would suffer. So the Archives has had, for some years, Jacqueline Kennedy's suit. But we never had a deed of gift for it. And so from the perspective of the National Archives, here we were kind of holding on to something that made us very nervous, because we did not have: A) paperwork or B) the interest or the desires of the donor written down.

So, getting into the details of the deed of gift, which—because I know I'll leave something out and I don't want to do that—the deed of gift is the deed of gift, and it's in the holdings now of the National Archives, as is Jacqueline Kennedy's suit. We had a problem where the last remaining heir of Jacqueline Kennedy was—I guess her son, John Kennedy Jr., had passed away at that point—Caroline was the closest surviving relative. And of course, Ted Kennedy is a relation by marriage, but not a blood relation. But he had taken over kind of handling the family matters. Well, we needed the signature of Caroline Kennedy on this deed of gift, which had been around for months and had been a very difficult matter to deal with by virtue of the fact that we had sent all this forward and nothing had happened on it.

So one of our tasks that day, in addition to talking about some appropriations matters, some improvements regarding the Kennedy Library, was to also talk about what Edward Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, was going to do with his records. He kind of wanted a center for the study of the United States Senate on the grounds up there adjacent to the Kennedy Library, which has

since, in fact, been created and is now in place. It was the first discussion of that that we had that day. It was also a very difficult job for Governor Carlin, the Archivist, to bring up the deed of gift. And he did that, and I'll remember that Senator Kennedy said, "Well, you can appreciate how sensitive a matter this is for the family. We understand the . . ." I think he used "historic." He said, "We understand the historic nature of this, but we also never want it to be displayed in the lifetime of any of the children or any of the nieces or nephews or whatever." And when you have a family the size of the Kennedy family, I mean, that was going to be a long time. So, he said he would take it up with Caroline, and the deed would, in fact, be signed. And I think within a month of that meeting, it was in fact signed and returned to the Archives. So that matter was taken care of.

So it was things of that kind of sensitivity that, you know, we needed to talk directly to the Senator. And we never ever asked him for anything associated with the Archives or the libraries or anything that he did not help a great deal with to the extent that he could in terms of that. And that was an important, important thing. I also had a wonderful voicemail when I retired from the National Archives and moved over to the Legal Services Corporation as their lobbyist. My first week on the job, I came back to the office from lunch, and I punched in my messages on my phone, and this familiar voice said, "John, this is Senator Ted Kennedy." And he said, "I understand you've retired from the Archives. I want to just tell you how much your work at the Archives and what you have done for our family means to me and to Caroline and to the Kennedy family, and how much we appreciate your service. And I just wanted to give you a call and leave you that message. So thanks very much." Click.

So I saved that message for a long time, and whenever I was having a bad day at my new job, I would punch in that message and listen to it again.

Stephanie: Yeah. What a great message to have, you know? [LAUGHS]

John: Yeah. Exactly.

Stephanie: Huh. Did you have any other high-profile cases, I'll say, during your time in that position?

John: Well, I did a lot of personal work with people that were in our leadership. I mean, Congressman Hoyer and I spent a lot of time together and got to know each other. Former members of Congress like—there were former members that we used for—Lindy Boggs, you know, was a great example. I mean, she was an icon of the appropriations world on Capitol Hill and was a very important and very high-profile member of Congress and somebody that

we really enjoyed a great relationship with and was kind of our—if Steny Hoyer was our godfather, Lindy Boggs was our godmother for many years, even after she left Congress.

And the leadership, I mean, Senator McConnell, who's heavily in the news these days, I had a lot of work in dealing with him over the years. Some members, like McConnell, had their own personal records. He collected writs of manumission from post–Civil War America, and he was interested in advice on how to preserve them or how to keep them from fading away. And so we had a personal visit with him on more than one occasion to, you know, talk about that and help him out in that regard. And Congressman, and then Senator, Roy Blunt, who was an important part of the leadership, we did a lot of work with him. So yeah, there were a number of members that came and went.

One of the things that I would say that my theory always was that, when a member of Congress was out of power, when a member of Congress was in the minority and not the majority, they had a lot more time on their hands. They were not the chairman of a committee or a subcommittee. They were not, you know, in the leadership kind of creating the budget or creating the agenda. They were really reacting to what the majority was bringing, in those regards. So when you're in the minority on the Hill, you've got more time on your hands. You also have less power.

My theory was that's the time we can get them and their family down to the National Archives for a tour. That's the time we can get them to spend time with us, because they've got more time on their hands at that time and are, frankly, just free more often than chairmen and people in power. And second of all, eventually, they will be in power. And when they got to that position, we wanted them to know us and love us and understand what we did for a living.

And so we had a pretty regular stream of members of Congress that we would invite down for what we call vault tours. Cindy Fox was a wonderful, wonderful hostess in the—for lack of a better term—in our treasure vaults associated with State Department records treaties and those kinds of things. Other archivists, like Milt Gufstason that we worked with through the years, were just great at opening the vaults up to their tours. Mike Gillette and then Richard Hunt were wonderful in opening up the records of Congress to show members the kind of records that were associated with their branch of government. So we used those opportunities to really showcase the records.

And so I always kind of felt like I was in the travel business part of my time—scheduling and all that, bringing the members in, greeting them, and getting the Archivist to tailor tours to the local interest of a member of Congress. What records do we have from their home, their

district, their state? We wanted to show them that the records that we preserve in the National Archives are federal, they originate from, you know, a member's district. So when a member thinks of the National Archives, and so that's where the laws go, that's where the Declaration of Independence is and the Constitution. Well, yes, but it's also where things that happened in your district are documented through photographs, maps, court records, and other transactional information. That's where all that's from as well.

And so to make them understand how local the history is, I'll never forget. I mean, one of the sets of records that we did a lot of very good things with were the records associated with the Mormon Church, you know, when they created the state of Utah. One of the things in the birth records of the state of Utah were Joseph Smith's diaries and Joseph Smith's records that really became the creating records for statehood. Well, when you bring a Mormon into those vaults, and you hand them records showing Joseph Smith's actual handwriting, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, they've never seen Joseph Smith's handwriting. They've never seen that before. And you put that in front of them, you really—I mean, they have a moment. And there were a number of very important members of Congress through the years, Majority Leader Harry Reid among others, that would see that, and that was a bonding moment for us with them. So that was important. That was an important part of what we did.

And one of the things that's interesting in terms of the longevity of that, when you now go into the main public exhibit at the National Archives, the main exhibit is called the *Public Vaults*. And that tagline came from the fact that it was the vault tours that we used to do for members of Congress and key guests that we used to introduce people to the National Archives. And that was back in the day that all we had was the Rotunda. When I came to the National Archives, the sum and substance of exhibit space for the National Archives was the Rotunda. And those exhibit cases that surrounded the Rotunda were the only space we had for rotating exhibits. So when the public vaults were created and the museum was created, and then the Lawrence O'Brien Gallery and the O'Brien contribution to that, and basically what it is today, that was all brand new. And so a lot of this concept came out of what Mike Gillette and Richard Hunt and Cindy Fox and Milt Gufstason had done through the years of opening the vaults up, which has kind of a mysterious vibe to it, you know. It wasn't the stacks. We went down the list of things that we could open up to the public. The stacks, you know, not so much. But the vaults, oh oh oh. There you are talking about something that's [LAUGHS] sexy. You know, you want to see behind that door.

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

John: So, a lot of that kind of came out of that over the years. We also, when members of Congress—and we had to be careful about this, but we did it, and we did it a lot—when

members of Congress would bring key constituents—I mean, there are constituents that are going to the doors of Congress on Capitol Hill every single day. You know, they're knocking on the door. They're going in. They're stating their case and, you know, they're lobbyists that are doing that every day. But there are a certain number of people back in the home district or the home state of a Senator or the home district of a Congressman, that are, shall we say, constituents of high value, meaning that they are the people that write the checks. They are the people that are the financial backing for members of Congress to run for reelection. With the internet age, that's a much broader group of people than it was back in the day.

Back in the day, it was a very relatively small—comparative to today—a relatively small number of check writers, and members of Congress would invite those people to come for a special week or a special weekend or a special visit to see them in their office on Capitol Hill, to be toured around the United States Capitol by the member of Congress. This was before, again, the Capitol Visitor Center opened. And it was all, kind of, personal tours and things back in those days. And they were always looking for things for those people to do in the course of their time in Washington. Well, John Constance [WAVES HAND] had an idea what those people could do. They could come down and get a very special tour of the National Archives, usually accompanied by either the member of Congress or the Senator or the member's spouse. That would be their tour guide or person kind of taking them around. The White House would typically be opened up to them through a special tour. The diplomatic rooms of the State Department would be opened up to them for a special tour, and the Smithsonian, obviously, would do things for them. But the National Archives was a big deal as part of that visit.

Stephanie: Yeah.

John: We would often start in the Rotunda before the public came in and be there when the Charters—back in those days, they would come up from the vaults. I can't tell you. It's top secret now how they get onto the display now. But back in the day, they came out of the vaults that had been produced by the Mosler Safe Company, up on scissor jacks. And they would appear in the encasements. Well, it was pretty damn cool to be there in the morning with nobody else in the Rotunda except you and your special guests and turn to the guard and say, "Raise the Charters." And the guard would push the button, and the Charters would come up out of the vault, and you'd see the Declaration of Independence appear and the Constitution appear and the Bill of Rights appear. So that was a big deal. And so for these special guests, that's the way their morning would start. And then we would take them into the vaults to see some other records and, after an hour or so, would send them on their way. And the next time I would see that member on Capitol Hill, they would say, "Thank you, John. That was the nicest thing that anybody has ever done in Washington for my people. And they will be talking about

it for the rest of their lives and wonderful and . . ." And, again, so it was like, "Remember the National Archives. [LAUGHS AND WAVES HAND] Remember the National Archives."

So, I mean, that was all part of the deal, and the things that I—you know, it wasn't rocket science, but it was very enjoyable. And it relied on a very capable group of archivists who knew their records and knew how to present them and tell the story of the records and tell the local story that might be of interest to an individual member.

Milt Gustafson knew the records of the Supreme Court. He knew the diplomatic records. And these people, when they would come to the Archives for a tour, it wasn't always at a convenient time of the day. They would come sometimes at 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. at night. And I always remember one night holding Milt over until about 7:30 at night waiting for a member to come off the floor so he could come with his staff and his family. And, you know, I never forgot it in terms of what Milt did for me that day. And this member of Congress never forgot it either, and for 20 years, was a friend of the Archives on Capitol Hill. So, you know, it works. It works. Doing things for people works.

Stephanie: Yeah, it sounds like. I mean, you're essentially marketing. Yeah, you're essentially marketing the National Archives to members of Congress and to the appropriations committee, then constituents and that sort of thing. I think it's really interesting, like you're giving them essentially a personal touch, you know, whether you're having them on hand to see the Charters of Freedom come up into the Rotunda or if you are personalizing tours. So, you know, you're having items available for them to view that are from their own district or something like that. So you're really showing them the value firsthand of what the Archives is all about and making it important to them.

John: Exactly. I mean, I think a lot of lobbying. Can you still hear me?

Stephanie: Yes.

John: My AirPods are getting low, I think.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: One of the things that I would say about lobbying as a profession is that you better be telling the truth. Okay, let's start with truth-telling. You know, lobbyists who have a very short shelf-life are the ones that go to Capitol Hill for the cotton industry or oil or you name it, and don't tell the truth. Those are the guys that you call former lobbyists, because they

don't last very long. All you gotta do is say something to a member of Congress that isn't true and have them go to the floor of the House or the Senate and repeat that on the floor of the House or the Senate, and then find out what they're saying is not true. You're toast. So, first of all, you're a truth teller. The main thing that all lobbyists do is provide information. You are channeling and targeting information to a member of Congress to help them make a decision. And, you know, whether they were going to add to our appropriation or subtract from our appropriation or leave our appropriation level to the next year, I at least wanted to have the confidence in myself that they knew what we were doing, that they knew what we would do with that money if they gave it to us. If they have to make a decision that another agency is going to get that money and we're not, so okay, we're going to live to fight again next year and we're going to go after that money again. But the first goal was to have them understand what the National Archives is, what we do, how important it is, how complex it is, and meet the people who are making those decisions every day. And all you need to do is meet an archivist who lives in these records and loves these records and understands that, wow, I mean, this is the real deal. I mean, these people are not doing this for, you know, for an hourly wage. These people are doing it because they love it. That was a big part of that communication, that we always wanted to keep going with them, that they got us.

Stephanie: So, I'm looking at the clock. We've got about, I think, seven minutes or so left for today. There were other things I wanted to talk about in terms of—again, when you were in congressional and public affairs—in terms of topics that you might have run into in that position in terms of theft of national treasures, preservation of electronic records, access to Presidential records, if you were kind of a point person on issues that would come into the media, you know, if someone was found to use personal email to do government business and things like that. I don't know if you want to start to talk about any of those things or if you want to hold it for the next time?

John: Yeah, let's hold that for the next time, if you will, and I'll think about it. I can also kind of make a list of happy stories and scandals that I can lay out. Scandals is too pejorative a term. I mean, more often than not, it was something that would happen that we had a story to tell. And I was there to get the story out. Happy to chat about that and to go into that.

Stephanie: Okay.

John: And every one of those controversies was also an opportunity to, through the press, explain to people what we did. And so a lot of that was kind of taking a . . . you know, and turning something around from a negative to a positive. That was certainly a goal and maybe an interesting one to put down on tape. So . . .

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah, kind of that educating the Congress and the public on really what our mission is and what we actually do, it sounds like.

John: Yeah, that was a part of it. And that then moved over into the whole web. The world of the World Wide Web in terms of trying to figure out how to do that most effectively through the electronic means, which we can talk about as well.

Stephanie: Yeah. Okay. Wonderful. Well, let me go ahead and stop the recording. Just hang on just a second here.

John: Okay.

[END RECORDING PART THREE]

[BEGIN RECORDING PART FOUR - October 6, 2023]

Stephanie: Okay. Welcome back. This is part four of an oral history with John Constance. Today is Friday, October 6th, 2023. And I just wanted to give a short recap from our last session. We talked about, or you talked about, the combining of Public Affairs with Congressional Affairs into one office. You mentioned fielding questions from Capitol Hill and the press, the public affairs website, financing the construction of All, and getting agency appropriations, in general, for—you named several drivers for our appropriations that are probably still very current today: ERA funding, the preservation of records, and the construction and maintenance of buildings. And then you also talked about bringing some of those appropriations committee staff and some members of Congress around to National Archives facilities around the country and giving them a show-and-tell and "this is why we need the money and this is why it's important to you and you should care," and then also working alongside the Kennedy family—and especially Ted Kennedy—and then being in the room when they took out some of the assassination artifacts for analysis and, you know, what an experience that was for you to be in that room. So that's kind of a recap of some of the topics that we talked about last time. Do you have anything in mind that you want to go over again or something else that you want to talk about in regards to those?

John: No. I mean, I've thought about this. I'm doing some fundraising right now for a nonprofit, and I'm starting to feel a little bit of the pressure again of coming up and meeting funding goals that I had kind of put aside after retirement. And I'm starting to feel some of that again. And I would only say that I felt a very, very personal responsibility in Congressional Affairs to figure out a way for us to get the money that we needed. I mean, I think everything that we

did, whether it was the tours and the visits and the, you know, the information that we would provide, everything was focused on getting the money. And I felt fortunate. I think some of my colleagues in the world of congressional affairs in larger agencies were not a part of the full run-up, shall I say, or the development of the budget. And therefore, they were kind of handed something to go and advocate for. I always felt fortunate at the National Archives that the Archivists that I worked for always ensured the fact that I was part of the discussions regarding budgeting from the very beginning. So I had heard all the background. I had heard all the debate internally as to what the priorities were going to be. And while I didn't set those priorities by a long shot, I was in the room when those priorities were set. And so I had a very, very good underpinning, shall we say, of information for the advocacy that I then got to do for the budget, and other people fought for the budget to the administration, to the President's people and the administration at OMB and whatever. That was kind of on a separate track. But the way it works in the real world is that no matter what the President recommends in his budget, we were somewhat independent players to go to the Hill and advocate, in many cases, for more money than was even in the President's budget. So you had to be careful about the way you handled it. But we were talking to people on the Hill that were really advocates of the Archives program, which I think we worked on, ensuring that over the years. And so we were generally in friendly territory on our committees, which was good. But anyway, I always felt a personal responsibility and a personal goal of seeing that we got as much money as we possibly could for the programs, for the agency. And that was kind of the orientation of the job no matter what function we were performing. That was really the ultimate goal. So . . .

Stephanie: Mhm. So even though you weren't setting the priorities, I mean, you were still able to advocate for and help us get more appropriations for the agency. And you're working with congressional members and committees. What do you think was key in forging some of those successful relationships?

John: You know, I think at some level—and I don't know whether this is the case today. In fact, I've been scratching my head recently regarding Congress and what it is today. But when I was up there advocating for the Archives, I ran into a lot of people that had a respect for history. I ran into a lot of people that had a respect for tradition, and I ran into a lot of people that understood the importance of preserving the past. As I jokingly said to you, I think at one point, that what you're trying to convey to them is you are preserving their legacy as well. I mean, they see themselves as key actors on the stage of American democracy. And by preserving their records and the materials about the agencies that they are working with and working for, you know, we achieve goals that put a good light on them as well. But I think it's very, very hard to come to Washington as a member of Congress and be sworn into the chamber and stand there on the House floor or the Senate floor and not have a sense of everything that's come before. And we really, really worked hard on that. When new members would come, we would have, as

I think I said, orientation for them at the Archives, where we showed them really what we did. And once they understood what we did, the reason for it and the need for it became pretty evident. So for the most part, I would say the majority of people that I worked with over the years had a—even if they didn't have an interest in history—they had a respect for it and that really was the key.

Stephanie: Interesting. Okay. Do you have any lessons learned from your time as the Director of Congressional and Public Affairs?

John: Okay. You know, I think the most important thing, as in a lot of things in life, you work on skills and you work on this and you work on this ability and that ability. It really all came down to relationships. I mean, it all came down to very personal relationships with people. And if you're interested in people, and you're interested in their lives—you know, I would typically go up there with the sense that I was calling on friends. I think that becomes very, very important. I had at least one Archivist of the United States, whose name I will not mention, who left one meeting once scratching his head about the interchange that we had with a staffer up there who said, "No, I'm not going to get you this number [SHOWS LEVEL WITH HAND]. We're going to try to get you this number [MOVES HAND UPWARD]." And he just couldn't wrap his head around how in the world it was that they were as welcoming and as willing to work with us as they were. And I remember in the car going back to the agency saying, "They like us. They like me. They like our mission. We have a great relationship with them. And at the end of the day, you know, they want to support the mission. And they also, the next time they see us, they want us to be happy."

That sounds so simple and simplistic, but I think it is about relationships, and it is about, you know—they knew that if there was something negative at the Archives, if there were something that was going to make them or their boss look bad, I would be the first one on the phone with them to tell them, "Boy, we really screwed up, and here you go. This is going to be embarrassing. It's going to be in the press. This is our answer. This is what we're doing to fix it." Whatever, as well as telling them, "Boy, this is a success we just had, and this is really a breakthrough, and this is wonderful, and, you know, I want your boss to come down. I want you all to be in the photograph when we celebrate this," whatever this was. And so it's both sides. And they always knew that I was going to be an honest broker. And, I think, that was the key.

Stephanie: So relationships, kind of building rapport with them, and building trust, it sounds like.

John: Yeah. I might have told you this story, but I had a cousin that was in the banking business, and I always remember that he required his tellers at the bank to know the names of every dog that came into the bank with their owner. This was in a posh area of Carmel, California. And, again, if you do that and you're not interested in dogs and you're not interested in people, it's kind of fake. But if you really are interested in people, and you go in and say, "How's your daughter doing at Clemson?" or "How's your dad doing? You said that he was in ill health, and is he getting better?" I mean, if you're faking that, you can see it 400-miles away. If you are interested in people, it comes across as genuine. And you develop a friendship over the years. And so, you know, that was something that was probably the most enjoyable part of the job as well.

Stephanie: Mm. Okay. Yeah, just getting to know them as people and their families and making those friendships.

John: Yes.

Stephanie: It sounds like, so you were kind of the point person when something would come out, say, for example, like in the media? Like they may hear that an agency deleted their email or somebody's using a private server or private email for government business and things like that. Classified records. So were you the one that was the point person that handled those questions, those cases?

John: Yeah, the information about those, I would handle it as a first point of contact. I mean, what my goal was, was to always get the subject expert to touch base with the staff person, because the subject expert was also the one that knew the issue with the most granularity and also what we were going to do about a particular issue or a particular violation or the theft of documents, which was, you know, a lot of times. Those were the things often that got the biggest press. I mean, the press might not understand the Archives, but they do understand someone stealing something from the government or from . . . yeah. And so in those cases, the inevitable cases that would come up, you know, I would be the point person, but I would quickly try to transition to the people who ran the search room or who were responsible for the records management program that had been violated or whatever. Because I never, internally, wanted people to think that I thought I knew more than they did, which frankly, I never knew more than they did. They were doing their job, their task. They've been professionally trained to do it, and they were doing it 10 hours a day. I was coming in as the messenger, and so . . .

One of the biggest battles I think I had with the Archivists of the United States over the years was my feeling of the need to get negative information to the Hill very quickly. And a lot of

times, the Archivists would say, "Well, we don't know what we're going to do. You know, we haven't investigated this enough." And my point always was, "Well, yeah, but it's going to be public possibly before we are prepared for it to be public. And the Congressman or the Senator is going to get a phone call from the press and say, 'What do you think about this?' Well, if we have gotten in touch with them early, and I have gotten a subject person in touch with them early to say, 'We know we've got a problem. We're going to fix it. And this is the timeline on which we're going to fix it,'" then, you know, you basically have created a space of time for you to work in, because if a Congressman was caught flat-footed on something, then suddenly they were the ones in control of the timetable and not us.

Stephanie: Yeah. Okay. You're kind of a point person, and then you turn into more of a facilitator, in a way, and getting that subject matter expert involved.

John: Exactly. Exactly. And again, it also helped preserve my relationship with the folks on the Hill from the standpoint that I wanted to get them the best information possible. And they knew that they were going to get that. One of the things that I learned over the years is that there are some archivists who can—how should I put it?—describe what they do with a very, very good ability to explain. There are other archivists that can't. And one of the things that I was constantly doing was trying to assess which ones were the ones that I wanted to put in front of the Congress and which ones I was—I was ultimately also the broker with the press, and my Public Affairs director, Susan Cooper, for many years, she and I were trying to figure out, okay, we need to tell this story. Who do we want to put in front of the camera to tell the story?

An awful lot of the Kennedy assassination interest in the country and the people in the country who were, you know, everything from the conspiracy folks to the people who were genuinely interested in that being released. They wanted to talk, once again, to the expert and thank God, I mean, we had in Steve Tilley, who was the custodian of all those of the Warren Commission and all those records. We had a guy that not only knew everything inside out, but, as we say in the business, the camera just loved the guy. He was very good on his feet. He was very good. And he was very diplomatic and extremely knowledgeable. So we had him, and I could list dozens of other people that we went to over the years in various areas of the Archives that could really tell the story.

Stephanie: Yeah, I could see that it would be good to get the right person in front of the camera to tell the story.

John: Oh, yeah.

Stephanie: Did you want to talk about any other high-profile cases that you had to deal with in any fashion while you were the director? I don't know. I had a few things listed here, like access to Presidential papers, preservation of electronic records, theft of national treasures. Anything that you want to speak about?

John: Yeah, I mean, we certainly had all of those. I mean, I would say that one of the things is the preservation of electronic records. Unfortunately, we were in the same subcommittee that had oversight over the Treasury Department and the IRS [Internal Revenue Service]. And one of the things that was a very large challenge for us as we were entering into the whole funding of the ERA, the whole thing came right after there had been some very large and very public screw-ups—for lack of a better term—by the IRS with their electronic systems and their electronic recordkeeping. And the IRS had dumped a whole lot of money into some systems that turned out just not to work and became obsolete in a short period of time, and it put the Congress—it put our subcommittee in a bad light.

So on the heels of that, in terms of their failure, here we are coming in and asking for in the neighborhood of a half-a-billion dollars for the development of the ERA system. And I can tell you, to say that they were wary of entering into a funding relationship on a large system would be the understatement of the year. And so a lot of it was a negotiation with them to come up with a way that we could get the money, but they would feel comfortable. This drove people in the agency just nuts, but the only way that we could get the money was with an agreement.

The GAO would come in and really do a parallel audit as we were spending the money. I mean, GAO was very regularly onsite. In fact, they had, in the early days of ERA, office space in the building kind of right next to us. And our subcommittee staff and the subcommittee were adamant that they wanted eyeballs that were reportable to the Congress—GAO being their investigatory arm. They wanted to be sure that they had that kind of oversight. And that was the only way we were going to get the money. And so we said, "Okay." GAO . . . they were scratching their heads, because their expertise is coming in after a project or after something has been done and, you know, investigating and auditing then.

One of the things that I told our people is, "Look, if this screws up, GAO has got money in the game as well. I mean, they're looking out for themselves just like we're looking out for ourselves. So with them in the room, we have a new kind of credibility in terms of the moves we're making and the way we're spending the money." So, GAO had a pretty sophisticated group that just looked at IT systems, and they were the ones that basically camped in with us. So that was really, I mean, that was the way that that was accomplished. And eventually, as I think I mentioned earlier, when Lockheed got the contract, then all of a sudden I had all of the

horsepower of Lockheed Martin and their lobby organization working alongside of me in order to ensure the money kept coming and the money kept flowing. They had a corporate interest in that at that point. And as is the case with weapons systems and a lot of things not quite as noble as ERA, in my humble opinion, that's what they do. They know how to get the train on track and continue the money flow for the development of those systems. And that also worked to our advantage at the Archives for ERA. So . . .

I think, obviously, a lot of the document theft issues over the years—the whole Sandy Berger fiasco, the much smaller but still no less aggravating disappearance of records over the years—was difficult. And I won't go into details on this because some of these people are—I think they're good people, and they've been punished, and they've paid their dues. But the thing that was the most aggravating, I think, to most people in the Archives was when employees would be associated with the theft of archival materials. And there have been some high-profile ones of those over the years as well. And those are even more difficult, because no matter what you try to do in the search rooms and no matter what you try to do with the interaction of the public, if you have a member of the staff who has fallen in love with a certain document, group of documents, or a category of records, and takes them away, they have numerous opportunities to do that, you know, undetected and undeterred. And those were, oftentimes, the most difficult and the most hurtful, I think, to people in the agency. And I had a couple of those to deal with as well in my tenure. So . . .

Stephanie: In your position as the director, then, were you doing the same thing? Were you talking with the media and getting those subject matter experts or whoever in there to sort of explain or smooth over what was happening?

John: Yeah. Yeah. And, again [LAUGHS], a lot of times you were dealing with the inexplicable. I mean, a lot of times with something like that, you were staring at this and staring into the abyss, and they would say, "Well, so what are you going to do about it?" And again, there's some of those things that just are not answerable. Fortunately, they were very, very rare. And that's one of the things that you tried to explain to people, but from a staffing standpoint, you know, it's difficult in business.

You always have the checks and balances associated with not one person handling the money, but more than one person handling the money and signing off and all the approvals and sign-offs having to do with petty cash or whatever it is in a business. In the Archives, by virtue of how thinly we are spread, oftentimes, I mean, it's one person by themselves in the stacks. I mean, it's not somebody with somebody looking over their shoulder. It is one individual. And we are an organization that truly relies on the integrity of every individual to do the right thing, particularly given the fact—and again, this was a matter of even when things aren't explicable in

terms of why they happen, things like the fact that we do not have an item-level control over textual archives. We know that that box contains these files, but what specifically is in each one of those files? We don't know that. And so if there happened to be an Abraham Lincoln signature that somebody came across, or if there happened to be a piece of Confederate money that was part of a serial set and invaluable, and if there was something that was very unique, we did not have an inventory that said, "Oh, here it was, and it's not there anymore. And so who had access or contact to it?" So when you don't have that item-level inventory, it's very difficult to do that.

So again, I have the highest respect not just for the National Archives, but for—in spite of what we're talking about right now—for all the people that work there, because by and large, 99.9 percent of the people that I worked with in my career loved history, loved archives, loved who we were and loved working for the agency. And when you had the occasional rogue, it was tough. It was tough for everybody.

And once again, if you've established a relationship with people on Capitol Hill, and you go in, and you express true regret and true angst and true heartbreak over these things, they get that, too. You know, that's the other side of those kinds of personal relationships is when I or one of my colleagues would go up there and say, "Boy. I mean, this is bad. This is really, really bad." And one of the things that I might have mentioned earlier was that, back in the day, when you were relying on if somebody took a document—if they take a document, and they want to take it home, and they want to put it in a desk drawer, and they just want to keep it—that has always been a problem.

But if they want to monetize it, if they want to take it and sell it or get money for it—back in the day, you really relied on just a handful of really good rare document dealers. That was the name of the game. They were the people, the guys in Boston or Philadelphia or New York or Los Angeles. There were a handful of people where the top dollar came from if you walked in the door and said, "I got a signature. I got . . ." whatever. They had an integrity where they would pick up the phone and call us and say, "Hey, I think we got something that's yours here. It looks like a federal document to me. It certainly looks like the chain of custody on this at some point came through you guys. And I got a guy here who is coming back tomorrow and wants to sell it to me." So that would bring us into a scramble to kind of try to figure that out. And oftentimes, those things ended well in terms of getting both the document recovered and also the punishment meted out.

What changed all that, of course, was the internet and eBay, where somebody could put a document on eBay, and maybe they would not get top dollar for it, but they would get a lot of money for it so quickly that you couldn't keep up with it. And so consequently, that really

became something that was damaging. Eventually, both our IG shop as well as some third-party sleuths in the history world caught on to this and were regularly reviewing eBay and regularly reviewing all that. And so that, in those cases, was what we went to the Hill and said, "Here's the solution. Here's what we're doing is trying to be out there shopping right along with everybody else so that if something comes up that looks like ours, we'll be able to get in the game and get the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] involved early on as to the fact that this is federal property." So anyway.

Stephanie: Huh. Interesting how technology has changed and how that changed our processes both externally and internally.

John: That person-to-person commerce that eBay created, while very convenient if you're dealing in stolen goods, is also very problematic. And so that was that. But just in summary regarding all of that, again, I thought the responsibility was always first and foremost, to be honest. I mean, once you lose your integrity, you can never get it back with people. And so always, always being honest in terms of what we were thinking and what we were trying to do was really the key. And in turn, that would help us be put in circumstances and situations by the folks on Capitol Hill that would enable us to be successful. And, you know, they respected that.

I'll tell this brief story—one case where Senator Stevens of Alaska staff reached out to us and said, "You know, we're going to Alaska for the 100th, for the centennial, of the Alaska Gold Rush, and we are taking with us a delegation from the U.S. Postal Service. We're going to be doing first-day covers, stamps that are associated with the centennial." And they asked me, "Do you happen to have any records that would be helpful to that effort, records that you could take color facsimiles of and, for example, present to local officials in Alaska as part of this effort?" And we said, or I said, "Let me check with the experts." And so I went back and sure enough, within 24 hours, we had identified a number of territorial records and things that we had that we were pretty certain that were not existing in public libraries or local archives within Alaska, and that would be something from which we could make color facsimiles and present to local officials. And so I went back. I had some samples, and I pitched this to Senator Stevens' staff, and they said, "Oh, my gosh. This is exactly what we're looking for."

And so they arranged charter transportation for the Archivist of the United States and I to go to Alaska to do a multiple-city tour associated with this centennial, to present these things to local officials, and to be part of just this joyful celebration in Alaska. And Senator Stevens, who really was a hands-on politician—I mean, I'll never forget. We went to Nome, Alaska, and we sat there, and we watched this long line of Native Alaskans out the door at a restaurant called Fat

Freddy's. And there sat Senator Stevens, along with his staff. And these people came in one at a time and told him about some problem that they were having with the federal government, some issue of the U.S. mail or Social Security or whatever. He listened to every single person for an hour and a half and then would turn to his staff, and they would solve these problems one at a time.

Stephanie: Huh.

John: The rest of the story is that we established a very personal relationship with Senator Stevens—not an easy guy to get to know. And the Archivist established a very good relationship with him. Wind the clock forward about a year, and I went to a hearing and in a nighttime kind of cabal where our Senate appropriations subcommittee was looking for a big chunk of money to be shifted from one agency to the other, our Electronic [Records] Archives money went away. And I'm sitting there at a hearing, a bill markup, the next morning, and I pick up on the fact that there's a line item on this chairman's mark that's missing. And what's missing is all of our ERA money.

Well, there were two people on the subcommittee: the chairman at that time—Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama—and the vice chair was Barbara Mikulski. The ranking member was Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, someone who I thought we had had a pretty decent relationship with. But obviously, she was willing that night to cut a deal and to cut us out. So I ran out the door, called the office and told the Archivist that we had a problem and suggested that he get on the phone to Ted Stevens. Ted was going to be opening the Senate that morning. He was President pro tempore of the Senate at that time, and he was going to gavel the Senate in at 10:00 a.m. that morning. This hearing, this markup, had been at 9:00 a.m. And so Governor Carlin got on the phone and was able to get Ted Stevens in his car as Stevens was going to the Hill. John basically explained to the Senator what had happened and Stevens said, "Don't worry about it." He said, "The bill is going to come up this afternoon before the full appropriations committee. By the time the bill comes up, your problem is going to be taken care of."

Well, so that afternoon, I go to the full committee markup and, all of a sudden, I get a progression, and I mean a progression of Senate staffers from both the subcommittee and the full committee seeking me out and apologizing for what had happened. They all conveyed the fact that Senator Stevens was extremely angry that this had all come down. They assured me that the money had been restored to the bill. And they wanted me to get back to John Carlin with sincere apologies for the fact that our money was wiped out in a nighttime deal on this bill. And I mean, I'll never forget that. And again, if you draw a line back to how we established that relationship with Senator Stevens, it was the wonderful Hill staff who I was calling on that thought of us and said, "Hey, you know, here's an opportunity in Alaska where you can spend

five days with us, you know, one-on-one with the Senator." And it was really through that then that you wind it forward a year or so and boom, there we are needing a favor at the 11th hour and getting it. So . . .

Stephanie: Oh, my gosh. What a story.

Transitioning a little bit. . . . I'm not sure if this is at the same time or at some point towards the end of your career, but you were appointed to the Senior Executive Service [SES]. And I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit, maybe the process and some of the pros and cons for becoming an SESer?

John: Yeah, it was really when I took over Public Affairs as well as Congressional Affairs. The job got larger, and it paralleled with an awful lot of colleagues in other agencies, other independent agencies, that wore both hats and they were typically SES. So I went to the Archivist—again, John Carlin at that time—and I said, "You know, I'd like to explore this and, you know, no harm, no foul. Can I look into it?" And he said, "Yeah, sure. Go ahead." So I looked into it. I got the information from our personnel shop. They in turn got the information from the Office of Personnel Management. And this process started.

Essentially, what I had to do was write a pretty lengthy justification. They had a number of categories, and I don't remember now what the categories were, but it was managing change and, you know, a variety of things that really paralleled all agencies. And I had to write like I hadn't written since I had been in graduate school. I had to write these long, long justifications. And again, that exercise was—while I kind of railed at the process—I understood that they were forcing anybody who was going to apply to become a member of the SES, they were forcing you into kind of an intellectual exercise that really helped prepare you for the wider responsibility or the bigger responsibility. And, you know, I will be honest with you. I don't remember. . . . Each agency had a certain fixed number of SES slots. And my recollection is that the agency itself had to recommend my appointment to both the White House and the Office of Personnel Management, as I recall. And then, you know, you wait to see, and you get the word.

I don't remember getting the word, but I do remember being sworn in at the White House. Judge Roy Lamberth was the federal judge that swore us in, and the swearing-in was in the Indian Treaty Room at the White House. It was pretty cool. I mean, it really was one of those days in my career that I fondly remember and think to myself, "Boy, something special is happening today: One—going to the White House, and two—having a federal judge swear you in for the SES." And it was good. I mean, and again, a lot of people just associate it with the pay aspect of it. That certainly helped, and it certainly helped in my retirement. But just the honor

of being part of that community was good. And then there were training opportunities and things that I was able to take advantage of that were just for the SES. And that was fun as well. So, you know, that was clearly a good moment as I think back on it. Thanks for that question.

Stephanie: Yeah. I had no idea that you would be sworn in at the White House and that each agency had a certain number that they could appoint. Wow.

John: And they had a very nice reception for us. The reception included these little White House cocktail napkins. I think I might still have some of those here at the house. [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Yeah. Well, that was a big moment. Of course! [LAUGHS]

Speaking of the White House, did you notice any differences when there's been a change in Presidential administrations?

John: In my career, the answer was no, because each White House had the common sense to let the records management folks in the Office of Administration and the Office of Records Management within the White House really take charge. I mean, they understood the continuity of that expertise. All administrations in my career were usually very open to having the Archives come in and provide advice and training. The Archivist of the United States, being a nonpolitical appointment, facilitated that. And there was always this openness in that. Once again, I'm sure there are people that had that specific responsibility in the Archives that would probably answer this question differently. But as someone who is looking at it from a distance in terms of how it impacted me with any battles with the White House or any, you know—no.

And that was what was so disappointing, certainly with the Trump administration and all the very high-profile things that have come out of that lack of understanding or lack of respect or lack of . . . "Lack" is a good [LAUGHS] . . . Just cover the waterfront with that term. Everything that has come as a result of that, up to and including federal felony charges, I think, like a lot of things that had become very routine and should have been routine through the years were no longer routine in the Trump administration. And that has been the result. So . . .

Stephanie: Yeah. So over the last four sessions that we've had, we've covered a lot of ground. What do you think are your most, like, proud moments or your favorite accomplishments throughout your time at the National Archives?

John: I would say groundbreakings, plural. Certainly Archives II. That day was very, very special for me and my colleagues. I mean, and there were many, many, many people whose hard work made that day possible. And I'll never forget that. I still, in my library here, have photographs

of that day and, in fact, a souvenir paperweight that's somewhere here on my desk. Jim Megronigle, Adrienne Thomas, Michele Pacifico, and others should have their names engraved on that building. I was a bit-player by comparison, but certainly played a role.

When we opened a new building for the Georgia regional archives . . . I mean, that was great in that there had been a lot of hard work associated with that. By virtue of the way that Presidential Libraries are at least initially funded, those were not things that—I mean, they are funded by their foundations—so while the ribbon cuttings of Presidential Libraries were always a very fun social event, for us in terms of any individual sense of accomplishment, that was different.

And I would say that, you know, the day that I retired from the Archives, they had a reception for me in the Archivist's conference room and—I'm going to try to say this without getting choked up, but that might be too much to ask—I looked around that room at colleagues internal to the Archives that I had been honest with and worked side-by-side with all those years, people on Capitol Hill that came when they didn't have to, but came to the reception in numbers that, to me, were significant, and having my family there that had kind of seen the other side of this up to and including my daughter Brittany, my younger daughter, who was then getting ready to go to law school. She was the one I took to Bring Your Daughter to Work Day, who disgustingly said at the dinner table one night to the family, "All Dad does is talk for a living."

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

John: [LAUGHS] But she got to see a room full of people that I did talk to for a living over the years that had enough respect for me and what I had done that they came out that day. Yeah, those are the ones that stand out and all of the small moments that people reached out and thanked me every year for a number of years. It was a battle to keep NHPRC in business, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. They would get zero funding, and we would fight and fight and fight, and we'd get them funded again. And every year, I mean, those folks at NHPRC never, ever failed to say thank you. And they were there that day as well and gave me a gift recognizing that. So that was a real poignant kind of moment in my life, in my career, and one that I'll really cherish. So . . .

Stephanie: Yeah. It must feel very nice to know that you were appreciated that much, that that many people turned out and gave you their thanks.

John: Yeah, exactly. You know, you can get carried away. The first thing I said that day when everybody had said all the nice things about me, and I looked at this room full of smiling faces, I got up to the podium and said, "I'm announcing today my candidacy for President of the United States." [LAUGHS]

Stephanie: Of course you did. [LAUGHS]

John: And I thought, "Whoa! Hold on a second. I've [LAUGHS] gotten a bit carried away." So, anyway . . .

Stephanie: [LAUGHS] That's awesome. So you retired from the National Archives, but then you went into the private sector, correct?

John: Well, yeah, semi. The organization that I worked for was Legal Services Corporation, and they are a government corporation, a nonprofit. They're set up very similarly to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, CPB. And Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] are kind of, you know—they get federal money, but they're a nonprofit. The structure is somewhat the same. And I went to work for them as their public affairs and congressional affairs guy, able to call on a lot of the same people. And I euphemistically said as I was retiring, that I had worked for 35 years for an agency that preserves the United States Constitution, and I was going to work now for legal aid, seeing that low-income people have the ability to get counsel in the courts. And now I was going to work for an organization that tries to make the U.S. Constitution work for everybody. And that, for me, was the connection.

A lot of the subject matter was different. I had to learn the subject matter quickly, but the skills were the same. In fact, one of the people that I called on regularly in the appropriations committee was the one that picked up the phone when he heard I was interested in possibly retiring and saying, "I'll tell you the people that need your help, and that is the Legal Services Corporation." He said that they've just lost their congressional affairs guy, and he said, "Call this guy, and ask him about the job." And so once again, because of my relationships with people on the Hill, they looked out for me as I was retiring and suggested this job, which turned out to be a good five years. I really enjoyed that, and I learned a whole lot more. I met hundreds and hundreds of new people in that job, and I can proudly say I took them to their high-water mark of appropriations. We got them \$420 million for appropriations in the year before I left, and it was the highest appropriation that they had had in their modern era. So . . .

Stephanie: Wow.

John: I felt really, really good about that as well. And again, I made some new friends on the Hill by virtue of some different committee assignments. But when you have a network like that, people would, unsolicited by me, call the new people I was calling on Capitol Hill to tell them, "This guy is a good guy. You know, he's honest. You can believe what he says," you know, whatever. So, they really paid that forward for me. And that was something again. I regularly stay in touch through Facebook and my blog and other means with all of those people. And on the rare occasion I get back to Washington now, I go see them. And all those folks on the Hill from both my Archives years and my Legal Services Corporation years are still friends.

Stephanie: That's great. Is there something or someone that you miss most about NARA, about your time there?

John: You know, one of the people I've thought a whole lot about the last couple of years is Deb Wall. Debra was a very young staffer when I first met her, and she worked for a guy named John Scroggins, who I'd worked for also. And just to see her career advance through the years and then take over the positions of Deputy and then Acting Archivist of the United States in maybe the most challenging year of the Archives' modern history, and the way she handled it, and the honest way that she was the broker for that whole year. Very impressive. And I've stayed in touch with Deb, and that's been just great to see that.

Stephanie: Yeah.

John: The guy that I recommended for the job, John Hamilton, head of Congressional Affairs, he's still there. And Shawn Morton and Kate Slauch, who I hired and who worked for me in Congressional Affairs, are still there. They are good people. So it's very nice to see that continuity. An agency like the Archives needs that continuity. They don't need one guy like me in there for too long, but they need people who've kind of learned in the vineyard and, you know, continue the legacy. That's very important to a place like the Archives. And one of the things about archivists and one of the things about people who like history, they hate change. [LAUGHS] So consequently, they're so averse to change. The benefit of that is that you get people who don't want to move, who don't want to, you know, they certainly want more money and they want to move up in their career, but they look around at the landscape and they say, "Well, who's doing what we do?" And the answer is nobody. And so it's like, this is a nice place to be, you know? I mean, if you're a walrus, you want to be in the water, you know. You want to be up north where it's cold. They look around and say, "Well, I'm a walrus. I don't want to go to Miami Beach. You know, I like it right where I am."

Stephanie: [LAUGHS]

John: So consequently, it works out well for everybody. And the people that it worked for the best are the people that are the least likely to understand and the least likely to say thank you, and that's the American public. That's stuff that's—you have to carry your “ataboys” along with you in an agency like the Archives because, unfortunately, the pats on the back are, I think, sadly few and far between. But you all do very, very good work and important work. And that's why everybody kind of stays in place.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah. There's a lot of long-timers with the agency, for sure. Yeah. Well, believe it or not, I've run out of my questions. But was there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about or any words of wisdom or anything that you wanted to add to the interview?

John: No. I just want to thank you and thank the History Office, and the fact that the agency has this program of oral histories says a lot about the National Archives. And from what I know of you and your leader, Jessie Kratz, I mean, you got the absolute right people doing it, and you've got them doing it for the right reasons. And because you're in an agency that understands the past is prologue, it's a good thing to do this. And I just want to end by congratulating you and your colleagues for your patience and your preparation and your time, because I've genuinely enjoyed it.

Stephanie: Good, because I've really enjoyed it too. So I'm glad that you enjoyed it also, that it wasn't just a long exercise that you were putting yourself through. So this has just been wonderful. It's been so interesting over these past four sessions, and I appreciate you taking the time out to do this, even though, you know, you're traveling around the world and whatever you're doing, a lot of other other projects that you have going on. So I appreciate you taking the time out to talk with me about everything.

John: Well, Stephanie, it's been a genuine pleasure to meet you. And I will [CROSS-TALKING].

Stephanie: Thank you. Thank you.

John: You're another person whose career I will now follow. So congratulations. Yeah. And congratulations Archives to have somebody like you in this role. So . . .

Stephanie: Well, thank you. Well, hey, I'm going to stop the recording now, okay? And then I just want you to hang on just for a second, okay?

John: Okay.

Stephanie: Okay.

[END RECORDING – PART FOUR]