

A special message for foreign dignitaries

Earlier this month, on April 3, the National Archives hosted a group of 10 ambassadors and high-ranking diplomats from Middle Eastern and North African nations, taking the group on a tour of the Rotunda to observe the Charters of Freedom, followed by a tour of the Public Vaults.

Staff also prepared a special display of documents on U.S. relations with all of their countries—mainly diplomatic correspondence and treaties. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns addressed the group and remained for an extended informal dialogue.

For years, visitors from around the world have been coming to the National Archives to see how the institution works or to do research using NARA's holdings. In some cases, their home country either has no archives or access to records is restricted—or even prohibited.

We have also had as visitors the leaders and high-ranking officials of many nations, large and small—the individuals who are, in some cases, leading their nations toward a democratic form of government. Not only do these visiting dignitaries get a VIP tour, but they also learn of the importance of archives as a symbol of a vibrant democracy and as an important element in day-to-day governing.

Last spring, Susan Cooper and I formalized the international guests' program by



establishing, in cooperation with the White House and the Department of State, a Distinguished Foreign Visitors' Program, which, during its first year, has already brought a number of visiting foreign leaders

and ambassadors to the National Archives.

The program began with the visits last year of the prime minister of Iraq, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, and the former president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel. In October, Wolfgang Ischinger, the German ambassador to the United States, and Nicholas Burns came to Archives I for a ceremony to mark the 15th anniversary of the reunification of Germany. Ambassadors from other European nations joined us for this event. In December, we hosted Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schussel during his visit to the United States.

Our April 3 visitors, previously mentioned, included ambassadors and high-ranking diplomats from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. On April 18, our guests at NARA included nine more ambassadors and a

number of high-ranking officials from other embassies in Washington, also for special tours of the Rotunda and Public Vaults. Earlier this month, Chinese Vice Premier Wu Li joined several U.S. cabinet members and their guests for a special dinner and visit to the National Archives.

Our international efforts are, of course, broader than just hosting visiting dignitaries. Late last year, we signed a memorandum of intent with Canada for closer strategic collaboration and cooperation between NARA and Library and Archives Canada. We are working with the Canadians on mutual solutions to common archival issues. Last spring, we hosted the meeting of the Executive Board of the International Council on Archives, an organization in which NARA has participated for many years.

For all of these visitors, and the many more we hope will come, we have a special message: It is vitally important in a democracy that records are accessible to the people as a sign that their democratic government is open, transparent, and subject to the will of the governed.

We hope these distinguished visitors leave the National Archives with a greater knowledge and understanding of American history, culture, and values—and an understanding of what's needed for a lasting democracy.

But the main message is clear and should not be surprising. As democracy takes root in more and more nations, it's important that democratically chosen leaders, especially the first generation, are aware of one of the most important building blocks of a democracy—an archive that makes the records of the nation open and accessible to all its citizens. Nor should we at the National Archives lose the opportunity to convey this message to all our distinguished foreign visitors, including those from countries yet to enjoy fully the blessings of a democratic system.

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



Photo by Darryl Herring

On April 3, in the Board Room at Archives I, Archivist Allen Weinstein (second from right) and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns (far right) met with 10 ambassadors and high-ranking diplomats from Middle Eastern and North African nations. Burns spoke to the group about U.S. history and about Americans' struggle to build a democracy.

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