DOCUMENTATION OF THE UNITED STATES AT WAR IN THE 20TH CENTURY: AN ARCHIVIST’S REFLECTIONS ON SOURCES, THEMES, AND ACCESS

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ABSTRACT: War is not simply a military matter, but rather a complex phenomenon that affects all of society. The documentation of war is similarly complex. It appears in both public and private sources and in machine-readable, audio, and video—as well as paper—form, thereby presenting a considerable challenge to archivists concerned with the preservation of adequate documentation. Trends in research and interpretation can affect the demand for particular types of sources, but access to the archival record is often a greater obstacle to research than limitations on the nature or extent of the documentation. Archivists bear considerable responsibility for what the future will know of war in the twentieth century because that knowledge will depend to a large extent upon those fragments of the past that survive—the archival record.

By the dawn of the twentieth century the United States had reached its continental limits and developed a full-fledged concomitant ideology of expansion embodied in the concept of manifest destiny. With world power status came further territorial and economic expansion beyond the North American continent that necessarily involved the United States in nearly all of the twentieth century’s armed conflicts. Two types of wars may be distinguished. If war requires an official government declaration, then the first United States war of the twentieth century began on 2 April 1917, when Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration against Germany. If, however, war is a confrontation where people kill each other under a national banner with or without a formal declaration, then the first twentieth century war began at the very dawn of the century when Major General Arthur McArthur, father of the famous World War II general, tried to quell Philippine “insurgents” resisting United States control of their territory (1898-1902). War must also include the United States’ involvement in the Boxer Rebellion in China (1900), when nationalists resisted United States hegemony in much the same fashion as the Filipinos, and the United States intervention in Mexico between 1911 and 1917, when
Brigadier General John J. Pershing pursued Francisco “Pancho” Villa through northern Mexico.¹

The only United States wars of this century that proceeded from official declarations were World Wars I and II. Although a wealth of material survives from World War I (1914-17), the paper explosion did not begin until World War II (1939-45). The Second World War left literally miles of documentation—so much in fact that Barbara Tuchman, who wrote about both wars, complained after completing Stilwell and the American Experience in China that there was too much source material.² More has been written about World War II than any other war, no doubt in part because it is the most voluminously documented. Since World War II, the United States has been involved in prolonged military actions in Korea and Vietnam as well as other areas of the world such as Grenada, Central America, and the Persian Gulf. For purposes of this paper, these conflicts, although undeclared, also fit the definition of war.

Various types of records document war in the twentieth century and, as the Vietnam conflict illustrates, involve public as well as private, civilian as well as military, institutional as well as personal domains. In April 1987 the secretary of the army transferred custody of the Southeast Asia War records to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). These consist of approximately 30,000 cubic feet of material created between 1954 and 1975 by U.S. Military Assistance Command-Thailand (MACTHAI), U.S. Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV), U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV), and their subordinate components. These records document the role of the United States Army in Vietnam and of the United States joint commands there. After processing and review by National Archives staff, they will be opened in scheduled increments. The last of them are scheduled to be available by April 1992.³ Other important repositories for official documents include the Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

A valuable counterpoint to the official military record is provided by collections of personal papers of Vietnam veterans such as the one at Cornell University,⁴ and oral histories such as those used to produce published first person accounts of individuals in Vietnam as, for instance, Al Santoli’s Everything We Had.⁵

War is a function of government, like making laws and collecting taxes. Therefore, much of the documentation of wars in which the United States has been involved is in the National Archives and Records Administration, the statutory depository of the permanently valuable records of the federal government. These include the records of Congress, which both declares war and appropriates the funds necessary to wage it. Testimony at the Iran-Contra hearings during the summer of 1987 suggests means of funding undeclared war might be documented in such records as those of the National Security Council.⁶

Other obvious government records of twentieth century warfare include those of the Department of State, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force as well as the joint and combined military agencies. More than half of the three and one-half billion documents deposited in the National Archives emanated from the military, sobering physical evidence of the extent to which war and the specter of war have occupied the government of a professedly peace-loving nation. Documen-
tation of war also occurs in the records of civil agencies as widely divergent as those of the National Academy of Sciences (reports and related correspondence, 1917-21, of the Washington office of the National Research Information Committee from its Paris, Rome, and London offices concerning aviation, munitions, ordinance, equipment, and other military and naval technical matters) and the Railroad Retirement Board (correspondence and memoranda documenting the agency’s response to the war effort in terms of supplies, personnel, and patriotic programs).

Many of these records are housed and made available to researchers in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C., and in two suburban locations. Records created by federal agencies located outside Washington, D.C., are deposited in the eleven National Archives field branches across the country. Many of the records most frequently requested by researchers have been microfilmed. They are available for research at the various National Archives facilities, and for purchase by institutions or individuals. In addition to records of the United States government they include some records of foreign governments that provide documentation of war, such as the extensive World War II collection of captured German records, those of the Italian armed forces, and Hungarian military and political records.

The National Archives also administers the presidential libraries, which contain a different type of documentation of war. In contrast to the official records of the government, the presidential libraries collect the personal and public papers of former presidents and of women and men who played important roles in their administrations. Because these are not official government records, but rather collections of personal correspondence, diaries, oral history interviews, memorabilia, and other historical materials, they provide an interesting counterpoint to the official record.

Both official and unofficial documents are merely records, and not direct revelations of truth. Much truth is, of course, to be found in them, but the task of separating true from false content belongs to the historian, and not to the archivist. Both true and false are, after all, part of the historical record. Documents of government agencies can be marred by human error, inaccurate data, and occasional deliberate attempts to mislead. Most often, however, they are created by some more-or-less disinterested individual whose job it is to submit a report such as a census count, a battlefield report, or the proceedings of a meeting. These records should, and most often do, pass from agency custody directly into archival custody at the National Archives where their integrity is carefully preserved. They are thus protected against the alterations and culling that sometimes occur to records remaining in private hands.

Records that do not pass directly from disinterested creator to archival custody, such as those in collecting archives including the presidential libraries, are subject to an additional caveat. As private papers, they are not subject to federal statute, but are accessioned exactly as donated by their owners. These records are not created by disinterested administrators, but rather by individuals who usually have a keen interest and a stake in the affairs they relate. The creator of the documents (or that person’s heir or representative) may edit, select, or purge the documents before donating them. Historian Robert Messer, who examined an important aspect of the cold war, based much of his research on the papers of James F. Byrnes, secretary of state during the Truman adminis-
tration. Approaching this source critically, Messer observed that "considerable evidence suggests that editing . . . was . . . performed on the 'full and complete' Byrnes Papers prior to their being deposited at Clemson University Library just before Byrnes's death." "Often," he continued, "a set of personal records so long under the control of the donor undergoes a certain amount of tampering. It is natural for anyone to want to appear to posterity in the most favorable light possible."

This is not to imply that one kind of record is to be preferred over the other, but rather to point out that they provide different kinds of documentation, and to emphasize that both are necessary to thorough research. The official documents may be more objective, but may also be voluminous or dull, requiring hours of tedious research. The personal papers, while possibly more biased, are perhaps also more concise and fruitful. Together they still will not provide a complete and accurate account of what actually happened, but will perhaps yield a closer approximation.

The earliest American presidential administration documented in its own presidential library is that of Herbert Hoover (1928-32). While it might be reasonable to assume that most of the war-related materials in presidential libraries deal with World War II and subsequent cold or undeclared wars, this is not always the case. Most of these libraries also contain materials that predate the tenure of the administration. Papers in the Truman Library, for example, not only document the president's World War I artillery unit, but trace its history back to the Civil War.

War is usually documented on a more personal level in nongovernment repositories such as private and public archives, university libraries, and historical societies. Private repositories like the one for personal papers of Vietnam veterans at Cornell University provide a much-needed counterpoint to the official record. Additional documentation of this type appears in the papers of ambassadors or generals and in records of private organizations. Newspapers and periodicals are rich sources; and the papers of war correspondents have proved especially useful.¹⁵

War is not a strictly military matter, and never has been. Much war-related research is directed toward the effect of war upon civilians." The involvement of noncombatants did not begin with strategic bombing in World War II, or even with General Sherman's march across Georgia 80 years earlier. For example, the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) reduced the population of Germany from 20 million to 12 or 13 million, lowered the standard of living dramatically, and decimated trade.¹⁷

War has disrupted human life cycles and relationships, and profoundly affected the health, food supply, work, and political and intellectual lives of civilians. Lives are irrevocably changed by the technology, psychology, and ideology of war. War technology has produced jet engines, radar (and its close kin, television), synthetic rubber, soft plastics, DDT, penicillin, and nuclear energy.¹⁸ Wartime propaganda has challenged personal beliefs and attitudes, and confronted individuals with changing perceptions of emotionally-charged concepts like patriotism, militarism, nationalism, pacifism, and civil disobedience.

War can abruptly and devastatingly change society, even when the battle fronts are distant, as evidenced by the internment of Japanese-Americans during
World War II, the "Rosie the Riveter" phenomenon retired in August of 1945, and the anti-Vietnam War movement and its relationship to the counterculture of the 1960s.

Some of the earliest studies of the effects of war upon society came out of a meeting of the Canadian Association for American Studies held in Montreal in 1970, where scholars presented papers that probed the effect of war upon business, ethnic experience, pacifism, dissent, and political leadership. The research tapped both government records (Records of the War Industries Board; Records of the War Department General Staff) and private papers (Jane Addams Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection).

Richard Polenberg presented a paper at that conference that dealt with Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime political leadership. He later expanded the paper into a book about war and society focused entirely upon the World War II period. In it he examined the changes that war brought to the power structure of the federal government (erosion of the legislative, growth of the executive authority), the economy, labor, racial and religious toleration, and the role of women in society. Most of his research was based upon personal papers in the FDR Library.

In a book titled Over Here: The First World War and American Society, David M. Kennedy considered the implications the home front had for the American national character; for social groups like workers, women, and blacks; and for the economy. Kennedy's sources included government records in the National Archives (and in the English Public Record Office) and personal papers from several nongovernment repositories.

Other directions in war-related studies are influenced by general subject trends in research, which in recent years have increasingly focused upon studies of women and blacks. One of the first scholarly studies of women after 1920 was centered on the effects of World War II, particularly on women's employment opportunities and social equality. Much of the research for this still-important work was done in the Records of the Women's Bureau in the National Archives. Subsequent studies have utilized records of other wartime agencies including the Children's Bureau, War Manpower Commission, War Production Board, and the Office of War Information. Current scholars increasingly mine the major collections on women in places like the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, and the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith. War-related materials appear in the private papers of individuals as well as in the records of organizations like the National League of Women Voters and the National Women's Trade Union League (both in the Library of Congress).

Researchers probing the American black experience have used official military records to study the desegregation of the armed forces (ordered by Harry S Truman in 1948) and federal court records to document blacks' changing legal position. An important guide to records in the National Archives pertaining to American blacks has been available since 1984. Limited to civilian records, Black History is an excellent example of the extent to which war is documented in nonmilitary records. Another book that appeared in 1984, Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans, affirmed the importance of oral history to the historical record of war.

In addition to topical trends, historical research on war reflects general trends in interpretation and reinterpretation. This is the work of the revisionists.
Historical revisionism results both from changing political and social attitudes, and from newly-available information. While the former is not a professional concern of the archivist, the latter is a crucial one. The opening of new records invariably brings a flurry of researchers with revisionist inclinations to repositories. The best known of these are the cold war revisionists, of whom Gar Alperovitz is sage and symbol. In 1965, Alperovitz challenged the prevailing American consensus that the Soviets were primarily responsible for the cold war. He instead assigned much of the blame to the Truman administration. A great deal of Alperovitz's work is based upon previously unavailable private diaries of Harry L. Stimson, Truman's secretary of war.  

Another notable example of reinterpretation based upon newly-accessible records concerns the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were executed as spies for the Soviet Union in 1953. As the cold war thawed, several books were written expounding the thesis that the Rosenbergs had not been guilty of conspiracy to commit espionage, of which they had been found guilty, but were instead victims of the hysteria of the McCarthy era. The Rosenbergs' sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol, added their own defense of their parents in 1975. But using records from the FBI and other government agencies that had been released as a result of a legal action initiated by the Meeroeps, in 1983 a new account of the case was published which concluded the Rosenbergs had indeed been spies.  

Trends in historical ideology as well as in interpretation can affect the kinds of records in demand by historians. The older, narrative types of history relied heavily upon expository records—reports, diaries, letters, and so forth. When positivism brought quantitative history into prominence, researchers began looking beyond first-hand narratives to aggregations of numbers: to the census schedules, statistical reports, and other quantitative records. This trend, which has subsided somewhat in recent years, demonstrates that the kind of records that researchers demand can change. Because archivists cannot anticipate these trends, they must collect records comprehensively, not solely for the inclinations of today's researchers. They must continue to do this even though the records that they clean, arrange, describe, and open may be ignored by researchers for years. 

Archivists must also be careful not to limit their idea of documentation to paper records. Most archives now also hold photographs, sound recordings, and video and computer tapes, and their proportion of total holdings will continue to increase. The issues raised by twentieth century technology are too complex to explore thoroughly here, but it should be noted that some of the documentation of war is already available only in high-technology media. The names of the soldiers chiseled on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington came from a computer tape. 

After this extended discourse on documentation of war, the big questions remain: Is the documentation adequate? Are archivists collecting the right things? Do researchers find the answers to their questions in archival repositories? These questions seem best directed to the researchers themselves, and the answers that this author has received from a number of historians are reassuring. Researchers typically do not complain so much about the collections as the difficulties of access. 

Most archivists want to make their collections as accessible as possible, but the negotiation of restrictions is not always under their control. Both govern-
ment and nongovernment records suffer from limitations of access, but for different reasons.

Americans from James Madison, a framer of the Constitution, to Judith Krug, current director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, have argued that the American form of government requires open access to government records. Statutory exceptions derive primarily from issues of national security and personal privacy. While few argue that these are not legitimate reasons for restriction, there is a notable lack of consensus about what constitutes a threat to national security or personal privacy, and who decides. Professional associations including the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association have joined researchers in protesting the length of time that many government records are closed. The Freedom of Information Act has helped by providing a means of appeal for researchers who are denied access to records, but has by no means solved the problem.

Nongovernment records face donor-imposed restrictions that can be even more impervious to appeal than federal restrictions. The archivist can have more influence on the formulation of these restrictions, which makes negotiating with prospective donors at once delicate and challenging. Archivists are inclined to preserve even those records that seem hopelessly bound with restrictions, hoping that someday they will be opened to researchers. As administrators with budget and space limitations, however, they must sometimes question how much of their resources can be allocated to storage of restricted or closed records. In the end archivists face hard decisions about how to meet the needs of today's researchers as well as those of the future.

Care, custody, and control of the historical record is a weighty responsibility because written history must be based upon the surviving fragments of the past. To the official documents, personal writings, pictorial images, and printed accounts of earlier times, the twentieth century has also left sound recordings, video tapes, and magnetic tapes as a part of its record. A crucial missing fragment can dramatically change an historian's interpretation of the past. Consider the origins of World War I without the Zimmerman telegram, or the World War II bombing of Coventry in the context of the "Ultra Secret." This is why the opening of new collections is met with such excitement, and it is why public and private repositories have to cooperate with each other as best they can—to present as complete a documentation of the past as possible. Archivists do not exactly hold the past in their hands, but they do hold the after-battle reports, the letters written home, the film clips, State Department memos, photographs, and body counts that are left. Historical interpretation will continue to change; but in the last analysis, the archival record will constitute the basis of what is known in the future about war in the 20th century.

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The opinions expressed in this article are solely the author's, and in no way reflect the official position of the National Archives and Records Administration.
NOTES


2. Because Herbert Hoover’s early career took him to China during the Boxer Rebellion, the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa, is a perhaps unexpected source for this era.

3. For a more detailed discussion of undeclared war, see Edward Keynes, *Undeclared War: Twilight Zone of Constitutional Power* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982).


5. *News From the National Archives, A Quarterly Compilation by the National Archives and Records Administration* (Summer 1987): 6-7.


10. *See Federal Records of World War II: Vol. 1, Civilian Agencies and Vol. 2, Military Agencies* (Washington: General Services Administration, 1951 and 1952). These descriptions were later supplemented by more detailed inventories, special lists, and other finding aids. Some of the records mentioned in them were later appraised as lacking historical value and subsequently destroyed. As a general guide, however, the work remains useful.

11. National Archives field branches are located in Waltham, Massachusetts; Bayonne, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Kansas City, Missouri; Fort Worth, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Laguna Niguel, California; San Bruno, California; and Seattle, Washington.

12. Published guides to these microfilm publications are available at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Many of them are also available at the field branches.

13. These include the Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; Harry S Truman Library, Independence, Missouri; Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas; John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts; Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas; Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

For a recent commentary on the presidential libraries, see John Berry, "Archives or Lightning Rods?" *Library Journal* (1 May 1987): 4.


33. For example, in her article about the Vietnam Veterans Archives, Elaine D. Engst reported that although in general the veterans did not restrict access to their collections, many retained copyright in anticipation of writing about their own experiences in the future (Engst, “Establishing a Vietnam War Veterans Archives,” 51-52).


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