

An Opportunity to Reform and Improve the Practices of the Archives of the United States.

After a tenure of over a decade, the current Archivist of the United States has resigned. After a tenure of over a decade, the current Archivist of the United State has resigned. This change in leadership offers an opportunity to appoint an Archivist with the scholarly credentials, archival experience, leadership skills, and commitment to promoting the creation and dissemination of knowledge that the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) requires. This watershed moment is all the more critical because NARA needs to be far more effective in fulfilling its mission statement: *“to provide public access to Federal Government records in our custody and control. Public access to government records strengthens democracy by allowing Americans to claim their rights of citizenship, hold their government accountable, and understand their history so they can participate more effectively in their government.”*

With those requirements in mind, it is appropriate and critically important for historians to seek the best leadership for NARA. The National Archives is at a watershed moment; it has been in a budgetary crisis for years, with significant declines in its funding. There has been a continuing draining of subject matter expertise among archivists, and staff morale is sadly low. Moreover, reflecting the budgetary crisis, the backlogs of classified and unprocessed records and declassification requests have grown exponentially. Finally, the Archives leadership has been reluctant to engage with stakeholders in substantive discussions of its deep-seated problems.

Obtaining, processing, preserving/protecting the American Republic’s records are essential to the workings of the National Archives. But that is only half the job; opening and declassifying, and actively aiding research in the records are hallmarks of a high-quality archive. That includes leading NARA into the digital age while safeguarding the integrity and discoverability of the documents. We do not need to remind our readers of how often governments and individuals have tried to eliminate records or restrict and/or block access to the nation’s record, despite the efforts of Congress to prevent such happenings.

Effective pursuit of NARA’s mission requires a change to current practices, and that requires resources. That NARA has no clout (no godmothers or godfathers) on Capitol Hill is well known. Making explicit the precipitous decline in appropriations for NARA relative to the expansion of its facilities and holdings and the commensurate need for personnel and technology, the new Archivist must

prepare and propose a detailed budget that addresses the shortfalls. The ARCHIVIST must then work productively and constructively with Congress and the White House to explain that budget. Essential to the new Archivist's success will be recognition and acceptance of the position's responsibility for serving as an active and enthusiastic ambassador for the NARA within the Federal Government while generating public support by educating America's citizenry about the National Archives' essential contribution to the collective good. The White House, Congress, and the American voter must appreciate how the preservation and dissemination of the nation's records serves the national interest.

Attracting more resources for NARA will not alone be sufficient for the new ARCHIVIST to redress the deficiencies that undermine the administration's pursuit of its mission. Equally essential is the end of the isolation of NARA's leadership. The new Archivist must, at the start, implement a new policy of outreach to NARA's stakeholders. That will include but go beyond institutionalizing a systematic mechanism for communicating changes and updates of developments that affect researchers. More fundamentally, the new ARCHIVIST should propose and welcome the establishment of an advisory committee composed of representatives of NARA's key constituents in both the archival and research communities.

In the near term the proposed advisory committee need not be statutorily authorized, such as the State Department's Advisory Committee on Diplomatic Documentation. But it could serve in a similar capacity. The Archivist could consult it in formulating a budget, in approving records disposition schedules, and in recommending reforms of the Freedom of Information Act, the Presidential Records Act, and other legislation integral to NARA's mission. The new ARCHIVIST should exploit the expertise of NARA's constituent groups even as she or he evokes buy-in from them and builds bridges among them.

The Archivist of the United States and NARA sets the national tone and standards not only for the archival profession, but also far more widely for the multitude of state, local, and private archives that collect and preserve the history of the United States. The ARCHIVIST must represent the non-partisan appointment of a true public servant and should not serve as a political reward or a professional prize.

While we propose the above recommendations as concerned citizens and scholars, we are confident that we represent a broad community. Three of us are former presidents of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, two of us are former chairs of the Advisory Committee on Historical Documentation for the

U.S. Department of State, and one of us has long experience in seeking the opening of classified archival records for the National Security Archive. Together we have more than a century of experience working in and caring deeply about the National Archives. There is no time to lose.

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