

Archives Pick Announced Despite Historians' Stance

Groups Charge Nominee Has No Related Experience

By Bill McAllister
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Clinton nominated former Kansas governor John Carlin yesterday to be the country's top records keeper, despite strong opposition from three major historical groups who charged that the former dairy farmer does not have a clue about how to preserve the nation's documents.

White House officials said the president, who has left the position of national archivist vacant for more than two years, decided to act after Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) assured Clinton that Carlin would be quickly confirmed.

Leaders of the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians and Society of American Archivists oppose Carlin, and told the White House Thursday he was totally unqualified. They charged that his nomination violates a 1984 law that requires the archivist be selected "solely on the basis of professional qualifications required to perform the duties and responsibilities of the office."

Clinton hailed Carlin, a two-term governor who managed Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign in Kansas, as a talented executive. "John Carlin will provide necessary leadership in terms of managing the institution, providing fiscal responsibility and performing the important cultural and historical responsibilities," the president said in a statement. Dole was equally glowing, declaring, "John's qualifications for this position are beyond question."

"I . . . can say without reservation he is the right person to provide the National Archives and Records Administration with new leadership it needs at this time," Dole said in a statement. He said he had promised Carlin this week that he would move the nomination through the Senate "as expeditiously as possible."

Historians cited the troubled history of previous archivists who bowed to presidential pressure over disclosure of presidential records and contend that a political appointee such as Carlin has no place as archivist of the United States. "The appearance of evil is as bad as evil itself when it comes to the management of the National Archives," said Harvard University historian John Coatsworth, president of the American Historical Association.

Tim Ericson of the University of Wisconsin, who was one of three members of the Society of American Archivists who interviewed the former governor, said Carlin "hasn't a clue" about the technical issues of how to preserve records. "It was our unanimous opinion he has a complete lack of knowledge for administering archival records. . . . He might as well be nominated for surgeon general or attorney general."

White House officials said that Carlin, a longtime friend of Clinton, was "an experienced leader with proven commitment to preservation, access and use of government records." A White House statement cited Carlin's role in the development of the "state of the art" Kansas Museum of History and his efforts to make his gubernatorial papers available without restriction a year after he left the statehouse.

Representatives of all three of the opposing historical groups were summoned Thursday to the White House, where—in separate meetings—they outlined their objections to J. Robert Nash, head of the Office of Presidential Personnel, and other Clinton staff members. The historians said they left the White House convinced that the president would nominate Carlin despite their opposition, which is well-known in historical and academic circles.

Hints of opposition from archivists and historians derailed more than a dozen other candidates, most of whom had doctoral degrees in history and academic backgrounds. Carlin, who has a bachelor's degree in dairy science, is currently the head of Midwest Superconductivity Inc., a technology firm in Lawrence, Kan.

The \$123,100-a-year archivist position has been vacant since early 1993, when Don W. Wilson, a Bush appointee, quit. He had become ensnared in controversy after he decided to let Bush keep computerized messages that historians said should have been preserved in the National Archives. A federal court judge overturned Wilson's decision. Wilson later was named executive director of Bush's presidential library at Texas A&M University.

The National Archives, an independent federal agency for the past 10 years, is charged with preserving and maintaining government records, ranging from the Declaration of Independence to millions of government photographs and computerized records.