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National Security Archive

Reporters, scholars get FOIA help, clout from group of 'investigative librarians'

Tom Blanton may have been coining a phrase when, describing the National Security Archive, of which he is director of planning and research, he said, in an interview: "We are, in a sense, investigative librarians."

If that sounds like a contradiction in conventional terms, so does the organization's title: it assuredly is not what it might sound like — a branch of the government. It assuredly is a gadfly which exists, in its own words, to "make available the internal government documentation that is indispensable for research and informed public debate on important issues of foreign, intelligence, defense and international economic policy."

In the floor of offices it rents from the adjoining Brookings Institution in Washington, the Archive stores government documents floor-to-ceiling — all of them unclassified or declassified but all of them usefully indexed or about to be. The beneficiaries of this massive accumulation are scholars, journalists, present or former government officials or staffers and, the Archive is not too modest to claim, "the American public."

The Archive was founded in 1985 and opened its doors in 1986 after its founding father and present director, Scott Armstrong, together with then *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner, perceived a need for someplace to obtain, index and store once-classified government papers. Armstrong, a former *Washington Post* reporter perhaps best known for coauthorship of *The Brethren* with Bob Woodward, already had earned the monicker of "The Great Accumulator."

'The great accumulator'

The Archive merely institutionalizes that, and, using its know-how and clout, helps to pry loose documents under the Freedom of Information Act that government agencies might not have thought they wanted to release.

Initially funded by the Ford Foundation, which saw a nonprofit archive as a potential "multiplier" for the many scholarly projects it funds, and by the

John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation, the Archive today operates on a \$1.2 million budget. It is largely supported by those two foundations plus the Carnegie Corp. and other project grants. Funding is through the New York-based Fund for Peace, a nonprofit "umbrella" organization that handles fiscal housekeeping for a number of similar offshoots.

To date, the Archive's major publishing venture has been the thick paperback known simply as *The Chronology*, published last year by Warner Books. Its 678 pages contain a detailed, date-by-date account of the development of the Iran-contra affair, and was termed by *Time* magazine "the ultimate viewer's guide"

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SCOTT ARMSTRONG

'... the currency of democracy'

ARCHIVE (From page 45)

to the scandal's "labyrinthine intricacies."

The Archive is about to publish again, with its newly designated British-owned publisher, Chadwyck-Healey. This time, in rapid succession next December, January and February it will issue three sets of indexed archival documents — in both microfiche and hard copy — on El Salvador, additional Iran-*contra* papers and the Iranian revolution and the fall of the shah.

And in the Archive's hopper are at least nine more active projects, ranging from the Philippines and South Africa to the Cuban missile crisis and U.S. intelligence policy.

FBI sued over libraries

If the Archive's full-time staff of 26 (including a full-time litigator) are indeed "investigative librarians," as ex-journalist and congressional staffer Blanton said, it should have come as no surprise when, together with People for the American Way, the Archive last month filed suit against the FBI to obtain details of that agency's "library awareness program." (See FOI/FYI for October and November, 1987 and February 1988.)

The program of FBI surveillance — and attempted enlistment of librarians' help in surveillance — of "suspicious behavior" by foreign users of American technical libraries has greatly distressed the American Library Association (ALA). (The Archive is an institutional member of ALA, and many staffers are individual members.)

In its complaint, filed in federal district court in Washington, the Archive details a chronology of FOIA requests denied or deferred and seeks "records improperly withheld" about the library awareness program. Said Armstrong, ex-

plaining the Archive's role in the lawsuit:

"Like other librarians, we believe that information is the currency of democracy. We are not surprised to learn that the FBI believes that libraries contain an amazing amount of valuable information. It goes without saying that this information is valuable to citizens of other countries, including the Soviet Union or any other country categorized as hostile to the United States."

Librarian's role changed

But the value of this information, Armstrong continued, lies in its "liquidity," and "anything that constrains the flow of this valuable information damages the liquidity of the marketplace of ideas and thus damages democracy itself.

"When the government begins to insert itself into this process by wanting to know from librarians who is reading what or why they are reading what they are reading, the role of the librarian changes dramatically from the primary facilitator of First Amendment access to information to a regulator of information."

Armstrong conceded that technical libraries may contain some sensitive information which could harm the U.S. if it fell into hostile hands. But he added: "If the FBI could point to specific information which for specific reasons needs be controlled and kept out of the public sphere — which in all likelihood means that it was mistakenly declassified or released in the first place — this might be a different matter."

Blanton expects the FBI to "settle out" on the lawsuit, which he termed a last resort: "We didn't sue to stop the program," he observed. "That's not our role. We just sued to get the documents."

3-way Iran-*contra* index in preparation

A classic National Security Archive project might be said to be that of Malcolm Byrne, an information analyst with a master's degree in Soviet studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies who worked three years as researcher with Scott Armstrong at *The Washington Post*.

Under Nicole Ball, the Archive's director of analysis, Byrne is indexing thousands of pages of testimony, depositions and appendices from the Iran-*contra* hearings — all prior to the testimony of Lt. Col. Oliver North. They'll be indexed and entered into a computer database three ways — by name, by date and by key words, for publication later

this year or early next in another volume of 700-plus pages.

Byrne, soon to be assisted by new teams of indexers, occasionally must take time from his analyses to respond to queries from journalists or scholars, but he regards this equally as much a primary responsibility as his analysis and cataloguing.

Byrne, who once thought of entering the foreign service like his father, a former ambassador, hopes next fall to get back to another Archive project: preparing for publishing extensive documentation of U.S.-Soviet trade policies and U.S. policy toward Poland during the Solidarity period.

Nor is the Archive an advocacy organization or one that seeks to interview government officials to put them on the spot: "We just advocate release of documents. The documents may lie, but they are the best available record," Blanton said.

Free help appreciated

Information that the Archive obtains is made available to journalists and scholars without charge. Clearly it is appreciated:

"Many of the documents I have obtained through you are simply not available through other means," wrote John S. Nichols, an associate professor of communications at Pennsylvania State University, who also noted that, because of lack of both funds and clout, "It is increasingly difficult for an individual academic researcher to effectively use the FOIA."

"There is just no way we could have even begun this process [analysis of the Cuban missile crisis on its 25th anniversary] without your help — all free of charge, all first rate," wrote James G. Blight, executive director of Harvard's Center for Science and International Affairs.

Scholars are not, however, totally uncritical of the Archive: some regard the massive volume of FOIA requests that Armstrong's shop puts out as occasionally competing with their own scholarly inquiries.

Is Archive 'commercial'?

And in some government circles, the heavy volume of Archive requests is seen as capable of tying up a federal agency's entire information staff — if all had to be complied with, and without collecting any compensating fees. According to Blanton, the CIA is one of the few agencies — if not the only one — that considers the Archive a commercial enterprise and therefore refuses to waive fees — a dispute that is currently in litigation.

Perhaps typical of an Archive project — and of the reluctant response of government agencies — are 13 volumes of printouts constituting the full database of documents released by the CIA under the FOIA. The CIA challenged the Archive's demand for these documents (which make a pile almost three feet high as they await indexing) but was overruled by a Justice Department interpretation. Now the Archive is suing to obtain the same material on floppy disks, which are known to exist and would simplify the indexing process.

"Their purpose is to make it as difficult for us as they possibly can. Ours is to make it as easy as possible," Blanton said.