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Democracy's Archive: The Importance of Government Documents to the Historical Record

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Democracy's Archive:
The Importance of Government Documents to the Historical Record
November 9, 2007

It is my great pleasure to be with you this afternoon and to celebrate a remarkable milestone in UK's history. I am probably preaching to the converted here, but I have always thought that our library is the crown jewel of our campus. And I am not just referring to the grandeur of this magnificent Young Library, but even more, to what is contained in the various libraries across campus. You are probably well aware of the treasure trove of original documents and interviews contained in Special Collections. But we are here today honoring another treasure that started 100 years ago—our vast accumulation of U.S. government records. These are the materials that probably few of us ever see—the voluminous congressional hearings, the myriad agency and bureau records, or the mountainous government reports of items great and small. One can read weather reports for a given day in the twentieth century, or the specific awarding of a patent, or the testimony presented in favor or opposition to the nomination of a federal judge. One can also read the complete findings of the Warren Commission, or the landmark Surgeon General's report into the harmful effects of smoking. For historians, political scientists, as well as sociologists, geologists, agricultural and medical researchers, and countless other fields of study, it is hard to imagine life without the storehouse of material contained in these records. Some of us may tend to take this material for granted. And, it is hard to imagine this library, or this university, without this remarkable collection. I don't think it's too much to say that without UK becoming a federal depository, the ability of this library to function as a major research venue would have been nearly impossible.

But we're here today to celebrate more than UK's personal milestone—the occasion allows us to celebrate the very fact that these records are available to the public in the first place. The governmental records stored in such a depository represent the raw stuff of history, the very historical framework of the republic, and a vital and necessary ingredient of a society hoping to govern itself.

The founding fathers recognized this early on. In 1765, John Adams wrote in the Boston Gazette that: "The people have a right, an indisputable, inalienable, indefeasible divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean of the characters and conduct of their rulers." Writing eleven years before the Declaration of Independence spelled out some other "inalienable" rights, Adams knew instinctively that public records were a sacred, indeed, a "divine right" in order for free people to understand the methods and motivations of their elected leaders. To Adams, that transparency was essential to the success of the democratic experiment, even in those instances where the information contained within was "dreaded."

John Adams represents the dual aspect of power—he was, at once, the revolutionary who saw the act of understanding their leaders as beyond dispute—but once in power, when he became president, he saw his position above tawdry public concerns, signing the Sedition Act. Power has a way of doing that, and the last two hundred years has shown that Adams was not alone in trying to muddy the transparency. This tension between a government wishing to protect its most cherished and, sometimes, embarrassing secrets, and the public's right to know how their government functions, is a constant thread throughout our history, one that is central to our current situation. That is

why our ceremony today is so important. The establishment of this library as a federal depository one hundred years ago reminds us that these records are, in every sense of the term, the basic archive of democracy.

In order to understand why such records are important, we should briefly note why history is important. Too often, when some people say they “value” history, they mean they like the sanitized, Santa Claus version that makes them feel good. There’s plenty in our past that can inspire us, and much for which we can be proud, but there’s also much for which we should be ashamed. History is not about making us feel necessarily comfortable. We shouldn’t just use history, as Robert Penn Warren put it, to serve as our own “private alibi-factory.” Sometimes, it should make us feel very uncomfortable. If the evidence is there, history has the power to redefine or even destroy some cherished assumptions and blind prejudices, and cause us to rethink some of the origins of our institutions and our common culture.

Keep in mind the crucial part of that sentence was “if the evidence is there.” In the end, our history can be no more thorough than our sources. The bare essentials of uncovering our past involve scouring the newspapers, the private papers, and the documents that require private institutions and citizens to deposit those materials in a library or archive. We certainly have a vast amount of those types of documents here at UK, but it is the federal depository designation that provides the researcher free access to the records of the federal government. Here in central Kentucky, researchers do not necessarily need to go to Washington to get records of the State Department, or the Defense Department, or the Department of Agriculture, or a Congressional subcommittee

hearing. They don't need to go to an Ivy League library to get these, either. They are here, waiting only for the creativity and ingenuity of the researcher to make the most of them.

Allow me to provide one, brief example of why these documents are so important to the historian, at least to me. Several years ago, I contemplated writing a book about a Kentuckian Ed Prichard, a New Dealer whose ballot box stuffing conviction seemed to hide any of his more noteworthy accomplishments in Washington. The problem with tackling this project was simple—sources, specifically, the fact there were seemingly none. He left no private papers and his oral histories were sealed by his widow. But in reading his obituary, I recalled a reference that in 1975 he had been informed by Sen. Walter Huddleston that he had been the subject of an illegal FBI wiretap while he worked as an aide to Harry Truman in 1945. For the historian, obtaining these wiretaps was essential. But where were they? What was in them?

The only place to start was in our government records here at UK, specifically a lengthy report I finally tracked down with the officious name, Report 94-755, “Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Government Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities.” In time, it became better known as simply the “Church Committee.” At first, it seemed innocuous enough, not unlike the thousands of other such reports generated by Congress. Yet as I read the report, I learned much that shocked me. For the first time, the report outlined how American citizens had been spied on by their government for their political beliefs for three decades in the mid twentieth century, and the first one to be illegally wiretapped for pure political purposes, was none other than Ed

Prichard. Not only did reading that report display to me just how pervasive government surveillance had become during the Cold War and alert me to continue my investigation of Ed Prichard, it also occurred to me what a remarkable thing this document was.

Governments don't often investigate themselves and broadcast it to the world, especially when the news is bad. But in the mid-1970's that very thing happened, and the facts of these disturbing revelations were there in black and white, for anyone to see.

To those on the committee, like Sen. Huddleston, a great friend of this library I should add, it was their duty to perform this service, and more importantly, the right of the citizens, to know, in Adams' words, the "character and content" of our rulers. In J. Edgar Hoover's case, and the presidents and attorneys general who oversaw and endorsed much of what happened, it was a sobering lesson for us all.

This one example points out how these documents blend with the overall research mission of this library. To read published works on the Church Committee's investigation, one could access the books or articles on the subject contained here in the stacks of Young Library. To read about one of the committee member's role in the hearings, one could go to Special Collections and access the papers of Sen. Huddleston himself. And to read the actual report, one needs to go to the government documents. The first two components in this research equation are well known and used extensively, but it's the third one that completes the circle, that actually serves as context for the other two.

Because of the availability of records like these contained in the federal depository libraries, and the material released under the landmark Freedom of Information Act, the American people have access to much of the inner workings of their

government. This is a development to be applauded, yet recent developments are reason enough to be concerned that Adams' exhortations on our "divine rights" may be in some jeopardy. In 2001, even before 9/11, President Bush signed an executive order that allows current and former presidents and vice presidents, and their families, the power to withhold documents of their presidency indefinitely. Millions of other government documents classified under the rubric of "national security" may remain sealed for your lifetime, something that even President Adams may have found contradictory to the maintenance of an informed, democratic society. Freedom of Information Act requests now go through a much more laborious and time-consuming labyrinth. A typical request now may take upwards to a decade to process. Challenges to these research impediments are underway in Congress, but obviously we have much work to do in reclaiming our democratic birthright. And before you think I am picking on the current Republican president, Democratic presidents, and their spouses, have been known to take advantage of this order for their own benefit. We recently learned that President Clinton invoked Bush's order in sealing the records of his wife while he was in the White House. For those wanting to know something of the character and conduct of Hillary Rodham Clinton as First Lady as they consider her presidential candidacy, these records are off limits until her husband says so, or until the public outcry is loud enough. The tension continues, but for the time being, those who believe in open access to the people's records, are losing.

So, in closing, congratulations to the UK Library on a singular milestone. I hope the next century produces even more material that can be as revealing to future researchers as the Church Committee records were for me all those years ago. And as you

celebrate this occasion, please keep in mind that if we are to truly understand the significance of what Adams said in the 1760s, perhaps you can use your voice to remind others that much more is at stake in keeping these records open and accessible than adding a footnote to an obscure research paper. In the end, preserving our “inalienable right” to government records is in keeping with the very ethos that inspired the revolutionaries all those years ago. While some of them they may have grimaced at what is occurring today nationally, they would undoubtedly applaud our celebration, and what has occurred in this library over the past century. Thank you.