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Disinterring Truth in a Dungeon

I like to call them "Hot Docs." Every biographer dreams of stumbling upon a private archive of old letters and diaries. Interviews and oral histories are necessary, of course, but notoriously unreliable. A diary entry, a private letter or better yet, a verbatim telephone transcript is like gold.

I first hit a vein in 1982 when I went to interview Averell Harriman for my first book, a biography of John J. McCloy, the Wall Street lawyer and perennial "chairman" of the foreign policy establishment. Harriman, the former Governor of New York and diplomat who was then 91, gave me 30 minutes, but it was a lackluster interview and he knew it. His hearing aid was not working very well, and he couldn't remember much about his old friend Jack McCloy.

Unhappy that he had not been particularly useful, he turned to his secretary and said, "Why don't you show Mr. Bird down to the dungeon and see if he can find anything there?"

Escorted downstairs to a spare, windowless room, I was left alone to rummage through a score of file cabinets bulging with tens of thousands of letters, telephone transcripts and top-secret government documents. One file cabinet drawer contained papers from his stint as Ambassador to Moscow during World War II. Another housed classified documents on the Central Intelligence Agency's financing of Christian Democrats in Italy's 1948 parliamentary elections.

Harriman had evidently made it his habit to take home with him carbons and sometimes the originals of top-secret State Department, C.I.A. and White House documents from his stints as ambassador, as chief of the Marshall Plan in the late 40's and as assistant secretary of state and ambassador at large under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. There was, for instance, a complete copy of Harriman's negotiations with Nikita S. Khrushchev in 1963 over the Limited Atmospheric Test Ban agreement. There were thousands of

pages of State and Defense Department cables on the Vietnam War. There were reports from the Joint Chiefs on the status and number of nuclear weapons held by the United States and the Soviet Union.

Being a rich man, Harriman had also made it a practice to have his own personal secretary when he was in government. This secretary routinely listened on a "dead" phone extension to all of Harriman's phone conversations, and recorded them in shorthand. These were then transcribed, typed up and filed chronologically.

By the end of that first day, a Friday, I came upstairs and said that I'd found some correspondence between Harriman and McCloy, but that there was more material, and could I come back next Friday? Sure, why not? said the secretary, who is best left unnamed. I came back the next week, and the week after that. In the end, I spent literally a year of Fridays in Harriman's dungeon. By the end, I had filled a four-drawer file cabinet with copies of his documents. This file cabinet now resides in my own dungeon.

Some of the most sensitive material came from a collection of papers — memos, reports and letters — written by Michael Forrestal, a key aide to McGeorge Bundy, who had served as national security adviser to both Kennedy and Johnson from 1961 to 1966.

Forrestal was assigned by Bundy to report to him on intelligence matters, specifically the meetings of the 5412 Committee, which supervised covert action programs like the "34-A" operations against North Vietnam in 1964 that provoked the Gulf of Tonkin affair. Forrestal also became Bundy's chief eyes and ears on things Vietnamese.

A few years later, I heard that Forrestal, who died in 1989, had gotten all copies of his papers back from Harriman. So last year, I tracked down a friend of Forrestal's in Manhattan who I had learned might have inherited some of his estate. Hoping to find

more of Forrestal's papers, I called her up and over the phone she said, yes, she had some boxes of his papers downstairs in her storage cage. And yes, if I helped her dig out the boxes, I could have a look at them. On the appointed day, I arrived and was greeted by her and, alas, a senior partner from Forrestal's law firm, Shearman & Sterling. This gentleman introduced himself as Forrestal's literary executor. He explained that I could not look at the papers because they were still classified.

Most of Forrestal's papers remain unpublished and classified. But thanks to Harriman's dungeon, I was able to publish numerous extracts in both "The Chairman: John J. McCloy, the Making of the American Establishment" and my new book, "The Color of Truth," (Simon & Schuster) a biography of McGeorge Bundy and his brother William.

Some of these still-classified documents include crucial evidence about such historical controversies as whether President Kennedy had decided to withdraw from Vietnam before he was assassinated. One Forrestal memo, for instance, quotes Kennedy instructing his aides "to seize upon any favorable moment to reduce our involvement" in Vietnam. Aside from unsubstantiated oral history statements, this is the only contemporaneous archival document that attests to Kennedy's desire to find a way out of Vietnam.

Harriman's papers eventually landed at the Library of Congress. Many of them, however, also remain classified. Copies from my dungeon can be found on the Web site: www.historians.org.

Below, part of a 1962 top secret document on the Vietnam War, with, from left, Averell Harriman, ambassador at large, McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser, and Michael Forrestal, a Bundy aide.

