

New challenges from the new Archivist

I am honored to be the ninth Archivist of the United States and to assume leadership of this confident and vigorous independent agency. In this, my first *Staff Bulletin* column, I would like to reiterate some of the thoughts I shared at my ceremonial swearing-in held in the McGowan Theater on March 7.

This is a critical juncture for NARA. We live in a world of imperiled budgets, increasing dependence on electronic records and retrieval, unprecedented security and preservation concerns, and profoundly insufficient attention to civic and democratic education. To meet these and other challenges, we must work cooperatively and creatively.

First, let me mention briefly a major administrative challenge confronting us—namely, the impending loss of critically experienced professional colleagues because of retirement or resignation. To those at NARA contemplating possible career changes, I ask you to defer your decision while closely watching the directions the agency will take in the months and years ahead. My personal pledge is to do everything I can to assure for all employees the most attractive working conditions possible.

In making my next point I owe a debt to Lee Hamilton, Director of the Smithsonian's Woodrow Wilson Center, who told a recent audience the following story: Returning to the White House following a wartime visit to a Washington church service, President Abraham Lincoln told a companion that he found the sermon's content excellent, the pastor's delivery eloquent, and his hard work evident. "Then you thought it was a great sermon?" Lincoln's response: "No." Why? Because the pastor had forgotten a sermon's most important ingredient: "He forgot to ask us to do something great."

Now I want to challenge all of you to "do something great." I am summoning the NARA family—with help from our friends in the broader archival community—to commit to a total effort over the next half-decade to achieve at least two great goals simultaneously.

The first involves fulfillment of NARA's major electronics records initiatives, the Electronic Records Archive (ERA) and the Electronic Records Management (ERM) initiative and related ones including the continued evolution of strategic directions



for the Federal Records Management initiative. In short, let NARA assume its natural leadership role in the fulfillment of electronic archival and records management projects at this crucial moment in the design of a

Government-wide system. I call this entire effort NARA's pursuit of "inside greatness."

At the same time, let us pursue a profound, solemn commitment to the American people to create, expand, extend, and—where necessary—redesign educational and public programming throughout NARA's orbit. This can be done while pursuing a greater number and variety of public and educational programs—linked to school curricula where possible—involving Washington, DC's educational resources, those of every NARA regional archives and records center, and the extraordinary resources of the Presidential library system, in partnership where possible with state and local archivists as well—in short, "outside greatness."

There will be a role for virtually every NARA employee in this expansion of our educational and public programming envisioned in the years ahead which, at the end of the day, will benefit greatly the American people—and NARA itself.

Next, a word about civility: In my previous work both in this country and abroad—whether in developing the National Endowment for Democracy, managing The Center for Democracy for 18 years, or trying to help negotiate conflict resolution in Central America, the Philippines, or Southern Africa—I have tried to build consensus. Where that proved impossible, of course, I have been prepared to act decisively. Under my stewardship, NARA will remain absolutely non-political and professional. Researchers will receive candid and courteous treatment at all times. Internal disagreements will be debated respectfully. Civility is crucial in our imperfect world if only to test on occasion the limits of knowledge.

My personal job description is transparent. The Archivist of the United States works for the American people, indifferent to partisanship regardless of which political

party dominates the Congress or the executive branch of Government. Therefore, the Archivist must display at all times scrupulous independence and a devotion to the laws and principles governing the responsibilities of his office. At all times, he serves as the designated custodian of America's essential "records that defy the tooth of time."

In the months to come, I look forward to meeting with and learning from many of you. For those so inclined, I have had a GroupWise mailbox set up (*Suggestions_For_The_Archivist@nara.gov*) to receive and respond to your ideas.

Finally, a *passion* for working on archives or records management is obviously essential to performing NARA's mission successfully. I know that many NARA employees share that passion. The wellsprings of motivation in each of us are personal and complex, ranging from core values (and core documents) to traditions, moral and religious beliefs, and a concrete work ethic. Additionally, we at the National Archives and Records Administration have as our professional and personal template not only the Charters of Freedom but the entire governmental documentary heritage (literally) at our fingertips. What an awesome privilege.

So I ask you to step back for a moment and ask yourself the same question that I, as one of NARA's newest employees, have asked myself every day since first coming to work at this great agency. What better opportunity than at NARA to "do something great" in proximity to the heritage and values for which so many Americans, whether great figures or ordinary folk, have fought for over the more than two centuries of our national lifespan. If, like me, your response is that there are few if any better opportunities, then, to paraphrase the poet Robert Browning: Come work with us. The best is yet to come.

Thank you.

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

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States