

Public Interest Declassification Board

Minutes October 31, 2008

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Minutes of the Meeting

October 31, 2008

The Public Interest Declassification Board held its eighteenth meeting on Friday, October 31, 2008. This meeting was held in the Archivist’s Reception Room at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) building in Washington, D.C. Martin C. Faga chaired the meeting. Board Members present were Ronald Radosh, Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker, William O. Studeman, Sanford J. Ungar, and Herbert O. Briick. Also present: L. Britt Snider, former Chairman of the PIDB; William J. Bosanko, Director, Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO), serving as the Executive Secretary for the PIDB; Michael Warner, Office of the Director of National Intelligence; Marc Susser, The Historian, U.S. Department of State; Richard Davis, U.S. Army Center of Military History; Martin Sherwin, George Mason University; Nancy Tucker, Georgetown University; Ronald Spector, George Washington University; and Robert Wampler, National Security Archive. John Powers, William Carpenter, A.J. Lutz, Julie Agurkis, and Meredith Stewart, ISOO, served as the PIDB staff.

I. Welcome and Opening Remarks

The Chair welcomed all those attending and gave opening comments. The chair introduced Mr. Briick as a new member to the Board and thanked Britt Snider for his service to the Board. The Chair welcomed the first panel of Federal agency historians.

II. Identifying “Historically Significant” Information and Prioritizing its Declassification Review, Panel I

Marc Susser, The Historian’s Office, U.S. Department of State
Michael Warner, Office of the Director of National Security
Richard Davis, U.S. Army Center of Military History

Dr. Susser gave a presentation on his work in the Historian’s Office at the U.S. Department of State, focusing on researching and compiling the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series. Dr. Susser explained the long history the State Department has in publishing official records of the foreign policy of the United States. In terms of prioritization, Dr. Susser explained that targeted congressional efforts to declassify historically significant records typically take

away resources from systematic and other declassification review programs. The State Department approaches declassification based on the age of records because it is the most straightforward approach from a records management perspective and fits within the legal mandate for compiling FRUS. He explained that it is difficult to identify topical priorities because it is not an efficient use of resources and there is much disagreement about identifying the priorities. Today the FRUS is publishing relevant records from many agencies, not just State Department records. FRUS citations serve as a “road map” for users to identify additional historical information. The focus of the FRUS has expanded. Volumes now include crisis issues and global issues, in addition to the traditional geographic issues and regional issues. FRUS is also creating “e-volumes” which are available on their website. Dr. Susser said that it would be beneficial for the Board to encourage declassification of records in the Presidential libraries.

Dr. Warner gave a presentation on the prioritization of historically significant records within the Intelligence Community. To determine historical significance, Dr. Warner looks at the particular mission of an agency and what it is that they set out to accomplish. Then, knowing how an agency utilizes resources, he looks for records which record the essential activities of the agency. A year-by-year review may work well at the State Department, but it is not necessarily the best approach for other agencies. Dr. Warner stated that agencies need to have some freedom to prioritize in a way that works best for them - prioritization by topic or records group series might be more effective. However, any prioritization process is resource-intensive and would likely take away resources from mandatory and systematic declassification. Dr. Warner said the best solution might be to have trained historians working in cooperation with Federal agency records managers.

Dr. Davis discussed the benefit of utilizing agency publications, such as monographs on a particular subject, in identifying historically significant materials for declassification. Publications can often provide a roadmap for researchers to identify other documents to be reviewed. Dr. Davis expressed concerns that Army units currently deployed in the field are not consistently preserving their records and implementing the Army’s records management policies. He stated that his office, the Center of Military History (CMH), has instituted a program to exchange hard drives with returning Army units in order to preserve their electronic records. This method is not the most effective; as it also means that the CMH is capturing a significant volume of non-record information as the hard drives are all-inclusive. This will create processing delays as archivists must review the entire contents of each hard drive. Still, Dr. Davis stated that the most important element in an effective declassification program is the preservation of records in the first place.

A discussion followed the presentations. The discussion points included: the production of FRUS volumes and the relationship with mandatory declassification reviews; the number of FRUS volumes per administration; the benefit of statutory requirements in assisting the FRUS staff; and technological challenges of performing electronic searches at the State Department. Also discussed was the possibility of electronic collaboration to meet the declassification needs of broad topics such as intelligence and defense. It was mentioned that the FRUS model might be a good model for addressing these issues, as was the idea of collaborating with external historians. Mr. Briick stated it might make sense to focus systematic efforts on the Presidential libraries because they hold the most important records and because the volume of records in each of those repositories is fixed.

III. Identifying “Historically Significant” Information and Prioritizing its Declassification Review, Panel II

Nancy Tucker, Georgetown University

Robert Wampler, National Security Archive

Martin Sherwin, George Mason University

Ronald Spector, George Washington University

Dr. Tucker presented her views on prioritization based on the perspective of historians. She explained that most historians are interested in the history of policy development and how those policies are implemented by the Federal government. Historians, for the most part, are not interested in intelligence sources and methods. They understand certain information needs to be classified. However, she is concerned that prioritization may result in greater selectivity of records chosen for review and would, therefore, impact document availability. Dr. Tucker explained that when Federal agencies choose what they believe are the most important topics for declassification, outside historians will likely disagree with those choices. She stated that prioritization is necessary but worried how it would be implemented. Due to the fact that historians’ priorities for research change over time, a system of prioritization would need to be reviewed regularly, while the routine review of non-priority records must continue. Additionally, the priority of declassifiers, she asserts, should not simply be focused on declassifying the easiest records, but should be focused on reviewing the difficult records as these records are usually the most historically significant.

Dr. Wampler’s **presentation** highlighted specific examples of types of documents that should be prioritized, including, briefing books, staff studies, memoranda of conversations, and meeting minutes. He stated that the first tier of priorities should be those documents at the Presidential libraries. He said that in order to improve the system there should be a permanent process for outside scholars to help set priorities by looking at specific examples of record groups and series in an electronic environment. The resulting recommendations should carry weight in the declassification process. Dr. Wampler said a legislative mandate on the declassification review process could possibly give force to the recommendations.

Dr. Sherwin’s **testimony** described the importance of historical analysis in a democratic society. He stated there is nothing more important than Presidential and Vice Presidential records. Priorities, according to Dr. Sherwin, are related to historians’ interest and there is no set of criteria that will have common appeal. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) should be given more support and attention and should be integrated into the declassification process. Dr. Sherwin encouraged the Board members to add to their recommendations the development of an electronic records declassification program in order for records to be reviewed electronically.

Dr. Spector described how agencies that are concerned with documenting institutional memory often focus on mission-related records, which do not necessarily shed light on the agencies’ broader role in American history. It is fortunate, however, that those agencies which take their institutional memory seriously are also the best at keeping records. Dr. Spector said that limited resources make prioritizing necessary, but there are aspects of prioritizing which will prove difficult. If a consensus is quickly achieved, there will be no guarantee that the most important records will be included. There may be key events and personalities that are not known to those making priorities due to classification. The members of a panel to set priorities would likely be drawn from the political, academic, and journalism arenas, but other interests (e.g. science and

technology) should also be represented. The panel should have the ability to examine a small sample of classified documents to make determinations of priority. Dr. Spector stated that if the resources for declassification are not likely to be expanded, historians should work to ensure that they are not reduced further.

After the presentations, discussion topics included: differences in establishing priorities among the public and professional historians; the challenging process of continually revising history; overclassification and how it hurts the classification system; the importance of communication and cultural exchange between declassifiers and historians; the importance of classification guidance to declassifiers; the lack of knowledge about what has already been declassified; the reluctance of Federal agencies and declassifiers to change their Federal agency's culture; and the fact that declassifiers need more and better guidelines and guidance.

IV. Open Forum

The Chair welcomed comments from members of the public, including Jim David, Michael Binder, and Frank Debenedictus. Mr. David endorsed a top-down approach to prioritization and the use of redaction by declassifiers. Mr. Binder stated that most Department of Defense FOIA requestors are interested in learning about the actions of a family member who served in the Armed Forces or of their own service and that priorities should not be identified by the needs of historians alone. Mr. Debenedictus stated that the release of records may help to clear up confusion about conspiracies.

V. Adjournment

The chair concluded the meeting at 12:30 P.M.