

5/14/95 *Trouble in the Files*

THE NATIONAL Archives and Records Administration tends to go long years without attracting public attention. As the keeper of all-important national documents and overseers of the network of presidential libraries, though, it's an agency that can't be indefinitely neglected without risk of real damage to history and heritage. That fact lends importance to the fight now brewing over last week's nomination of John W. Carlin to be national archivist—an appointment sharply opposed by a raft of historians' and archivists' professional associations—and the sub-fight over whether, in Mr. Carlin's Senate confirmation hearings May 24, the dissenters' concerns about his credentials and the nominee's own views on his job can be fully aired.

The academic associations complain that Mr. Carlin, ex-governor of Kansas and an early Clinton campaign supporter, has no relevant credentials for a job whose founding legislation called specifically for a professional who would be politically independent of the president. The concern is the same as when that law was passed in 1984 as part of the removal of the archives from the umbrella of the General Services Administration. It was and is that a nonprofessional archivist would be unable to act independently on matters of personal interest to the executive, specifically on matters concerning the privacy of the presidential papers. (The current law governing independent preservation of presidential records, in turn, was passed in the aftermath of Watergate, though increasingly baroque legal maneuvers have kept many of the Nixon papers inaccessible to this day.) An archivist without professional standing falls prey to a long-standing bureau-

cratic competition between the central archives, which are supposed to guarantee openness and fair access across the board, and the individual presidential libraries, which prefer to operate independently and are accorded a high proportion of the overall budget to do so.

Professional historians fear that a national archivist without independent professional standing will be hampered in the two tasks the archives urgently need addressed: a thorough management overhaul and a renewed effort to ensure the access to presidential papers that the law guarantees. The previous archivist, Don W. Wilson, was harshly criticized on both counts; management during his tenure drew two scorching reports from Congress and a watchdog agency, and a last-minute deal he brokered assuring former president Bush control over many documents from the Iran-contra period was overturned by a federal judge. The Clinton administration, unfortunately, is appealing the overturn of that decision, an appeal in which an archivist might be expected to play some role.

Mr. Carlin, who was pushed strongly by those who favor the presidential libraries in the long-running tug of war, needs to be asked in public about all these issues, but the administration initially suggested no witnesses at all, and Sen. William Roth, who will chair the hearing, has scheduled only two five-minute slots for critics. This is preposterous. The president lauds Mr. Carlin's managerial skills, and others on the Hill support him. But the administration's bungling and dithering over the appointment, followed by an apparent rush to get him through, offer all the more reason to let Mr. Carlin's case be examined fully.