

FORUM

With the exception of editing for conformity to capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.

Secrecy in Government

To the editor:

Past SAA president Timothy L. Ericson's history of records classification and secrecy in the United States government in the Spring/Summer issue was quite informative. Unfortunately, it was also keenly disappointing. Even putting aside evidently radical differences of political opinion and interpretation of world events, I found some major causes for concern in his approach to the issue of government secrecy.

Mr. Ericson's complaint about government secrecy revolves around what constitutes a reasonable restriction on access to information. He is evidently of the mind that everything should be made known to everybody, even though much government information is considered secret for the simple need to win wars and protect lives. Indeed, he even cites the need for secrecy among the First Continental Congress and the signing of the Declaration of Independence, admitting that such secrecy was required for the safety of the participants and the future of the new nation. Yet he faults the government—and particularly the current administration—for secrecy invoked for that very reason of the safety of those who could be harmed by making certain information known.

He cites several supporting sources for his attack on "unreasonable restrictions on access." But unreasonable by whose standards? Those of the military in protecting sensitive information, the divulgence of which could and likely would jeopardize the lives of our troops and citizens? Or those of the people who say nothing should be left secret, that all government information whatsoever must be made public regardless of potential for harm? (Indeed, how many of the latter are outraged over the Valerie Plame scandal solely because a top Bush official is being blamed for it?) Or, looking at it another way, is "unreasonable" to be defined by specific legal standards designed to protect life and property, or by an archivist's or institution's political leanings?

Is Mr. Ericson as ardent in demanding that all private records also be made public, regardless of the wishes of donors and regardless of the harm that may be done by divulging sensitive personal information? One of the tenets of the profession is that discretion be exercised so as to not cause harm to be done by making damaging personal information available. I maintain that there is no difference between the responsibility to protect sensitive personal information and sensitive government information if harm would result from divulging either.

Mr. Ericson overlooks a critical fact. We—the free nations of the world—are at war with terrorism. War puts management of military information in an entirely different context than in peacetime. We as citizens have a right to know government information. But we do not have a *need* to know, when public divulgence of sensitive information jeopardizes national interests and security.

His citation of the Georgia man who was thwarted in his desire to reclaim a live atomic bomb from the waters of the Atlantic as an indictment of government secrecy told the story as far as I was concerned. Would Mr. Ericson have preferred that the SAC have broadcast the location of the bomb to the world and opened it up to salvage by the first party to reach the spot? Given today's climate of fear over the very real possibility of terrorists gaining access to and deploying nuclear or chemical weapons, I found his citing this incident in support of his point of view to border on the perverse.

We are at war in a time of unprecedented access to information. The tension between the need to protect sensitive information and the ability to instantly disseminate information around the world has never been greater. Going back to the bomb off Georgia, imagine the consequences should such an event happen now and detailed information about the bomb and its location be posted to the Internet or, by any other means, be made available to terrorists with the means to recover and detonate the thing or, even worse, replicate the technology for repeated use. We live in an age in which three forces are colliding: Unprecedented ability to broadcast information worldwide; unprecedented technological ability to kill en masse; and unprecedented desire on the part of terrorists to kill. There are people who want nothing more than to kill massive numbers of Americans. And sensitive military information must be kept from these people, even if it causes Mr. Ericson a conniption fit or two over secrecy.

Other parts of his article were simply disingenuous. For example, he cites the Bush administration as being the only current practitioners of secrecy at the national level worthy of prominent mention, and reels off a standard-issue list of other politically correct targets, ranging from Joe McCarthy to Abu Ghraib. Yet he fails to note that Senator John Kerry never has released his Navy records after repeated requests, even though doing so would have enabled voters to

make informed decisions in last year's election, thereby fulfilling Mr. Ericson's ideal of holding elected officials accountable.

For another, he condemns the Bay of Pigs invasion because a poll of Cuban citizens indicated massive support for Castro. But what result would one expect in a poll of citizens of a totalitarian dictatorship in which free speech does not exist and dissent is punishable, both then and now, by social and economic retributions, imprisonment, or execution? This example teaches a lesson Mr. Ericson overlooks: The tension between secret and public information is rendered moot when common sense is thrown to the wind in interpreting information of either genre.

He condemns "sinister motives" for government secrecy. But what of the sinister motives of those who would gladly use sensitive information to advantage in harming others? Or does he assume, going back to the Georgia bomb one last time, that anyone who wants access to government information has only innocent motives for doing so?

On the other side of the coin, he does not comment on elected officials, particularly certain Democrat senators, who have felt no qualms about divulging sensitive information to the public and the news media. For example, Senator Kerry divulged the name of a CIA operative in the Senate chambers during the John Bolton confirmation hearings, well before the Plame affair came to a head. During the confirmation hearings for Judge Henry Saad, Senator Harry Reid (D-Nevada) claimed to have reviewed raw preliminary data compiled by the FBI on Judge Saad, in clear violation of FBI policy that considers such data to be strictly confidential until it can be verified, and urged his colleagues to do the same. Should not we as archivists be speaking out as fervently against abuses of obviously sensitive information like this as Mr. Ericson claims we should be against abuses of secrecy for what is plainly not sensitive?

Thomas Berry
Toledo, Ohio

Letters on the *American Archivist* Cover Controversy

To the editor:

The exchange of letters to the editor in response to the "Sun Mad" cover illustration for the *American Archivist* (Fall/Winter 2003) has raised important questions for professional debate about how archivists define our professional responsibilities. While we do not intend to extend the debate about the advisability of the choice of the cover illustration, we do want to make it clear that it is important to receive expressions of concern from our members with due consideration and respect. As members of a professional society we should respect each other's perspectives, even when—especially

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when—they differ from our own. We should be especially careful to avoid even the appearance of questioning the ethics of an entire segment of our members.

At a time when SAA has renewed and strengthened its commitment to diversity, it is critical that we acknowledge and accept the diverse perspectives of corporate archivists, just as we do those of religious, governmental, and academic archivists and of tribal archivists, archivists of color, and gay/lesbian archivists. SAA's institutional diversity can be seen in the individuals elected to serve as president for the three years beginning in 2004. With the election this year of Elizabeth Adkins as vice president/president-elect, SAA will have consecutive presidents representing academic, government, and corporate archives.

SAA recognizes and respects the need for diversity in the archival profession, and it seeks to ensure that all who are interested in protecting the historical record feel welcome. We call on all archivists to unite in the goal of documenting society in all its many aspects, and to respect the diverse perspectives and needs of our colleagues in all types of archives.

Randall C. Jimerson
SAA President, 2004–2005
Western Washington University

Richard Pearce-Moses
SAA President, 2005–2006
Arizona State Archives and Library