

# New initiatives help provide understanding of NARA

I want to bring to your attention two new NARA initiatives that will serve the American people and a worldwide audience by providing greater understanding of the educational and research resources of the National Archives. The first is NARA's new Distinguished Foreign Visitors Program, launched on June 23 with the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Dr. Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The second is a completely redesigned web site, *Archives.gov*, scheduled to be up and running on July 20.

In cooperation with the Office of Protocol at the Department of State, during their visits to Washington, foreign visitors, including heads of state, their spouses and families, will be invited to the National Archives Building downtown—to tour the Rotunda and the Public Vaults exhibit and to learn about the vast holdings of the Archives, especially the historical records of U.S. relations with their own country. It is hoped that these dignitaries will come away with a greater appreciation and understanding of American culture, history, and values.

It was an honor to host Dr. al-Jaafari and a small Iraqi delegation. The Prime Minister viewed an original draft of the U.S. Constitution with annotations in George Washington's own hand, the Charters of Freedom, and the Public Vaults, followed by an examination of documents relating to aspects of U.S.-Iraq relations. We are grateful to **Susan Cooper** (NCON) and her Public Affairs staff for their skilled, professional development and management of this program.

The web site redesign offers not just a new look, but a completely new way of thinking about and organizing the information on the site, and draws on expertise and contributions from a variety of sources. It reflects an understanding of current "best practices" in web design, awareness of trends among Federal web sites, suggestions by NARA staff, and responses from our customers. All of this has steered us toward profound changes in the architecture of the site, in the layout of pages, and even in the interaction between the site and online visitors.



how they can find what they want.

The main page of the new site has been carefully designed to help visitors quickly understand what's here and how to find it. A section called "Most Requested" holds a prominent position in the center of the page because people tend to explore the offerings of any organization by starting with the most-requested items. Next to the "Most Requested" section is one called "America's Historical Documents." Visitors know that the National Archives has fascinating historical materials, and they want to see the highlights.

Also on the main page is a navigation bar with links to broad categories of basic information, including information about what the Archives does and what resources it offers. Here, as is the case throughout the site, choices about content and language have been informed by NARA's work with the public. In the left navigation bar you'll find the category "Federal Records," with links to information about records of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. The links provide a way for visitors to explore our resources in a way that is easy to understand.

Along the right side of the main page is a section called "*Archives.gov* For..." This section reflects a profound shift taking place in the design of Federal web sites—a shift toward directly addressing major customer groups. The "*Archives.gov* For..." section provides links to pages designed specifically for each of NARA's major customer groups, including the general public, genealogists and family historians, veterans and their families,

A recent survey revealed that approximately 60 percent of those visiting NARA's web site are first-time visitors, meaning that they may not know what the National Archives is, what are its holdings, or

educators and students, researchers, records managers, and more.

There are many more features to the new web site, all carefully designed to help customers find what they are looking for and to find related resources that can enhance their experience and encourage them to explore further.

The development of this site represents a great achievement of the Web Program Staff and all the content authors throughout the agency who reviewed their material and helped transform it. A year from now, I expect to be able to report that *Archives.gov* has surpassed Federal benchmarks for customer satisfaction.

Meanwhile, work on the site continues. The July 20 launch represents just one step in the ongoing evolution of *Archives.gov*. The Web Program staff will continue to improve and enhance the site as more customer responses are received and as technological advances permit. One thing is certain: Future changes, like the current ones, will reflect NARA's commitment to providing customers with the "readiest" possible access to the wealth of essential evidence held in trust for them.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States

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in the July 2005 issue  
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*