

Access and security: a delicate balance

Two major missions of the National Archives seem to contradict each other.

The first is the public's right of access to the Government records in our holdings. Americans should be assured that they can visit the National Archives and use "their" records for whatever reason—to research family history, to document eligibility for Federal benefits, or to learn more about how Federal officials have conducted themselves in office.

Last month, I reported to you on progress NARA has made in the past two years on increasing access to our holdings:

- steady development in building the Electronic Records Archives and developing Government-wide standards for classification;
- partnerships to broaden and deepen Internet access to our databases and to digitize more of our traditional holdings; and
- preparations for two more Presidential libraries in the National Archives' nationwide system.

At the same time, NARA is improving the response rate to requests from researchers, historians, journalists, and others for records under the Freedom of Information Act.

Then, there is a second NARA mission, apparently a contradictory one: maintaining the security of the records we hold for the American people. Understandably, for citizens to rule themselves, they must have access to records that will document their rights, call Government officials into account, and help them learn from the nation's past.

In the past few years, however, several major breaches of security have occurred at some of our facilities, and at least two individuals have gone to prison for removing documents from the National Archives. Security procedures have been increased at all our facilities in recent years, but theft remains a serious problem.

With both access and security issues in mind, in mid-April NARA staff met with our counterparts from the Library of Congress, from several components of the Smithsonian Institution, and from Library and Archives Canada.

For one long, spirited afternoon, we



discussed security problems and shared some solutions we have implemented.

Providing the grist for discussion were two cases of document theft, one from NARA,

one from Library and Archives Canada. We reviewed both of them step by step to analyze what happened, our responses, and how those responses might have been more effective.

The theft from the National Library of Canada involved papers relating to Glenn Gould—classical pianist, composer, and conductor—one of Canada's greatest musicians. The Library holds some eight meters of textual records, photographs, sound recordings, and other materials relating to Mr. Gould.

Library and Archives Canada received a tip regarding these stolen materials, which were being advertised on a web site. Eventually, the accused thief was tracked down, brought to trial in New York, and found guilty of grand larceny and possession of stolen property.

National Archives staff, in turn, recounted the case of Harold Harner, who admitted to stealing more than 100 documents from NARA. An investigation led to Harner after a Civil War researcher saw for sale on the Internet the same document he himself had once used at the National Archives. Harner was sentenced to two years in Federal prison.

The group also discussed how to determine that something is missing, how to recover stolen materials, and how to return stolen materials to their original condition.

The participants also agreed that more exchanges of ideas and potential safeguards against theft were needed and made plans to meet again next spring to explore these security issues in greater depth and to seek more effective solutions.

At issue is finding the right balance between the public's right of access to Government records and the security

measures we must take to protect those records. We at NARA have increased security in all research rooms in recent years, with such measures as surveillance cameras and restrictions on what a researcher can carry into the research room. More needs to be done, but it must be done carefully to preserve the legitimate rights of access while maintaining an effective level of security.

NARA staff is determined to prevent the kinds of thefts experienced in recent years. When thefts occur, however, these cases are pursued aggressively to track down the documents and ensure that the guilty parties are brought to justice.

Effective security for the records and artifacts entrusted to us remains a sacred mission for the National Archives, and we are fortunate to have a vigilant staff, dedicated to combatting theft. I commend all of you for your efforts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

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