



Questions for Archivist of the United States Nominee Dr. Colleen Shogan

Submitted to the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

by the National Coalition for History (9/12/22)

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these questions concerning the pending nomination of Dr. Colleen Shogan to become the Archivist of the United States (AOTUS). We fully support her confirmation. The National Coalition for History (NCH) is made up of a diverse number of 43 organizations representing historians, archivists, researchers, educators, students, documentary editors, preservationists, genealogists, political scientists, museum professionals and other stakeholders. As researchers, teachers, and conservators of American history and culture, we care deeply about the programs and activities of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

In recent years, Congress and the executive branch have placed additional responsibilities on the agency without providing the funding necessary to assume these functions. These include transitioning from the preservation and storage of paper records to the preservation and storage of electronic records. NARA also faces the continued addition of presidential libraries. Each new presidential library created and placed under NARA's care adds additional costs for staff, maintenance, and records management. If Dr. Shogan is confirmed as the new AOTUS, Congress should ensure that she has the financial resources so that NARA can meet its mission of preserving and making publicly available the records of our government.

1. Funding

NARA's funding has fallen in real terms over the course of decades. This year's budget increase was a welcome development, but it does not make up for years of disinvestment: the agency lacks both the human and technological resources that are necessary to fulfill its responsibilities. How do you see your role in keeping NARA properly funded, and how do you propose building the NARA constituency with the public and on Capitol Hill for more appropriate resources?

2. Prioritization

NARA faces tremendous challenges in meeting its day-to-day responsibilities, let alone taking on new initiatives. If Congress appropriates budget increases for NARA, how would you allocate new funds? Given the many areas that require attention, which needs would you prioritize?

3. Restoring Public Access to NARA Research Facilities

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic NARA facilities were closed, many for over two years, due to legitimate concerns for the health and safety of the public and NARA staff. NARA

research rooms around the country at its many facilities, including presidential libraries, have reopened. However, some NARA facilities are still requiring appointments and offering limited service to researchers and the public. Providing public access to our nation's records is one of NARA's most essential functions. Will you make reopening and restoring all NARA facilities to pre-pandemic levels a priority and what steps will you take to ensure that happens as soon as possible?

4. Establishing and Maintaining Relationships With Stakeholders

How will you approach creating and maintaining effective relationships with a wide range of archival user groups including historians, researchers, students, educators, federal agency staff, veterans, genealogists, journalists, and others?

What is your experience partnering with archivists and records managers outside NARA at the national, state, local and international levels? How would you establish partnerships with these communities?

5. Backlog of Veterans Record Requests

Due to the pandemic, the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis was closed for two years. This resulted in an enormous backlog of over 600,000 requests from veterans for their military service records that are housed at the NPRC. The backlog is slowly decreasing from its peak down to a level of 440,000 requests. Nonetheless, NARA has been unable to provide an estimate as to when they will be able to clear the outstanding requests. Do you commit to eliminating this backlog as soon as possible? Will you support digitization of paper records at the NPRC that slow down response time?

6. Backlogs of Freedom of Information Act and Mandatory Declassification Review Requests

NARA is also experiencing backlogs in Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests. For example, the National Security Archive was recently told that there is a 12-year backlog for declassification reviews at the George W. Bush Presidential Library. If NARA receives budget increases, would you allocate funding to the National Declassification Center to provide the resources it needs to eliminate and prevent backlogs?

7. Presidential Records Act Reform

Events over the past few months have made obvious the glaring inadequacies in, and need to reform, the Presidential Records Act (PRA). Under current law, NARA lacks any enforcement mechanisms, short of reporting suspected violations to Congress and the Department of Justice, in cases involving failure to comply with records preservation rules while a president is in office and the duty to turn over records to NARA at the end of a

presidential term. Will you make the case within the Biden Administration and with Congress for the need to craft bi-partisan reforms to the PRA? What responsibilities would you see the Archivist having in any modifications to the PRA?

8. Presidential Libraries

As you know, NARA recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the George W. Bush Library Foundation to turn over control of the museum operations to the foundation. NARA has placed a freeze on finalization of the transfer at the request of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Many are concerned this will set a precedent which will allow supporters of a president to shape the exhibits in the museum in light most favorable to him or her without input from NARA. If confirmed, this will be one of the first major decisions you face. How do you envision the future of presidential libraries? What roles do you see for NARA and private presidential foundations in their establishment and administration?

9. Transition of Federal Government Record-Keeping to All Electronic Format

In June 2019, NARA and the Office of Management and Budget issued OMB Memorandum M-19-21 requiring that, “By December 31, 2022, all permanent records in Federal agencies will be managed electronically to the fullest extent possible for eventual transfer and accessioning by NARA in an electronic format.” Many are concerned meeting this deadline is unrealistic given the disruption the COVID-19 pandemic had on federal government operations over the past two years. Will you support an extension of the deadline to provide agencies more time to comply?

10. Declassification

The process of declassifying presidential records is currently being centralized at NARA in Washington, DC, which creates an opportunity to address the backlog in that area. Currently, the National Archives relies on individual researchers to file FOIA and MDR requests for specific documents, which produces slow, haphazard results. Would you support creating a systematic declassification review process for all older presidential records—that is, those from the Carter Administration and earlier?

11. Federal Records Management

How will you collaborate with heads of federal agencies to ensure they – and the staff they lead – understand and comply with the Federal Records Act? NARA exercises essential oversight over federal agencies by conducting records management inspections. Unfortunately, NARA can only inspect a small number of agencies each year and has rarely audited some of the agencies whose record-keeping practices have raised significant concerns, including the CIA and Department of Homeland Security. How would you improve NARA’s oversight of records management within federal agencies?

12. National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), NARA's grant-making arm, has begun defunding popular and bipartisan initiatives to publish and digitize the papers of the Founding Fathers, Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Addams, Frederick Douglass, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other American luminaries. If confirmed, can we rely on you to ensure that the NHPRC will continue robust support for these vital legacy initiatives?

13. NARA Workforce

How do you intend to engage NARA senior leadership to provide the necessary vision to, and support of, rank-and-file agency staff who consistently demonstrate their commitment to NARA's mission?

In the past, NARA scored low on ratings of workforce morale among federal employees. Although self-assessment ratings have improved, how do you plan on building on the progress made by your predecessor? Describe your priorities for ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

14. Public Education

NARA has increasingly taken on a significant role in public education. Given your background, what is your vision for NARA in that sphere? How do you see the role of NARA as differing from that of other cultural heritage organizations in the federal government? Also, as a member of the commission preparing for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, what do you see as NARA's role in that celebration?