

**Draft Transcript of National Archives Assembly Legacy Project Interview with Dr. Michael J. Kurtz**

**February 24, 2011**

**Interviewer: John LeGloahec**

**LeGloahec:** Alright, well, good afternoon. My name is John LeGloahec and we're here today to interview Michael Kurtz, who is Assistant Archivist for Records Services here at the National Archives. And we are interviewing him upon his retirement from the National Archives. We've prepared a list of questions that we're going to go through and sort of take you through your long, distinguished career at the National Archives and find out some of the stories that you'd like to share with us on your departure...

**Kurtz:** I'm glad to do it. Thank you for the opportunity.

**LeGloahec:** First question is that after receiving your B.A. in History, which you received from Catholic University, and your M.A. from Georgetown, what brought you to the doors of the National Archives?

**Kurtz:** Well, actually I was working on my Masters when I came to the Archives in March of 1974. And, you know, it would be nice to have an elevated, professional reason for coming. I needed a job and I put my application in and in those days, in the olden days, you put in your 171 to the Civil Service Commission and you got an automatic 100 if you were a college graduate, and I was, and the form was referred to the General Services Administration, of which the National Archives was a part. And I began to get a series of forms. One said, "We're sort of interested in you, don't quit your job." The second one said, "We're a little more interested, don't quit your job." And about the third time, it says, "We're very interested"; offered me a job. And I had a chance, I had a choice, actually, of two positions at NARA; NARS as it was then, the National Archives and Records Service. One was in, what was called Territorial Papers and Tom Gedosch gave me a tour; this was before I made up my mind which one to go to. The other was in Records Declassification. So, Tom gave me some very good advice and from time to time over my career I've gotten good advice that I've been very fortunate. And Tom said, "Well, Territorial Papers is going to last forever, but if you're really ambitious, you want to get ahead, go to Records Declassification." I did and parenthetically, Territorial Papers was abolished two years later so that was my first lesson that things are not permanent in the bureaucracy. So, after consideration, I took the Records Declassification job and started on March 4, 1974.

**LeGloahec:** Interesting, that at the end of your career, the National Declassification Center became such a crowning achievement for you...

**Kurtz:** It all comes around, doesn't it? That's what I thought, "I'm back in Declassification".

**LeGloahec:** So, you were aware of the archives profession? You knew that there were people out there who did this kind of thing; you said, "Well, I want to be an archivist when I grow up."

**Kurtz:** You know, to be honest, no, I did not. In fact, until the first day of work, I never was in the Archives building, though I went to Catholic University. I was majoring, actually, in European History and I really was not aware of the Archives as a profession. I learned all of that as I started here and it's all unfolded ever since. But, no, I can't claim that, you know, I woke up one day as a precocious youth and decided I wanted to be an archivist. But, I'm so grateful that I've found the profession.

**LeGloahec:** That is, tends to be very typical of the profession on a whole. You know, a lot of people, all of a sudden, find themselves in Archives and they're thinking, "Well, what am I doing next?" So, you're not alone and you come from some very distinguished company. Take for a minute and talk about what were your impressions of the agency when you first arrived here?

**Kurtz:** Well, I remember the orientation on March 4<sup>th</sup> and everybody gathered and the person, the lady from personnel (in those days, it was the Personnel Department) said that the Archivist insisted that we arrive at 8:45 and leave at 5:15. She didn't say anything about what happens in between but I was real clear, you had to be here on time, you had to leave on time. And in those days, there wasn't flexitime and any of these kinds of adjusted schedules. And, so we would gather in the office where I worked and when the clock said 5:15, we were allowed to leave. So, it was a very regimented, in many ways, much more rigid, less flexible of an organization; I think both in the way work is done and in the way employees are allowed to work and interaction between managers and staff. It was a very, very different agency. More formal, more academically oriented. Most who wanted to be, all who became archivists had to have backgrounds in American History; most had, many had advanced degrees. So, you didn't have library schools, you didn't have archival concentrations, such as you do at information schools around the country now. So, it was a very different profession, it was a very different organization.

**LeGloahec:** For what was a very impressive career at NARA, take a minute and sort of give us the timeline that we'll address as we go through here as to the various places that you've worked over the years...

**Kurtz:** Well, when I started in Declassification, of course you have to have security clearance and I didn't have one. So, I was detailed for several months to work in, what was then called the Military Archives Division. Here, the Archives in Washington, in those days, was divided between the Civil Archives and the Military Archives. I do remember my first day also, where I met Alan Thompson, who was the Director of Declassification, and he asked me, he said, "Do you know what they call us at DOD?" And I didn't even really know, probably, what DOD was but I said, "No." He said, "Dead letter clerks." So, I think that kind of goes back to kind of how the agency sort of saw itself at that time. But anyway, I was given a technician, I came in as an Archives Technician; I was a GS-05. So, I started assignments and in about two or three months later the security clearance came through, it was a much quicker process than it is these days. So, then I went for several months back to Declassification, then I was offered a permanent technician position back in the Military Archives Division, in the processing section. So, I was always working in, what was called then, Military Projects. So, I started out as a technician and as an archivist, doing processing, what we now call, processing. So, I became an archivist, I

believe somewhere around July of '75 and started then of course in September with the Archivist Training Program, as they had in those days.

So, I stayed in the Military Archives Division for the next six years until 1980. In the middle of that period of time I went into Modern Military and did reference and so I had both, actually, both processing and reference. In 1980, I was interested in getting a promotion, so I talked to my supervisor at that time and I said, "Well, how does it look?" and he said, "Well, in about ten years." He said, "There are a lot of people ahead of you." So, I thought, "Hmm, I don't know about this." So, I had been doing work out at Suitland, at the Washington National Records Center, on my dissertation; because, in those days, there was an archives component of our organization there. And, I was working with the records of the American military occupation of Germany after World War II. So, I got to know the staff out there, not only on the Archives side, but on the Records Center side. So, there was a GS-12 vacancy open in, what was then, the Accessioning and Disposal Branch at the Records Center and in those days, people really didn't go from the Archives side to the Records Center side, that was, it was very caste conscious and very unprofessional and archivists would not go and work in what was considered the warehouse operation. And so, Jack Saunders, was the Chief of the A & D Branch, and so, I applied and there were no other applicants, so I quickly learned that's the kind of competition that's the best. And I got a job there. And it was one of the best moves I ever made. I really, for the first time, began to understand really how NARS, how the Archives interact with agencies. I really wasn't clear about that at all. What records schedules were; how schedules were applied. The Records Center Director, at that time, Carlton Brown, wanted me to develop courses to market to federal agencies, which I did. These were records maintenance courses, records creation courses; basically, records management courses. So, I had a chance to teach. I had a chance to interact with agencies in a variety of different ways. It widened my perspective and I think it was, in many ways, the best move, of all the moves I've made, it was the best.

So, I stayed there for three years. I went there in March of '80 (many of my transitions seem to be in March timeframe). So, I stayed there for three years then a position opened in, what was then, NAA. Not acquisitions, as it is today, but the Planning and Analysis Division. It was a very small division but it handled, in a kind of nascent form, what we now have in Information Technology; what we have in NPOL, Policy and Planning; it really had all of that, directives, it had everything from an administration, management point of view. So, Adrienne Thomas was the Director and this was in NA, that was the office. So, she was interested in hiring archivists, to be able to do management analyst work in the archival work processes and programs and she thought it would be helpful to have archivists on staff. So, I applied and it was, I think, there were 12 other applicants, so I was very surprised, but I did get the job. So, I went there in March of '83 and stayed about a little over four years. It was totally different from anything that I had done and I think it took me a while to adjust to doing that kind of management analysis work. The first project that I worked on was kind of revamping the way the agency responded to request for military service records. In those days, they had people pay ahead of time then the search was conducted, 40% of the time the searches were negative so then you'd have a huge multi-month refund process, a huge backlog in answering requests. So, my first job in there was to do an analysis, you know, what we might call, at this point, a BPR, Business Processing Reengineering Effort. That's not how we looked at it then, but that's what it was. One of the things I want to note there, is there was a gentleman named Dan Ross and Dan had worked in

NARS' Records Management Office before it was closed down in about 1981 or so. Dan was in the office of the National Archives at that time, he was an elderly gentleman waiting to retire; he was a management analyst. I went in to talk to him and he said, "Would you like me to help you?" and I said, "I very much would." Because I had no idea how to do this and so I learned and he was just kind of my mentor all the way through the process and I never forgot that. And I tried to kind of inculcate that into myself to do that with other people.

So, then I became the Deputy in the Office of the National Archives in July of 1987 and Trudy Peterson was the office head. So, this was a nationwide program of all the regional archives, as well as the Archives in Washington. At that time, there was not an archives section in St. Louis but basically, what's being set up now in Research Services is that, that kind of focus again. So, I was there for, I became the acting office head in March of '93 when Trudy Peterson became the Deputy Archivist and Acting Archivist. I became the permanent office head in March of '95 and then in '97, January of '97, I was assigned as Assistant Archivist for Records Services, Washington DC and I have had that job ever since.

**LeGloahec:** Very impressive. Sort of elaborating on what you were just saying, you have said, and I've heard you say it in a forum that you gave, in many ways you believe a road to a successful career at NARA runs through a Suitland. And then you have even alluded to, you know, nobody wants to go work in the warehouse. Why do you, how do you feel that way as far as what does Suitland stand for and...

**Kurtz:** Suitland, the Records Center at Suitland, I think, gets you in contact with a huge swath of the federal government. So, whether we're talking about records management projects or we're talking about accessioning and disposal; you know, whatever... we're transferring permanent records to the National Archives, which is a major function that they perform; managing classified information. It has more functions than any other Records Center, in my opinion, topped only probably by St. Louis for complexity and challenge. So, you really understand, a lot more, the work of this agency if you work at the Washington National Records Center for a while. I think if you just stay in one kind of box, you may end up learning that box very well, but you don't really understand the bigger picture. And at Suitland you can learn the bigger picture.

**LeGloahec:** You were obviously here at the agency for two very important points in its history; both the independence from GSA for the agency, as well as the establishment of the professional organization, that has become known as the National Archives Assembly, of which, you are a lifetime member of the Assembly. Talk for a moment about your impression of those two very different events.

**Kurtz:** Let's start with the Assembly, because as in time it comes first. It was a very tumultuous period, we were, as you know, under GSA and we had a series of administrators in GSA of, probably, dubious merit. But, they had various ideas about the National Archives and how it should be managed and, really, what it should be. The first was Admiral Freeman, who was under the Carter Administration. He thought that the way to bring access of the Archives to the people was to kind of break up the holdings and you'd say, for instance, have Civil War records in Atlanta, that kind of thing. That created quite an uproar, not just at the Archives; but

in the profession, historical profession, archival profession, concern on the Hill, that kind of thing. He was followed by Gerald Carmen, under President Reagan. And, of course, in the early Reagan years there was a riff of some severity. So the combination of all of this really led many people outside the organization to believe NARS was ill-placed in GSA. So in the midst of all of this conflict the staff was very concerned, professional and para-professional. So, coming out of this whole thing with Freeman and Gerald Carmen, the National Archives Assembly formed to focus on these issues, get attention to the National Archives, to get attention to the concerns of the staff at the National Archives, and to provide a forum. So, these were very, beyond lively, early meetings. You know, this was kind of a crisis time and it was, I think it was rebellious in a certain way to form the organization; it was an indication of lack of confidence in what was happening. So, the Assembly, ever since, at various times in issues with the Hill or confirmation of the Archivist, that kind of thing, you know, play a role. But I think what's really happening that has been most beneficial, it's really developed as an organization with so many outreach activities, educational activities, and it's a forum to bring many diverse staff members together in a place where that's not easy to do and there aren't that many natural forums to do it. So, it started out as an operation in crisis.

That kind of bleeds over into the question about independence. There was a lot of concern on the Hill and so, by 1984 the movement to get the Archives out, I think, the book by Robert Warner really goes into the details from his perspective and he was obviously a critical player in it, very critical. I would want to say something about him, how underestimated, at the time, he was. My job, one of my jobs, in NAA at that time, was I was the internal controls officer, which was kind of a bizarre function when you were part of GSA. So, two GSA types wanted to come over to interview the Archivist about internal controls. So, I was in the meeting with him and Dr. Warner started talking and it didn't make any sense at all, I couldn't follow him. I thought, "Oh my god", after they left he turned to me and said, "How did I do?" So, that was one of his techniques, I mean, they didn't know what happened in there and it wasn't that he was incompetent, far from it, he was very clever. And how he presented himself to them and how he operated, that was an eye-opening lesson, that kind of what you see is not necessarily what you get, you got to look deeper at what a person's really up to. That was very interesting.

So, at that point, I think GSA had an acting administrator, Carmen was gone, and this gentleman was favorable to archives independence so he didn't put up any road blocks to the legislation. I think Senator Baker, Howard Baker, who was the majority leader at the time, said it was the most complicated rule he ever tried to get on the Consent Calendar, usually they're kind of routine little things and this was sort of quite complicated. But, it went through and we became independent on April the 1<sup>st</sup>, 1985; independent again.

**LeGloahec:** Do you feel that sort of keeping up on Dr. Warner, do you think that independence would have achieved without him?

**Kurtz:** No, I really don't. It took a catalyst. It took somebody to kind of bring people together. There was a lot of discontent and concern in various places but I think that he was critical in playing that role. He wasn't the only person playing a role, there were any number of people who did, both inside and outside the organization, but I think there's no question that he was indispensable.

**LeGloahec:** As an Assistant Archivist, and even in some of your other management positions, you were in many ways the public face of NARA. Do you feel that that position managed you, or how did you manage in that position?

**Kurtz:** Well, that's an interesting question, who manages who? I would say that I was always very conscious of the fact that I represented the National Archives and that there was an expectation about performance and conduct and interactions with people that came with that responsibility. So, I think I tried to manage the position but always from the perspective of the position itself and the responsibility that went with it.

**LeGloahec:** One of your other responsibilities was, in 1993, we made the move out here to College Park. How does the herculean task of moving records out to the new building, how did that work with you?

**Kurtz:** Well, first of all, I think it was utterly transformative. You know, if you kind of think of an attic run amok to the Nth power, really was the condition of the stacks at the National Archives building. You know, years and decades go by, and you put something here and you put something there, paper kind of controls finding aids, index cards, whatever. And really when we looked at it and knew that we were actually gonna have to move, we weren't able to, we would not have ever been able to. So, it took a massive reorganization, first of all, to put an organization in place that focused exclusively on preparing the records to move. Trudy Peterson, who, I think, gets credit for the insight of that need and seeing to it that it happened; she was the office head at the time. Geraldine Phillips and Maida Loescher were the ones who had the day to day responsibility and it was herculean. I helped in the planning. I helped in the organizing and dealing with staff issues. But, it was those two, and those who worked for them, who made this happen. It took five years to get ready to move. Out of it came the Master Location Register, the first comprehensive finding aid control of all the records and it's been refined ever since and now we have the Holding Management System. So, that's a good example of how the processes have evolved and how things improve over time, the contributions of people to it and the need to stay eternally vigilant when you're dealing with such a massive volume as the collections we have.

----- TECHNICAL ISSUES AND CONVERSATION -----

**LeGloahec:** Alright, we were talking a little while ago about the move out here to College Park. If you want to just talk a little bit about, sort of, your role in that and what that really involved as far as getting all the materials from Archives I out here to Archives II.

**Kurtz:** Well, I think the first thing to say about the move was it was a seminal moment in the Agency's history. Because we not only had records here, at downtown Washington, we had records at the Washington National Records Center; we had a whole archival section there. We had are cartographic and audio-visual materials at Pickett Street in Alexandria. Records, really, and staff scattered in a number of places in the Washington Metropolitan area. So, it was an enormous undertaking to get over two million feet of records under adequate control to move. And, I think we can be proud of the fact that we moved on time and never lost a thing; that's quite an achievement for all those who worked on it. My role, I was the Deputy in the Office of

the National Archives and so it was my job on a day to day basis to work with Gerry Phillips, Geraldine Phillips and Maida Loescher, who were the two managers directly in charge of the division responsible for organizing the records to move. So, my job was to help facilitate what they did, get them the resources that they needed. It was a herculean job. Think of about, think about an attic, kind of, run amok for fifty plus years, a variety of finding aids, and in many cases, no finding aids. So, they created from scratch the Master Location Register, which was the first, really, comprehensive management control, physical control of the records that we ever had. That was really comprehensive and from that has actually evolved today's Holdings Management System, which is more sophisticated and a much better tool. But, Gerry Phillips and Maida Loescher get the credit for the creation of the Master Location Register.

**LeGloahec:** Do you want to comment at all on this site, and how this site came to be? Were you involved at any point in the...

**Kurtz:** I really was not involved. It was, I think, the work of Frank Burke, who was the Acting Archivist at that time, who was also on the faculty at the University of Maryland's Library School. And, I think, Steny Hoyer, Congressman Hoyer, was very interested in getting a facility in his district and we wanted to be affiliated with the University, on the University campus. A number of presidential libraries are located on university campuses; there are real advantages to that. And, you know, you had to find a location that had enough land that we only pay a dollar a year rent, I believe, for the land for 99 years; it's quite a deal. And so, it was really rather an ideal location.

**LeGloahec:** Great, thank you. In your 37 year history, or career with NARA, you've had the opportunity to work under several Archivists. I guess going back as far as Burt Rhodes, would be the first Archivist that you worked under and you've had the opportunity to work closely, at least, with the three most previous Archivists in your Deputy role. Take a minute, if you'd like, and comment on the Archivists that you do, that you've interacted with and tell the story of the Archivists that you've worked with and what they're like?

**Kurtz:** Ok. Well, that would be John Carlin, Allen Weinstein, and David Ferriero. I think that the way to look at them is to see what they have in common first, which probably...I don't think most people would do that. Each one came in with the belief that there were major aspects of NARA's mission that was not being met. That NARA faced contemporary challenges that we were not geared to meet. In Governor Carlin's case, he was concerned that from his perspective, we had an over-emphasis on our traditional custodial role. That we were not paying attention, in a serious way, to our records management role, which from his perspective, went beyond just appraisal and scheduling of records, it was providing guidance and assistance to Federal agencies and being much more engaged with agencies on the business needs they had in regards to records management. Uh, he also felt that there was a whole generation of records keeping that was being lost because it was being created even in the late 90's, primarily electronically, digitally, and we were not really organized, staffed, or otherwise prepared for the electronic record. And the third thing over time, was he realized because of the renovation of the National Archives building downtown, that there was a tremendous opportunity to tremendously enhance the museum and educational functions of NARA. So, he created a strategic plan and the budget was driven by the strategic plan on those areas that he emphasized. He moved resources from one

place to another, not popular if you're the one losing the resource but that's what you're going to do to strategically manage.

Allen Weinstein felt that we had really neglected our civic literacy responsibilities as kind of a bulwark, a foundation, for a literate democratic citizenry. So when it was time to redo the strategic plan in 2006 that was entered as a major goal of the agency and figured prominently in both the vision and mission statements that were developed.

With David Ferriero, again, I think that there were some concerns, there are concerns that he has, that we are not still adequately situated to deal with the electronic records challenge and the records management challenge that agencies face as a variety of social media, new ways of recordkeeping are just kind of rushing forward. How to cope with it, how to document the record, how to preserve it; I think those are some major concerns that he has. So, they're similar in that sense. Each one felt there was one or more contemporary challenges that the agency was not facing.

Very different in styles. Governor Carlin, of course, coming from a state political background, was used to kind of a cabinet style. He would set the tone, he would set the direction, it was very centralized. The cabinet secretaries were there to carry it out, make it work. Professor Weinstein had, of course, a university, collegial sort of aspect to his work; that's what he had done in his previous career. So he regarded his senior staff, probably, as a collection of senior department heads in a college, you know a College of Arts, whatever. I think Mr. Ferriero made it clear about his management style when he came in. Early on in meeting with the senior staff he gave us an article that was published in 1975, in the Harvard Business Review, they have compilations, and this one, I think, was the compilation on management. It's an article by a professor named Abraham Zalesnick and it contrasts the difference between leaders and managers. And clearly from Zalesnick's point of view, the leader's the one and the managers are keepers of the status quo and continuity and that kind of thing. And so Mr. Ferriero clearly identified with kind of the leadership perspective as it was laid out by Zalesnick. So I think that while they're similar in seeing challenges that had to be faced, very different in their styles of going about it.

**LeGloahec:** What does, in your opinion, what does the ideal Archivist of the United States have to have to be most successful?

**Kurtz:** I think it's very challenging for anyone to come into this agency at the top if they lack federal experience, if they lack relevant professional experience. This is a very complex organization and so I think that, frankly, if there were candidates that had some experience at the National Archives who also had the other aspects, you know, that I just mentioned there, the federal experience and political experience. I'm not sure such a package exists but you asked about an ideal candidate. It's someone who brings together a deep knowledge of the inside of the agency with kind of extensive outside experience. I'm not sure that really exists.

**LeGloahec:** Fair enough, fair enough. Ok, let's switch gears for a moment and let's talk about your professional involvement. We've already discussed that you were with the agency during the founding of the Assembly and you were a lifetime member, you are a lifetime member of the

Assembly. Comment on the role of the Assembly at NARA, you mentioned it a little while ago, as far as the founding, how you view this organization and the place that it holds here at NARA.

**Kurtz:** I think it's really evolved in a really good way. I think it brings, it's a forum, where the leaders of the Assembly, over time, really, consistently have brought forward topics that the staff is interested in and needs to know about, set up a forum for discussion for bringing ideas forward, issues forward. If we didn't have, there is no other avenue in the Agency really that does that and that can do it, I think, with kind of a relative sense of freedom and autonomy, to set it up. So, I think the educational role and the communication role has been critically important. It's a quiet one in the sense that it's not dramatic but it goes on, week after week, month after month, with programs and that kind of thing. So, while the drama of the founding has long passed, I think that the Assembly continues, really, to make a serious contribution to the professional knowledge of the organization.

**LeGloahec:** Looking back over your professional career outside of NARA, if somebody said, "Pick one", what would you identify as, possibly as, one of your most major contribution to professional organizations, whether it's the Society of American Archivists or any of the regional organizations?

**Kurtz:** I think it's the book that I published for...that the SAA published that I was commissioned by them to write on management, *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories*. I think that has, there's been thousands of sales, I think it's had an impact on practitioners. It certainly helped me clarify and think through my own thinking about management in a way in which, even lectures don't really do. When you actually have to write something for publication, in particular, a book or a manual, there's a lot of reflection that has to go into it. So I would say I think that's the major contribution to the profession.

**LeGloahec:** You're frequently called upon to speak on a variety of issues and if somebody's on a program committee and they're planning a panel or session or round table and said, "We should get Michael Kurtz." What's that session going to be about?

**Kurtz:** Well, it could be about a couple of things. Anything to do with looted art, cultural restitution, that has been a major area of my personal and professional focus, I've had a number of publications in the area, I've had the opportunity to participate in international forums on the topic as part of the American delegation to these conferences...so, anything in that area, certainly. Archival management, definitely. Those are the kind of areas that I think that would make sense to have me involved.

**LeGloahec:** Talk for a moment about your work at the University of Maryland, where you've been an adjunct professor for many years now. Your work there has certainly shaped a number of NARA employees, because we tend to cherry-pick them over here fairly frequently. How did the idea of that management course come to fruition for you?

**Kurtz:** That I really owe to Frank Burke. Frank was in charge over there of the archival program and he suggested to me that maybe I might want to come and teach a summer course on management. I thought, "well, OK", so with some hesitation, I started and gradually that

evolved into a focus on managing cultural institutions, and then kind of more zeroing in on now managing archives. And so, the credit for the concept and the credit for the idea goes to Frank Burke.

**LeGloahec:** I know at least two NARA staff members who met in your class and married...

**Kurtz:** Yes, and have had children as a result of it! Now that's really touching people.

**LeGloahec:** And even my wife remarks about when she was in your class, as well.

**Kurtz:** Really? Ok, when was she in there?

**LeGloahec:** She had her library degree many years ago, probably in the late 80's early 90's.

**Kurtz:** Oh...ok well I started in 90, so...

**LeGloahec:** What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing the National Archives today?

**Kurtz:** There are a number of them. I think the most serious challenge is, I don't believe the agency has ever taken management seriously. There really is no comprehensive management development program for current managers or emerging managers, we had that in NW. I hope the agency decides to do that on an agency-wide basis. It's a, not just a vocation, but it's a profession. And I think for many managers, their heart is with what they consider "The Work", which is the archival work. And "The Work" actually of management is management. And so I think that has been a long, long-term challenge and I don't think the agency has approached it in a really serious, concerted way. And so, I hope that it does.

Another challenge, obviously, is the digital record; the preservation and ongoing access of those records. I think the agency is actually better set up than perhaps many of the critics would give the agency credit. I think ERA, while not a perfect tool or a perfect system, is functional, will increase in its functionality, and will be able to perform the basic core functions that we need to have it perform.

I think that the development of the National Records Management program has been critically important. I think that what John Carlin hoped to see really has come to pass; a much deeper NARA engagement with federal agencies at all levels. And not just with records officers but with CIOs and general counsels and managers in other agencies, those who have...the records creators. I think we're much more engaged than we ever have been before. But that is going to be an ongoing challenge.

Access. The resources necessary for digitization and for getting these records online. The reason we've gone with partnerships in digitization is resources and so given this time of incredible austerity and concern about the federal budget this agency is not going to get money for massive digitization and yet that really is what customers want. And so, we've accomplished more in that regard, than I think we realize but there is an enormous challenge there.

And aging infrastructure; this is an agency with 44 buildings. That's an enormous property load and so that takes a lot of money to keep that up and running. So, we're a very labor-intense, facility-intense organization. What, 80% of our budget goes to those two items? And so in order to really perform the mission, the leadership has to find a way to grow the resources and that is going to be a challenge. So there's any number of challenges that should keep people busy for a very long time.

**LeGloahec:** Can you identify, over the course of your career, a particular challenge that you encountered, a dark day in your career that...

**Kurtz:** ...Mmhm. There were two dark days. One of them was with the missing Clinton hard drive, which occurred in March/April of 2009. That was a very, very serious day; the repercussions have lasted to this day. The requirement for a much stricter control of records; access to records is at an unprecedented level of what we've done. I'm proud of that fact that under my leadership we have done that. But the fact that it was necessary had brought the agency into disrepute, tremendous amount of congressional, negative congressional oversight and media attention. So, and there have been other security issues as well. I'd say that is a very major challenge. It goes back to keeping control of the records. I obviously think the staff, overwhelmingly, is well motivated and honest. There's always the possibility that someone is not; the reality that someone is not. So trying to maintain custody and security of the holdings is a real challenge. So that was a dark day.

The reclassification controversy in declassification was another very, very difficult period of time. That revolved around a series of agreements that we had with the national security agencies shortly after 9/11. Our goal really was to, try to limit what the agencies could do in reclassifying information but I think what people had forgotten by the time this really became a public issue in 2006, was the environment right after 9/11. So in trying to walk that line between protecting national security and releasing information is a difficult line, we took a lot of criticism at that point in time, I certainly did. So what you do is try to explain what you're doing and why and you really just keep working. Take cognizance of what people are saying, see what's valid, see what changes need to be made and make them.

**LeGloahec:** What would you identify as the most significant turning points in your career?

**Kurtz:** Well, as I've made a farewell visit to the Washington National Record Center and I told them, as I've told others, that in my career deciding to apply for an archivist position in what was then the Accession and Disposal Branch, the warehouse part of the operation, if you will, was unprecedented. It took...I look back on it and you say to yourself, "Why was this such a big deal?" but it was. A respectable archivist stayed with the records and what respectable archivists didn't understand is the records center is where the records are, actually. And I learned so much. I had no real appreciation or understanding of the interaction between the National Archives and agencies until I went there. I didn't understand about records schedules, records management training. A whole...my whole perspective of what we really do as an agency was tremendously broadened. And that was probably about the best decision I made. Everything else really in one way or another flowed from that.

**LeGloahec:** Wonderful. We've talked about the dark days here. You looking back and saying of all the accomplishments that you've had over the span of your career, what's the one that you'd like to be most remembered for?

**Kurtz:** The National Declassification Center, without a doubt. That was almost a miracle. With an idea that was developed by Senator Moynihan in 1997 in his Secrecy Commission report, it went nowhere at the time. It didn't have any support here at the National Archives either, frankly at that point in time. And so when it was resurrected, actually, as part of Barack Obama's presidential campaign, and I think it was early on so it may have been as early as April of 2007, I think that first came out as a plank. I was certainly and everybody was I think certainly startled by it. At the same time at the end of December 2007 the Public Interest Declassification Board came out with a report to the president, that out of 18 recommendations, 13 involved a national declassification center. So even in the Bush administration in the summer of 2008, there was an examination of it, not a particularly positive examination of it, but none the less it surfaced. And after President Obama won election, it really started to move. That's what made the critical difference, and support from senior levels at the White House ensured that the NDC was created and in such a way that it really could flourish. So, going through that process and setting up here, I was the acting director until we hired a permanent director. And working through the complete revamping of all the work processes, which we did with the other agencies as partners, using our Lean Six Sigma work process improvement methodology was simply fabulous. To see that they, now in the last year, have been working through 83 million pages is amazing.

I also suggested, frankly, to the folks at the White House that there be a deadline given to work through the backlog. And that's why the memorandum that the President issued, at the time that he issued the executive order, in December of 2009 really had that December 2013 deadline in it. There's nothing like a deadline to focus the mind.

**LeGloahec:** Thanks for leaving that behind! (Laugh)

**Kurtz:** Yes! You're quite welcome!

**LeGloahec:** You've talked a little bit about, sort of, NARA's reputation with the federal agencies....

**Kurtz:** ....Mmmhmm....

**LeGloahec:** ...and you've certainly talked and commented about the evolution of that relationship. How do you see our reputation now, and where do we need to be in the future?

**Kurtz:** Oh, I think it's much stronger now, in two areas. One is records management, which I mentioned; I think we're seen as, really serious partners; as an agency trying to provide guidance, trying to get ahead of all the technological curves that keep coming up as far as communications goes; doing interesting projects that have relevance to agencies; and taking initiatives like the Big Bucket schedules, which while controversial here at NARA, are well received, actually, in the federal community. I think, in the declassification arena, I think we are

seen as having successfully stepped up to the NDC plate and so we've got now the authority that we have never had; not complete, not absolute, far from it. Agencies decide ultimately on whether an item is classified or not, but we're running the process. We are not, you know, the poor cousins and so we are not only at the table, we're at the head of the table and that's an incredible change. So, I would see in the future, building on that and just, you know, one of the Transformation goals is to be an agency of leaders and I think in these areas, we need to continue that.

**LeGloahec:** NARA seems to get its fair share of knocks in the press. As you say with the Clinton hard drive, we get a lot of bad press for things that go wrong. Certainly we're doing some things right. What are we doing right? What should we be getting better credit for? What could we be doing differently to help improve the reputation?

**Kurtz:** Well, many things are being done right, in my opinion. One of them is that, Jim Hastings initiated in 2006 a change in the Textual Archives Division to put an emphasis on processing and so we have made exponential improvement in the records that have been described and put into ARC, records that have been processed and available to the public. Now granted, there's years of work to go but it's organized, it's focused, and it's productive. That's a behind the scenes kind of thing and it doesn't get a lot of attention, it's not sexy but it is incredibly important and has always been an area of work neglected in favor of other pursuits. So, I think that is a major success.

I think our museum and educational services are simply outstanding. The Boeing Learning Center is an incredible resource. The exhibits that we have put on; the permanent gallery, the Public Vaults, is the first museum about archives. It's not an American History museum, it's about archives and about our holdings and that's incredibly powerful. I mean, there have been thousands, well, hundreds of thousands, if not a million people gone through that since it opened in 2004. It's been used for countless VIP tours, which are actually incredibly important; members of Congress, congressional staff, OMB types, White House types, public interest groups...you know, you're building an understanding of what we do, who we are.

What do we need to do? We need a first rate communication strategy office; we're lacking that. The emphasis over the decades has been to put resources into the program offices, now I know the program offices don't feel that's the case, but it is the case; granted, not enough. And so we have tended to skimp on what's now called business support, on communications and strategy. We need to make, the agency needs to make a major investment in both of those areas to really have the foundation for success. Again, those are not sexy, they're not out front, but they can do an enormous amount in the areas of public attention, public support and communications.

**LeGloahec:** It's March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1974, you have the opportunity to go down and talk to the class of new hires coming into work that day. What are you going to tell them?

**Kurtz:** In March of 1974...

**LeGloahec:** ...Isn't that when you started?

**Kurtz:** It is, it is indeed. Well, I think I mentioned what I was told. Umm...that's a hard question because I'm trying to I guess imagine myself as a mature professional at that point in time...

**LeGloahec:** ...What is the piece of advice that you wished you had had?

**Kurtz:** Oh, ok, ok....

**LeGloahec:** ...What would you tell the new hire today?

**Kurtz:** No one told me, no one told us, how important of a place we were coming to. No one talked about the mission. I'll be perfectly frank. I don't think many of the people here, at that point in time, thought this was an important place. I think it was considered and felt to be a backwater. I think many people felt they were in a backwater. I think a lot of managers at that time felt that their careers were really second best to being academics. I never wanted to be one so this was not a problem of mine. No one talked about the mission. Why it's important to work at the National Archives. Why it's worth a lifetime of commitment. That's what was missing and that was huge.

**LeGloahec:** What does the 30 second commercial for the National Archives sound like?

**Kurtz:** Well, jingles and those kinds of things are not my strength but I would say it somehow has to connect the citizen, the viewer, to the Archives. You know, we say, and it's true, that everyone's in the National Archives. And I think that's the way to reach people. I leave it to the marketing gurus about how to package that but I think that's the point.

**LeGloahec:** If there was some story that you wanted to tell, that you didn't think you've had an opportunity to tell over the last hour or so, what's missing from this interview?

**Kurtz:** Well, you know, many years ago when I working out at Suitland doing my dissertation, doing research, going through gazillion boxes, thousands of them, I came across, I had a box and it was material obviously seized by the Nazi secret police and obviously captured by the American Army. And I was just going through it, you know, just going through it and there was a diary of a man who, in Berlin, who was waiting to be arrested the next day and that would be the end of him and suddenly all of these boxes and folders and all the policy I was trying to track about what we did with looted property and all that, became human, it became human and that had a really strong impact on me. And so, we kind of can lose track of that...the human dimension.

**LeGloahec:** And that's important?

**Kurtz:** It's critical.

**LeGloahec:** Well, those are all my questions. Thank you very much for sitting with us and I think that we've had a really great interview.

**Kurtz:** I appreciate it and I've enjoyed every bit of it. Thank you.

**LeGloahec:** Great.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----STILL RECORDING-----

**Kurtz:** Did you get everything covered you wanted, John?

**LeGloahec:** I think, yeah I went through all of my questions...

**Kurtz:** ...They were good questions. They were very good questions. I don't think there is anything that I did not say that I wanted to say. Um...I...

**LeGloahec:** ...You didn't say anything that you want to restrict?

**Kurtz:** No. No, actually, not at all. I thought the thing on the three archivists was a challenge, but I think I did them justice...

**LeGloahec:** ...That was a very diplomatic explanation.

**Kurtz:** Well, it's true. How effective they've been...

**LeGloahec:** ...We're still recording...

**Kurtz:** ...Pardon me? Yes, stop recording.



# *National Archives and Records Administration*

8601 Adelphi Road  
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**Gift of Historical Materials  
of  
Michael J. Kurtz  
to  
The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)**

1. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, **Michael J. Kurtz** (hereinafter referred to as the Donor), hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America, for eventual deposit in the National Archives of the United States (hereinafter referred to as the National Archives), the following historical materials (hereinafter referred to as the Materials):
  - a. Video recordings (2 DVDs) of an oral history interview of **Michael J. Kurtz** conducted on **February 24, 2011**, by **John LeGloahec** on behalf of the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project.
  - b. Transcript of the interview of **Michael J. Kurtz**, conducted on **February 24, 2011**, by **John LeGloahec**. Transcript prepared by **Holly McIntyre** and reviewed by the Donor.
  - c. Additional paper materials, including CV from the interviewee and correspondence regarding the interview.
2. Because the Materials were generated in connection with the National Archives Assembly Legacy Project – an oral history project designed to capture the institutional memory of retiring NARA staff – the Donor stipulates that the materials be accessioned into the National Archives and allocated to the donated historical materials collection of the National Archives Assembly. This collection is designated as NAA and is entitled, Records of the National Archives Assembly.
3. The Donor warrants that, immediately prior to the execution of the deed of gift, **he** possessed title to, and all rights and interests in, the Materials free and clear of all liens, claims, charges, and encumbrances.
4. The Donor hereby gives and assigns to the United States of America all copyright which **he** has in the Materials.
5. Title to the Materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist of the United States or the Archivist's delegate (hereinafter referred to as the Archivist).
6. Following delivery, the Materials shall be maintained by NARA at a location to be determined by the Archivist in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and provided that at any time after delivery, the Donor shall be permitted freely to examine any of the Materials during the regular working hours of the depository in which they are preserved.

7. It is the Donor's wish that the Materials in their entirety be made available for research as soon as possible following their deposit in the National Archives.
8. The Archivist may, subject only to restrictions placed upon him by law or regulation, provide for the preservation, arrangement, repair and rehabilitation, duplication and reproduction, description, exhibition, display, and servicing of the Materials as may be needed or appropriate.
9. The Archivist may enter into agreements for the temporary deposit of the Materials in any depository administered by NARA.
10. In the event that the Donor may from time to time hereafter give, donate, and convey to the United States of America additional historical materials, title to such additional historical materials shall pass to the United States of America upon their delivery to the Archivist, and all of the foregoing provisions of this instrument of gift shall be applicable to such additional historical materials. An appendix shall be prepared and attached hereto that references this deed of gift and that describes the additional historical materials being donated and delivered. Each such appendix shall be properly executed by being signed and dated by the Donor and the Archivist.

Signed: Mirland J. Kauf  
Donor

Date: November 24, 2011

Pursuant to the authority of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, the foregoing gift of historical materials is determined to be in the public interest and is accepted on behalf of the United States of America, subject to the terms and conditions set forth herein.

Signed: [Signature]  
Archivist of the United States

Date: 29 NOV 11

