

Archivist Reshuffles Staff, Pledges to Improve Agency

Moves Win Tentative Approval of Hill, Private Critics

W/24th By Bill McAllister
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The head of the National Archives and Records Administration, labeled "the absentee archivist" by a Senate committee for delegating too much power to subordinates, replaced his deputy yesterday and promised to transform his agency into "a premier national cultural institution."

Don W. Wilson, the presidential historian who has headed the archives since 1987, pledged "a more participatory management structure" for the independent agency in a two-page "action plan" distributed to the archives staff. His actions drew tentative approval from the Senate committee and a private group that have been highly critical of Wilson's record.

In his statement, Wilson disclosed that he was detailing Deputy Archivist Claudine J. Weiher from the No. 2 position in the agency and replacing her with Raymond A. Mosley, his former chief of staff. Weiher will assume Mosley's current position, an assistant archivist for special and regional archives, a spokeswoman said.

Wilson said that the reassignment "is not connected to the allegations" contained in a highly critical report issued earlier this month by the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. "This action addresses solely the perception that the archivist is not functioning as the supervisor of agency programs and priorities," Wilson said.

Leonard Weiss, staff director of the Senate committee, said, however, he saw the reassignment and other Wilson actions as a direct response to the committee's report portraying Weiher, who is 51 today, as effectively running the agency.

"I think that significance is that there has been a pretty weak management structure at the National Archives and that the archivist has not been a hands-on manager," Weiss said. He said he would take a "wait-and-see attitude" toward the changes.

"It's a beginning. We're pleased to see the first steps," said Page Miller, director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, a coalition of about 50 historical and archival groups.

Her organization has argued that Wilson is facing a crisis over the future of governmental records that are increasingly being kept on electronic disks and tape. "There is a crisis in the archives in which it will become a museum of paper records," she said. "The perception is the current leadership has not realized that this is a crisis."

Wilson did not directly address that issue

in his action plan, but he did promise to move the agency away from its traditional role as "a custodial-oriented agency," a goal Miller said her committee has supported.

In its report, the Senate committee was sharply critical of the archives inspector general, Lawrence A. Oberg, and the process that led to his selection while he was being investigated for contract fraud and was the subject of internal complaints. Wilson suspended Oberg the day the Senate report became public and yesterday he said that Oberg remains on administrative leave pending his own investigation.

The archivist also promised to cooperate with reviews being conducted by both the Justice Department and the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency, reviews triggered by the Senate report.

In an effort to resolve some of the agency's management problems, Wilson, the former director of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, said he was organizing an internal management council composed of office heads and staff directors to advise him on policy issues. Miller said this could resolve worker concerns that "all the decisions are coming from 'mahogany row,'" as the suite of ornate Pennsylvania Avenue offices shared by Wilson and Weiher is known.

Wilson also promised to reactivate the National Archives Advisory Council, a panel of historians and researchers who advised the agency when it was part of the General Services Administration. Wilson said he has begun "to develop a new spirit of cooperation" with congressional oversight committees and promised to have a strategic plan for the agency by Feb. 15.

Miller questioned whether Wilson can meet that deadline and said she doubted that the agency had an adequate staff to be properly advising federal agencies which records they should be saving. Alabama has seven workers handling this task and the archives 15 for the entire federal bureaucracy, she said.

In his statement yesterday, Wilson repeated his earlier disagreement with some of the characterizations in the Senate report and said his own review as well as that of the other agencies will provide the employees named with "a prompt, objective and timely resolution of the matter."

Wilson's career could be at issue. Although a presidential appointee selected "without regard to political affiliation," Wilson does not serve a fixed term. Weiss said that could mean that Wilson could be removed by President-elect Clinton after he takes office, if he finds Wilson's performance wanting.