

NARA: 'Alive and well on all fronts'

Following are edited excerpts from the *State of the Archives* address given on November 30.

As you may have noticed, I have a lilt in my voice and a spring in my step today. Why? Because it is my belief that together—NARA employees and stakeholders, veterans and new recruits, National Archives senior staff, and our colleagues throughout the archival world—we can point with pride to a genuine sense of accomplishment since we last gathered here a year ago.

The past 22 months of my tenure as Archivist of the United States (to paraphrase a recent *U.S. News and World Report* issue on American leadership) has provided an opportunity to set directions “by building a shared sense of purpose, by setting out to make a positive social impact, and by implementing innovative strategies.” All of these are evident in NARA’s new and creative 10-year Strategic Plan, in the discussions of which over half the NARA work force and many of our stakeholders played a meaningful role.

And so I begin this brief review of the situation by thanking each and every one of you, whether here in Washington, DC, or throughout the country at any of NARA’s regional archives, Federal records centers, or Presidential libraries, for your personal effort over the past year in meeting the challenges that I set out only 12 months ago.

Access and Preservation

To deal with a huge backlog of traditional records—more than a million cubic feet—we have made major staff changes in our Washington, DC, research centers to expedite the processing of these records so that researchers can use them more easily. The result has involved the reassignment of a number of individuals to either full-time processing or full-time reference work. I want to thank those staff members involved for their efforts in assisting in this area. Eliminating this backlog of unprocessed records is absolutely critical to NARA.

Many of the records that customers want to see are declassified records, and after the discovery early this year of activities aimed at reclassifying previously declassified records, with support from our senior managers, I took some major steps at reaffirming our commitment to transparency and maximal access.



First, in quiet discussions with the relevant agencies, we are returning to the open shelves the overwhelming majority of the affected records. So far, 53 percent of the records removed have

been released in full and 46 percent with some redactions. Second, we are working with other agencies . . . in taking the lead on developing a Government-wide policy for the declassification of classified records. This is our National Declassification Initiative, and you’ll be hearing more about that.

We are also moving ahead on schedule to ensure the preservation of and access to electronic records to respond to the urgent need that confronts us. In developing plans for the Electronic Records Archives (ERA), we have partnered with some of the nation’s leading research centers and universities. We have identified four agencies—test cases, if you will—whose records we will begin “ingesting” next year in increment one of ERA.

As the system’s development progresses, we look ahead to future researchers and citizens accessing traditional records by way of the ERA. To that end, we are moving ahead with digitizing projects for records now available only on paper and/or microfilm. These are two more major steps toward our “archives without walls.”

Today, every agency and department can transmit documents to the *Federal Register*—which we publish in cooperation with the Government Printing Office—electronically, and 75 percent of all documents in the *Federal Register* are managed electronically. We have received much praise for the constantly updated electronic version of the *Code of Federal Regulations*, which is revised daily to reflect amendments published in the *Federal Register*.

We have now taken a lead role in making records preservation, recovery, and accessibility a part of the Federal disaster response plan. NARA is working with the Council of State Archivists, which elicited from each state a records recovery plan to be implemented in the event of a disaster.

Presently, neither archives nor libraries nor museums have an adequate official status in FEMA’s disaster recovery matrix. . . .

Our Customers

Day in and day out, we continue to help agencies improve the management of their records, traditional and electronic, through special NARA programs. The Federal Records Center Program saw its seventh year of profitability, bringing in more than \$5 million in retained earnings. At the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, responses in less than 10 days to more than 1.2 million requests annually are now the rule, not the exception.

The numbers visiting NARA’s various installations in this past year—especially the Presidential libraries and regional archives—remain impressive. But these figures are topped by the million-plus visitors to National Archives headquarters in downtown Washington, DC, who now . . . remain in the building for well over an hour. What used to be a five-minute trip to look at the Charters is now over an hour! That’s wonderful!

Civic Literacy

Throughout the National Archives system . . . educational programs are expanding greatly in number and range—and this in the absence of supplemental funding to cover their costs. We have begun to make measurable progress on our goal of helping to improve the civic literacy of the American people so that they can more readily appreciate the history of our country and their place in it.

To increase the level of civic literacy, we have enhanced and expanded our various museum, education, communications, and public outreach programs. We have done so with the help of our partners, especially the Foundation for the National Archives.

These educational activities have been robust at NARA for years, of course, not only here in Washington but in the libraries and regional archives. Now, they have an epicenter in our new Learning Center, which will be fully open next spring at Archives I for use by teachers seeking new ways to use primary documents to make the study of history and social studies more engaging and interesting for students and teachers alike.

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Partnerships

In pursuit of our goals, the National Archives in the past year forged new partnerships with customer and stakeholder groups, other government agencies, and private companies—here in Washington and all around the country Throughout the year, I spoke to a wide range of archival, genealogical, and historians' groups, but also to a significant number of civic, library, and museum associations in an effort to strengthen our relationships with all of these as we seek common ground.

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I have not been brief in this talk so far, so let me sum up. The Archivist has closed the door on 2006 with the following sentence or two: Staff morale remains solid despite hiring freeze. Budget needs fattening up (but not the Archivist). NARA is alive and well on all fronts.

As for the speech you have just heard, I conclude with a well-known cautionary word for speakers like myself from no less than Winston Churchill. At one point in his career, he took to distributing copies of his recent speeches in Parliament. A political opponent acknowledged the gift and wrote Churchill: "Dear sir. Thanks for the copy of your recent speeches. . . I shall lose no time in reading them."



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*This column originally appeared
in the December 2006 issue
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*