

OPEN SECRETS

What the government seeks to conceal the National Security Archive works hard to put on the record

BY SAMUEL FROMARTZ

In the last days of President Reagan's term in office, the nonprofit National Security Archive got a tip that the White House was about to delete thousands of electronic messages on the White House computers — the same back-channel system Oliver North used to communicate with top administration officials during the Iran-contra affair. Concerned about the loss of valuable White House records, the archive filed suit against Reagan to prevent the destruction of the documents. At 6:10 on the eve of George Bush's inauguration, a federal judge issued a temporary injunction to prevent the records from being destroyed, beginning what has become a year-old suit to preserve the data.

The suit was just one of many the now nearly five-year-old archive has filed in its aggressive campaign to make classified information about government affairs available for the public record. Its aim has been to preserve what founder Scott Armstrong calls "institutional memory" — the layers of public and private documents that make up national security policy — in order to hold officials accountable for their words and actions. Having obtained documents through the Freedom of Information Act and through donations from researchers, the archive has become a repository for

a vast amount of once-secret government material available to anyone who wants to see it. The archive has put itself squarely on the map as a crucial source of information when it comes to the record of government conduct.

Thanks to its unique collection of contemporary national security documents on Iran and Central America, the archive achieved celebrity almost as soon as it opened its doors. Its day-by-day account of the Iran-contra affair from its inception in 1980 until April 1987, published the day congressional hearings began, became a 678-page bible for national security reporters and congressional staffers. Even independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh requested a copy in electronic form into which classified information could be inserted for his record of the affair. Its resources will undoubtedly be tapped during the upcoming trial of former National Security Adviser John Poindexter.

After expanding quickly, the archive went through a period of turmoil last year. Its plan to publish its collection of government documents fell behind schedule, contributing to conflicts between the archive and the Fund for Peace. From the beginning the fund has served as the archive's tax-exempt sponsor and financial administrator, an arrangement that allows the archive to receive foundation funds. The difficulties also caused concern at the Ford Foundation, which had made a substantial loan to the organization.

Last summer, after months of internal fighting, the executive committee of the Fund for Peace moved to place Armstrong — a former *Washington Post* investigative reporter who started the group with \$20,000 of his own money — on administrative leave. This prompted the staff to threaten a walk-out. Armstrong then stepped down from day-to-day management and by January he had become a visiting professor of international journalism at American University. The archive worked up a new budget, cutting three members from its roughly forty-member staff and designating four more positions as possibly expendable. A search for a new executive director was initiated.

Armstrong, who says he never wanted to be a manager, concedes that a more business-minded person was needed to run the archive; at the same time, he believes that concern about the archive's highlighting of dishonest statements by Reagan administration officials was the underlying cause of his troubles.

Early on, Armstrong says, Ford Foundation officials told him they were upset by some of the free-lance pieces that staff members, making use of the extraordinary material available at the archive, had written on controversial topics like Central America and the Iran-contra affair. He says the Ford people feared that columns by authors identified as archive employees would compromise the group's avowed nonpartisan stance if they criticized officials and pointed out inconsistencies or lies in their public statements.

"At one point after I appeared on *MacNeill/Lehrer*," Armstrong recalls, "I got a call from Stan Heginbotham [of the Ford Foundation's international affairs program], who said, 'What were you doing, calling George Bush a liar?'"

"I said, 'I'm not calling Bush a liar; it's just that what he says is not what the documents say.'"

"Well, then you're calling Bush a liar, and during a presidential campaign that's a partisan position." So I said, 'It's only partisan if you say you don't think liars should be president. I didn't say that.'" (Ford Foundation officials, as a matter of policy, declined to discuss matters concerning the archive other than its funding. The foundation's vice-

Samuel Fromartz, who lives in New York City, writes frequently about business-related subjects.

president, Susan Berresford, pointed out that Ford has provided the archive with more than \$800,000 in grants, in addition to the \$1.5 million loan. "Our actions speak for themselves," she said.)

The archive, in consultation with the Ford Foundation, drew up a policy statement that emphasized the need for disclaimers when staff members published their own work. But Armstrong contends that the foundation's criticisms were part of an effort to temper the archive's vehement public opposition to government lying and dissembling. "It will be the end of the archive with a voice," he says. "It will be turned into a scholarly library — the *Sewanee Review* of nonprofit organizations."

Others connected with the group say that the conflict with the Ford Foundation was a comparatively minor issue — even a nonissue — and that the turmoil simply reflected the growing pains of a major nonprofit organization beset by funding pressures, missed publishing deadlines, and Armstrong's inability to manage its affairs. Joseph Onck, the co-chairman of the archive's board and former general counsel, says that the Ford Foundation was well aware of the archive's adversarial role in the past and was comfortable with it. "At Scott's request, I raised those concerns with Ford at the highest level and it was clear that was not a problem they were concerned about." Nina Solarz, executive director of the Fund for Peace, says, similarly, that she had no problem with the archive's attacks on official lies; her concern, she says, was focused solely on management problems.

What the archive was attempting to achieve was "a fairly natural transition from a founder to a manager," says deputy director Tom Blanton. "But it's taken longer than people wanted. It's been complicated and it's been fraught with a lot of conflict."

The National Security Archive is housed in the Brookings Institution building near Dupont Circle in Washington. File cabinets, worn furniture, computers, and bookshelves dominate the fifth-floor space, which is crowded with staff members, most of whom are in their twenties or thirties. Declassified U.S. documents

are everywhere — overflowing from drawers, piled on desks, stacked on bookshelves, and carefully catalogued in a mini-mainframe computer.

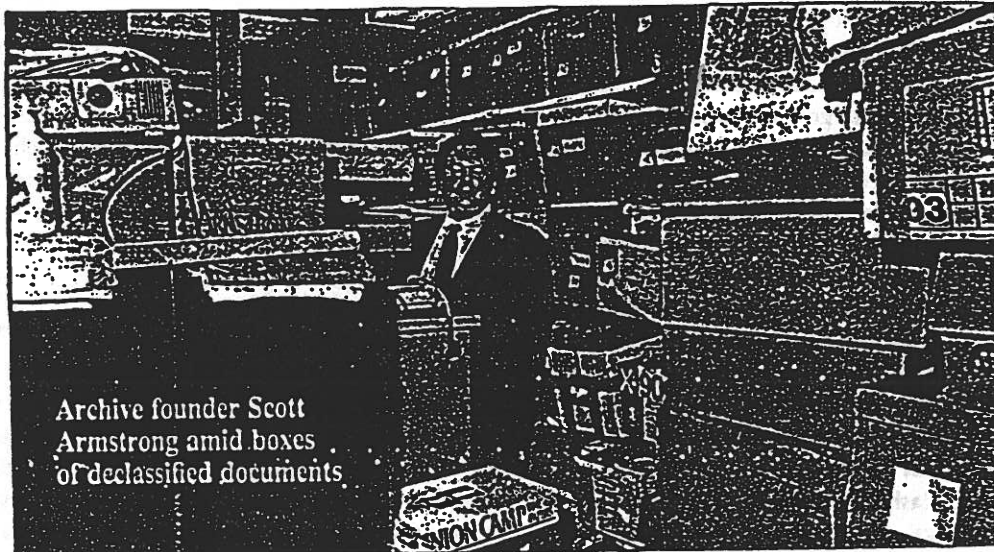
A transcript of a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing is stuck up on the wall above the photocopy machine, just one page out of 45,000 formerly secret government documents housed at the archive in a collection that's increasing at the rate of 1,200 to 1,500 a month. The archive collects newspaper clips, press briefings, court records, phone logs, computer messages, bank records, airmgrams, cables, flight logs — virtually anything that constitutes a record of government policy and action.

Armstrong has a rare grasp of the workings of government, having honed

wanted to ask" — and Armstrong soon amassed a huge number of documents relating to U.S.-Soviet relations, the Middle East, and Central America.

Agency officials, of course, had censored many sections of many of these documents. When Armstrong sat down to compare his set of documents on Central America with those gathered by former *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner, the two men found that different chunks of the same documents had been blacked out. By combining their different versions, they were able to create a more complete record of U.S. foreign policy in Central America. It was this discovery that convinced Armstrong of the need for a repository for declassified government documents.

CHRISTINA SOBOTKA



Archive founder Scott Armstrong amid boxes of declassified documents.

The archive was a key resource during the Iran-contra hearings — and undoubtedly will be again during the trial of John Poindexter

his skills as senior investigator on the Senate Watergate Committee before joining *The Washington Post* in 1976. He co-authored the best-seller about the Supreme Court, *The Brethren*, with the *Post*'s Bob Woodward and left the paper in 1985 to work on a book about U.S. foreign policy.

It was during his years at the *Post* that Armstrong, frustrated by the canned statements and managed news of the Reagan era, began to build a career around the Freedom of Information Act. The FOIA was the route to the story behind the story — "the only way you could get to ask the questions you really

While the archive's usefulness helped it attract initial funding from organizations like the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Armstrong was aware that the archive couldn't provide its services indefinitely without a more dependable, long-term source of income. He worked out a plan with the Ford Foundation to design numerous "document sets," consisting of indexes and microfiche copies of documents, that could be sold to libraries around the world. The sets were organized around specific topics, like El Salvador and Iran-contra.

In 1988, after an agreement had been drawn up with the publishing firm Chadwyck-Healey, the archive received a \$1.5 million low-interest loan from the Ford Foundation's program-related investments office. The conduit for the Ford money was the Fund for Peace, which signed for the loan. The revenue from the publishing activity was intended to replace grant funds as the archive sought to achieve self-sufficiency by the mid-1990s.

"Here was an opportunity to have a locker full of frozen events and offer them to libraries — to make the market economy work for a nonprofit foundation," Armstrong explained recently.

The plan was ambitious. The first set of indexed documents was due out in March 1989, with two more scheduled for release that year and seven each year from 1990 on. The cataloguing and indexing effort would be "equivalent to that of the largest research libraries," according to the archive's business plan.

The first document set was published nine months behind schedule. By mid-year of 1989, the archive's failure to meet its publishing schedule became the focus of discussions between the archive, the Fund for Peace, and the Ford Foundation. When Joshua Reichert took over as interim executive director in October, he thought the operation could go broke in a matter of months. The budget was slashed, a massive fund-raising effort was undertaken, and the publishing plan scaled back to produce four document sets by June 1990 and another four by the following June. The goal of self-sufficiency was put off until the end of the 1990s. The board also decided eventually to become independent of the Fund for Peace.

The process of gathering the documents and putting them together is painstaking and labor-intensive. As a result of the government's arbitrary declassification decisions, staff members are in some instances compelled to compare three versions of the same document to obtain the full record — including the scrawls and initials in the margins that can provide some sense of an official's thinking.

Analysts and indexers pour over every cable, briefing paper, and memo re-

leased by the government, gathering names, dates, and locations, seeking cross-references to other documents, trying to place each bit of information into the larger picture of foreign policy. Each document is scanned by three sets of eyes and eventually entered into the mini-mainframe that serves as the archive's electronic index. The pay-off of all this labor can make headlines.

During the Oliver North trial, for instance, the government objected to releasing documents that identified by name a Costa Rican intelligence official with close ties to the United States. The debate over how much of the document could be released stalled and nearly derailed the trial.

"A reporter called us during the afternoon break and asked what we knew about this guy," recalls Blanton, the archive's deputy director. "So we go to the data base and we see three different versions of the same document — two versions released by the Iran-contra committee and a third in a civil lawsuit." That evening the archive released the uncensored document to major newspapers, showing that the government had been trying to protect a secret that had already been released.

"It shows how arbitrary the government is, and the total lack of reality in the argument that these were national security secrets," says Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the archive who specializes in Central America.

Another example: in 1988, the archive won a court case it had brought to obtain classified documents about the Cuban missile crisis. A 300-page stack of material from the National Security Council arrived at the archive in January 1989, one week before a conference that would bring together top policymakers of the era was to begin in Moscow.

The documents, seen only by the twelve most senior members of the Kennedy administration, detailed a plan to overthrow Castro more than a year after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. As it happened, this second attempt was tentatively scheduled for October 1962, the month the Kremlin tried to deploy nuclear missiles on the island. The documents appeared to support the Soviets' long-held contention that they had acted because they feared the U.S. was ready to invade Cuba.

Armstrong and Laurence Chang, who coordinates the archive's Cuban Missile Crisis project, traveled to Moscow and released the documents, precipitating a historical revision of the affair. Even former U.S. officials conceded that, had they been in the Soviets' shoes, they might have concluded that a U.S.-backed invasion was imminent.

Along with its numerous coups, the archive has also had more than its share of run-ins with the State Department, the CIA, and the FBI when it sought documents from them. At one point the Justice Department's Office of Information and Privacy even set up a hot line for government agencies to call when the archive requested material.

"The archive, because of its institutional being, will be in conflict with the government, any government, whether it's a Democratic or Republican administration," Blanton observes. "No government welcomes an outside watchdog which is tracking its statements and highlighting contradictions."

Armstrong sees his conflicts with the Ford Foundation and the Fund for Peace as heralding a less outspoken era for the archive, an era during which its advocacy work will be diminished. Others say the greatest threat to the archive could be the diminished presence of Armstrong, who now serves as a member of the board and assists the archive in its litigation efforts. "I made it clear that I thought the future of the organization depended very much on having Scott continue to be centrally involved in the policy and advocacy side of the archive," says John Shattuck, chairman of the archive's board through 1989.

Archive staff members are already talking about starting up new projects, possibly one on Panama and another on the drug war. Then, too, there is the alluring prospect of the trial of John Poindexter. The archive has thousands of documents relating to Poindexter, and its third document set, on the Iran-contra affair, is scheduled to be released in mid-April, by which time the trial should be under way. This may provide just the sort of energizing event the archive needs to move forward after a time of trouble. ♦