

A progress report on declassification

Declassification issues do not directly involve the majority of the nationwide NARA staff, but they are an important part of our mission. We are doing some important work in this area, and I want to report to all of you on its progress.

More than a year ago, after learning that some agencies had removed declassified documents from public purview at NARA with an eye toward reclassifying them, I announced that NARA would take several major steps regarding declassification issues.

One of them was the creation of the National Declassification Initiative, or NDI, to better coordinate and integrate our declassification efforts with those of other Federal agencies. The NDI is also aimed at improving the quality of reviews of classified material and releasing as much information as we can as quickly as possible.

The NDI, which began in October 2006, involves teams of experts from our staff and from the agencies that originate and contribute to classified documents. I supervise the process personally, and the interagency team is led by **Michael Kurtz**, Assistant Archivist for Records Services—Washington, DC. The major agencies involved are the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Defense, including the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. I am pleased to report that these teams are making visible progress toward the NDI's goals.

First, we are seeking to accelerate the review of some 160,000 cubic feet, or about 480,000,000 pages, of classified records at Archives II. These records have received an initial review by their originating agency, but now many of them need to be reviewed by other agencies with "equities," or classified information from other, non-originating agencies that is contained in the records. The Presidentially ordered deadline for making these "equity" referrals was December 31, 2006, and agencies have three years, or until December 31, 2009, to review and decide on their equities in such referrals, or they are then subject to automatic declassification.

Ordinarily, resolving referrals requires a large investment of not only resources, but also time. Referring material to individual agencies for review requires a significant amount of time to send the records, either physically or electronically, then additional



time for the agency to review them and report back, and then more time to resolve any questions that arise. However, that is not the case with NDI, which seeks to make the process

more efficient and effective.

Now, agency representatives come to Archives II and, with NARA staff, examine the classified documents. If another agency needs to review it for equities, the representative of *that* agency is also at the table, and the matter can be settled on the spot. This is one of the keys to the NDI's success so far.

Second, we are performing quality assurance on the previous *initial* review of the documents conducted by the agencies. We want to ensure that material that ought to be made public is released, and material that ought to be withheld, for national security or other reasons, is *not* released. We also want to avoid having agencies over-refer material to other agencies or withhold information that does not require continued classification.

The interagency quality assurance team recently reported some very early results based on samples from 87 records series, and the news is good. In the end, the team found that 72 passed, 12 failed, and 3 require additional sampling before a final decision can be made. Those series that failed require a variety of measures to make them eligible for continued processing for eventual release.

The declassification activity should also be viewed in the larger picture. The 160,000 cubic feet of classified records at issue represents only that which we have on hand today and does not include accessions that will arrive in the near future that will require additional declassification processing. Moreover, these records are just part of a backlog of about 1 million cubic feet of unprocessed records of all kinds, not just classified ones. To decrease, and eventually eliminate, this massive backlog and keep up with future accessions, we have, as you may know, reassigned a number of our experienced staff archivists who are familiar with those records.

They are writing descriptions for all records series to the appropriate level to ensure adequate access by professionals and others who do research at NARA.

A similar effort is being made in our Presidential libraries, under the Remote Archives Capture Project (RAC), developed by the libraries and the Central Intelligence Agency. Classified documents that are approaching 25 years of age are scanned, brought to the Washington, DC, area, and reviewed by equity-holding agencies to determine whether their information should remain classified

The Office of Presidential Libraries has scanned more than 3.5 million pages of classified material from the Truman through Carter administrations. By December 2006, the libraries had met the deadline for referral of multiple-equity documents. So far, the libraries have received decisions on more than 500,000 pages of materials as a result of these procedures.

The NDI and the RAC help us focus on one of our major missions: providing access to as many of the records of the Federal Government as possible. In the final analysis, the success of the NDI and NARA's leadership will be measured in terms of how it assists in fulfilling our strategic goal to ensure access by the public as soon as legally possible. This will require unprecedented output in order to move 160,000 cubic feet through the process in a relatively short period of time.

The ready availability of these vital records is essential in a democracy such as ours. Citizens must be able to hold their government officials accountable, obtain copies of records that guarantee their rights and entitlements, and see and read the story of the nation.

To repeat a phrase I use regularly, the National Archives is in the access business, and its efforts are focused on providing maximum accessibility to Federal records in a timely manner.

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

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States