

With patience and savvy,  
the National Security Archive  
mines history's raw material.

# OpenSecrets

BY DAVID C. ANDERSON

The National Security Archive — not to be confused with the National Archive and Records Administration or the National Security Agency — is a non-profit group tucked into a humble, cluttered office suite atop the library of George Washington University in Washington, D.C. It deals in history retail: Each day's mail carries off a few letters to government agencies requesting the release of classified documents that shed crucial light on momentous events. And each day's mail brings in a few responses, most of them unproductive — an acknowledgement that a request was received, news that agency X can't do anything without first consulting agency Y, a formal rebuff that will trigger an appeal.

Even so, the archive's staff remains optimistic, having learned that collecting historic documents is like growing fruit from trees: a matter of patient cultivation over a period of years, not days or weeks. Some recent harvests are impressive:

— The Soviet Union's 1964 game plan for fighting World War III in Central Europe.

— A frank "lessons learned" report on successes and failures of U.S. humanitarian interventions in Sudan, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Central America.

— A Kennedy Administration commission's critical report on the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

— Transcripts of Henry Kissinger's meetings with leaders of the Soviet Union and China.

— Thousands of documents relating to human rights vio-



**Tom Blanton, the archive's executive director, says its approach has evolved "from confrontation to negotiation" with federal agencies.**

lations committed by Guatemala's armed forces, including a chilling, photo-illustrated logbook of young intellectuals apparently captured, tortured and executed by military death squads.

In 15 years, the archive has obtained some 5 million pages of documents related to events as monumental as the end of the cold war and as marginal as "yellow rain." (Was the strange substance that turned up in Southeast Asia evidence of Soviet-sponsored chemical warfare or bee droppings?) In addition to acquiring documents on its own, the archive, with its staff of 20 analysts, research fellows and administrators serves as a cen-

ter for document-based historical research and champions the idea of openness in government. While it has used the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to amass much of its huge collection—The Christian Science Monitor has called it the largest nongovernmental library of contemporary declassified material—the archive also sometimes litigates. A notable victory occurred in 1989, when a suit filed at the last minute persuaded a judge to prevent officials in the Reagan White House from expunging staff e-mail messages as they made way for the incoming Bush Administration. The archive pursued the case for eight years, eventually winning a Supreme Court decision that preserved existing White House e-mail and established the principle that e-mail correspondence should be treated as official records.

Over the years the archive has found that declassifying documents may alter the course of history as well as illuminate it. A database on the Guatemalan military, assembled from declassified U.S. documents, wound up helping the truth commission examining human rights abuses in Guatemala to pursue its investigations despite resistance from Guatemalan authorities. Kate Doyle, a senior analyst at the archive, also spent 18 months advising Guatemala's truth commission on how to obtain relevant U.S. documents on its own.

In the 1990's, the archive uploaded to its Web site documents about the 1973 coup in Chile, in which General Augusto Pinochet toppled Chile's President Salvador Allende. When the general was arrested in 1998, the archive's collection became a focus of international attention. Peter Kornbluh, another senior analyst, worked with families of Charles Horman, Orlando Letelier and Roni Moffit to press for release of more documents. Horman, an American Allende supporter working in Chile, disappeared during the 1973 coup; his widow, Joyce, has long believed U.S. officials were involved with his murder. Letelier and Moffit were assassinated by a car bomb in Washington D.C. in 1976, allegedly by Chilean secret police. At the end of 1998, President Clinton ordered the declassification of U.S. files relating to the Pinochet regime, and an uncensored page finally vin-

icated Joyce Horman by acknowledging that "U.S. intelligence may have played an unfortunate part in Horman's death."

The documents could also support efforts to prosecute the general and others for human rights abuses. "A number of the documents name names, places and events," points out

Kornbluh, who has published commentaries on the documents in both the United States and Chile. "Even if they can't be introduced in evidence, they can provide

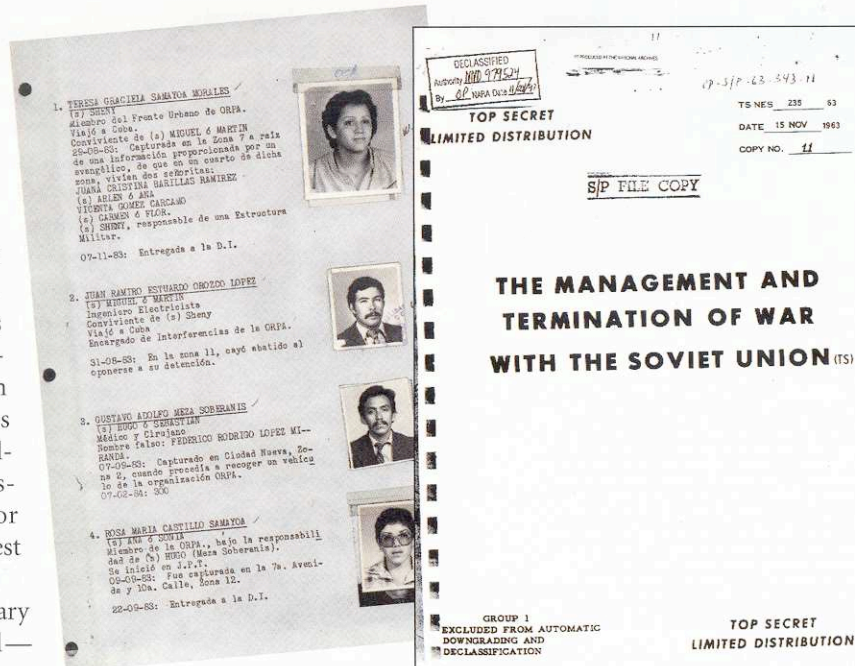
**From the archive: a page from a book logging the work of a Guatemalan death squad (left) and a documentary relic of the cold war.**

many leads for Chilean investigators." Such activities won the archive a special 1999 George Polk Award, an honor usually conferred on journalists. The award citation called the archive "a one-stop shopping center for declassifying and retrieving important documents, suing to preserve such government data as e-mail messages, pressing for appropriate reclassifications of files and sponsoring research that has unearthed major revelations." The accumulated successes also make the archive a uniquely valuable resource for historians, political scientists, journalists and people who are just plain curious, all over the world.

Over the years, the archive's staff and fellows have published 21 books and hundreds of articles based on declassified documents, including major studies of the Cuban missile crisis, the Bay of Pigs, United States policy in South Africa, spy satellites, the "Prague Spring" of 1968, the Iran-Contra scandal and the cold war from the Soviet point of view. (See bibliography on page 30.)

The archive also sells sets of documents on microfiche and Web access to 12 digital collections on a list of topics that includes Afghanistan, El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Africa, the Philippines, nuclear nonproliferation and the military uses of space. A few more sets are added each year. Revenues from these sales, combined with foundation grants, support the archive's \$1.5 million annual budget.

Large selections from the archive's current menu are also available for free on a Web site at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>.





**Elvis meets Nixon: When the archive learned that the 1970 photo had become the most frequently requested item from the government's National Archives, it obtained the backup documents, including the entertainer's transcribed note offering to be a "Federal Agent at Large."**

The United States Congress passed the first Freedom of Information Act in 1966, but it did not become genuinely useful to journalists and scholars until 1974, when amendments passed in the wake of the Watergate scandal applied it to national security documents. Time passed and

declassified files began to accumulate in basements and attics of people who had obtained them with FOIA requests, prompting some to think of consolidating their collections with an independent organization that could also serve as a center for research and continued pressure for release of more documents.

In 1984, Raymond Bonner, a journalist, and Wisconsin Representative Jim Moody started the Central America Papers Project to bring together FOIA releases on U.S. policy there. In 1985, Scott Armstrong, a Washington Post reporter, expanded the concept beyond Central America, obtaining funding from a number of foundations to establish the archive.

In the beginning, the group's approach to government was predictably adversarial. The archive's FOIA requesters regarded agency employees as natural enemies, while the agencies considered the archive a major irritant. "FOIA complicates life for the average government employee," explains Charlie Talbott, who dealt with the archive regularly when he worked as chief of the FOIA division at the Department of Defense. The requests to declassify documents "create an extra burden they don't have time for and don't get paid for." In the early years, he says, the archive didn't seem to care about that. "They would pelt us with massive numbers [of requests], clog the system."

As time went on, however, grudging respect developed, then even a level of collegiality. Tom Blanton, the archive's executive director, acknowledges an "evolution from confrontation to negotiation. It was deliberate on their side and deliberate on our side." In the beginning, he believes, some government officials hoped minimal cooperation could "make us go away. Now there's a recognition that we're here to stay." As for the archive, he says, it has learned over the years that "it's much better to negotiate; confrontation eats a lot of resources" without necessarily producing results with any more speed or certainty.

Lee Strickland served for many years as information and privacy coordinator at the C.I.A., which receives 7,000 FOIA inquiries per year, and watched the archive's professionalism evolve. "They make discrete, reasonable, logical requests," he says. "They don't come in for things about U.F.O.'s or say, 'give me everything you have on China.' When you read one of their letters, you understand exactly what they want." And although Blanton and others at the archive think of him as a person who found reason to reject many requests, Strickland speaks admiringly of the archive's mission. "They play a valuable role as advocates for openness," he says. "There is a need for checks and balances" on matters of secrecy.

Government officials charged with responding to FOIA requests belong to a group called the American Society of Access Professionals. Blanton proudly points out that Will Ferroggiaro, the archive's FOIA coordinator, is now so welcome in the halls of the government's most daunting bureaucracies that he has a

Dear Mr. President:

First, I would like to introduce myself. I am Elvis Presley and admire you and have great respect for your office. I talked to Vice President Agnew in Palm Springs three weeks ago and expressed my concern for our country. The drug culture, the hippie elements, the SDS, Black Panthers, etc. do not consider me as their enemy or as they call it the establishment. I call it American and I love it. Sir, I can and will be of any service that I can to help the country out. I have no concerns or motives other than helping the country out. So I wish not to be given a title or an appointed position. I can and will do more good if I were made a Federal Agent at Large and I will help out by doing it my way through my communications with people of all ages. First and foremost, I am an entertainer, but all I need is the Federal credentials. I am on this plane with Senator George Murphy and we have been discussing the problems that our country is faced with.

Sir, I am staying at the Washington Hotel, Room 505 - 506-507. I have two men who work with me by the name of Jerry Schilling and Sonny West. I am registered under the name of Jon Burrows. I will be here for as long as it takes to get the credentials of a Federal Agent. I have done an in-depth study of drug abuse and Communist brainwashing techniques and I am right in the middle of the whole thing where I can and will do the most good.

I am glad to help just so long as it is kept very private. You can have your staff or whomever call me anytime today, tonight, or tomorrow. I was nominated this coming year one of America's Ten Most Outstanding Young Men. That will be in January 18 in my home town of Memphis, Tennessee. I am sending you the short autobiography about myself so you can better understand this approach. I would love to meet you just to say hello if you're not too busy.

Respectfully,

/s/ Elvis Presley

P.S. I believe that you, Sir, were one of the Top Ten Outstanding Men of America Also.

I have a personal gift for you which I would like to present to you and you can accept it or I will keep it for you until you can take it.

Here one may read the latest revelations about once secret storage of American nuclear weapons in Japan, learn about the Central Intelligence Agency's participation in the downfall of Iranian Premier Mossadeq, or peruse the autopsy report on the assassinated Che Guevara.

There's also the startling photograph of President Richard Nixon shaking hands at the White House with Elvis Presley. While the photo has long been publicly available, visitors to the archive site may also examine copies of background documents produced in response to the archive's declassification request in 1992. These include Presley's handwritten note seeking an audience with the President to ask for appointment as a "Federal Agent at Large" and memos traded by members of the White House Staff on how to handle the situation.

"If the President wants to meet with some bright young people outside of the Government, Presley might be a perfect one to start with," writes an earnest Dwight Chapin. "You must be kidding," reads a marginal note by H.R. Haldeman.

place on the group's board and one year served as its president.

Meanwhile, the archive's analysts have found plenty to do beyond continued dunning of agencies in Washington. The end of the cold war and the emergence of new democracies in Eastern Europe made available new troves of closely held documents created by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. As a result, the archive has collaborated with other groups to set up dramatic conferences that bring together scholars, veterans of international crises and the relevant documents.

In 1987, for example, the archive helped out with meetings at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government to examine the Cuban missile crisis. Three Soviet officials appeared, and they were so intrigued with the process that they helped organize a 1989 follow-up session in Moscow that brought in a delegation from Cuba. That led to a final conference four years later in Havana, hosted by the only surviving national leader who participated in the crisis, Fidel Castro.

Assembling the participants, the experts and the documents, Blanton observes, provokes discussions that produce "a whole new body of evidence.... you can hold all of them to a higher standard than you could if you took them one on one." Since then, the archive has participated in similar meetings on the anti-Soviet uprising in Hungary in 1956, the "Prague Spring" of 1968, the Berlin workers uprising of 1953, the emergence of

## The Freedom of Information Act allows anyone to request documents by sending a letter to the FOIA offices of executive branch departments and agencies.

Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980's and five conferences on the collapse of Communism in 1989.

Most recently, the archive and its European colleagues formalized their efforts in the Parallel History Project, which pursues documents on NATO and the Warsaw Pact in tandem. Release of NATO documents is complicated by the fact that any member of the alliance can veto disclosure. "We are subject to the lowest common denominator," Blanton laments. The project's strategy, therefore, is to "get everything we can out of the Warsaw Pact side, then use that as leverage to open up the NATO side."

The recently released Soviet plan for nuclear war in Europe is a prime example. European scholars were able to take advantage of the Czech government's willingness to open its files from the cold war era—willingness that may well have been motivated by Czech awareness that the Soviet scenario seemed to accept obliteration of Czechoslovakia in the course of the contemplated nuclear exchanges. While researchers haven't been able to unearth a similar blow-by-blow from the NATO side, the archive has uploaded U.S. documents from 1963 and 1964 in which high officials discuss contingencies for war with the Soviet Union.

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In the 15 years it has been in business, the archive has filed some 21,000 such letters; they now go out at the rate of five to seven per working day. Despite all the filings it makes on its own behalf, the archive defines part of its mission as promoting broader use of the act in the public interest. Its Web site offers detailed instructions for preparing FOIA letters.

Ferroggiaro, who has been with the archive since 1991, and now monitors all requests going out under its name, adds four general pieces of advice:

**1. Do the homework first.** "The FOIA request should be the last resort," he says. Government agencies produce plenty of documents for the public record—press releases, transcripts of hearings, reports—and news reporters and other researchers may either have seen or know about the rest. It's important to understand sequences of events, people involved and issues engaged before writing a request letter.

**2. Be specific.** "The more information you can give them the better," Ferroggiaro advises, "and the more finite the request in terms of the universe of records." Having done the proper research in advance, for example, it may be possible to ask the State Department for "cable traffic through the U.S. embassy in San Salvador in the month of March, 1984," rather than "everything on El Salvador in 1984." Narrowing the request would reduce the response to a few hundred documents from several thousand.

**3. Be persistent.** If a request is turned down, the law permits an appeal; it's worth pursuing. Documents may not be released if an agency says they can't be found or if they are judged to be covered by one of the exemptions, which include material related to national security and law enforcement, proprietary business information, personal privacy, internal agency rules and pre-decision memoranda.

It's possible to challenge denial of a document's existence by providing more specific information about it. And it's possible to challenge the bases for exemption rulings. Ferroggiaro also points out that appeals are heard by higher-ups in the bureau-



A Chilean newspaper publishes documents obtained from United States agency files relating to the Pinochet era.

cracy who may have a more detached view about the risks of release than the line-level officials who issued the first denial.

4. *Be prepared to wait.* While the law requires agencies to respond to requests within 20 days of filing, understaffed FOIA offices hardly ever meet that deadline, and the courts have tolerated delays and backlogs so long as agencies can show they are making an effort. Patience can pay off handsomely, however. The archive waited more than a decade, for example, before receiving the C.I.A. inspector general's investigation of the Bay of Pigs debacle. And it is still waiting for documents first requested in 1995 relating to U.S. policy on genocide in Rwanda. "We're historians," Ferroggiaro says. "We have time." ■

The Ford Foundation gave the National Security Archive a planning grant in 1985 followed by significant program support from 1986 to 1988. That year, the Foundation's Program-Related Investment division provided funding to establish the archive's computerized indexing and publishing program.

For the past two years, the Foundation's Santiago, Chile, office has supported the archive's efforts to open U.S. files related to the arrest and prosecution of General Augusto Pinochet and to recover historical memory in Chile and the region. A subsequent grant this year underwrites the archive's efforts to increase transparency in U.S. foreign policy.

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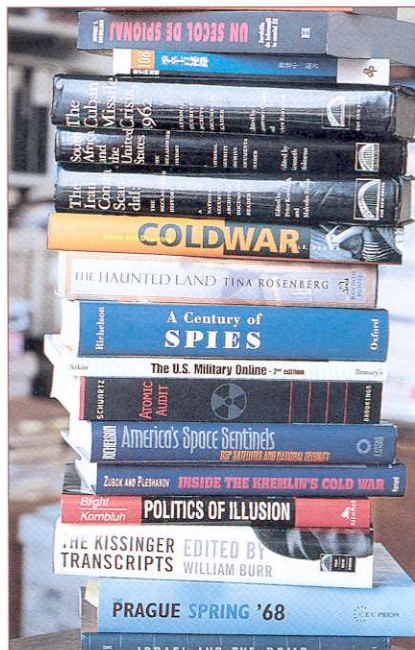
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