

A private security archive unlocks US Government secrets via the Freedom of Information Act.

By PETER CARLSON

STONED on speed, Elvis Presley arrived at the White House wearing a purple velvet suit and bearing gifts for President Richard Nixon – a Colt .45 pistol and some silver bullets.

It was Dec 21, 1970, and Elvis had a mission. He wanted Nixon to give him a federal narcotics agent's badge so he could carry dope and guns wherever he went.

Nixon didn't give Elvis the badge, but he did pose for pictures with the King of Rock 'n' Roll.

Nineteen years later, newspapers reported that the Elvis-Nixon photos were the most requested pictures in the federal government's vast photo collection, and Tom Blanton responded the same way he responds to so many other interesting news stories: he filed a Freedom of Information Act request.

"When the president meets with anybody, there's a whole paper trail, so we filed a FOIA request and got the entire file released," says Blanton, who is the director of the National Security Archive, a private research group devoted to prying documents out of the US government's files and making them public.

The fruits of Blanton's Elvis-Nixon FOIA turned out to be gloriously goofy. There was Elvis's handwritten letter to Nixon requesting a meeting and bragging that "I have done an in-depth study of drug abuse." And a White House staffer's memo suggesting that Nixon ask Elvis to "record an album with the theme 'Get High on Life'." And the official notes of the historic meeting: "Presley immediately began showing the President his law enforcement paraphernalia, including badges from police departments ..."

Blanton posted the documents on the National Security Archive's website, and for years they were the most downloaded items on the site.

But in 2003, the Elvis-Nixon meeting was dethroned by another of the archive's postings – documents detailing the 1983 meeting of two other legendary characters, Donald Rumsfeld and Saddam Hussein. The archive obtained those documents by FOIA, too.

One State Department cable showed Rumsfeld cozying up to Saddam, who was then involved in a long, bloody war with Iran: "Rumsfeld told Saddam US and Iraq had shared interests in preventing Iranian and Syrian expansion. He said US was urging

Secret mission



The King and the president: Photos of Elvis Presley calling on Richard Nixon at the White House in 1970 were among the most requested pictures in the US federal government's vast photo collection.

other states to curtail arms sales to Iran."

Astonishing stuff

Over the past 23 years, the National Security Archive has filed more than 35,000 FOIA requests and collected more than five million pages of government documents. Some of the documents are mind-numbingly boring, of course, but others are nothing short of astonishing:

A CIA guidebook called *A Study of Assassination*, which advised right-wing Latin

Americans on the most effective ways to bludgeon, stab and shoot their enemies.

A National Security Agency study revealing that the agency "deliberately skewed" its account of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, which led to the escalation of the Vietnam War.

A 2002 Pentagon PowerPoint briefing on plans for the upcoming invasion of Iraq – code name "Polo Step" – that assumed that only 5,000 American troops would remain in Iraq by the end of 2006.

Perhaps the most famous documents

obtained by the archive were the CIA's so-called *Family Jewels*, which detailed the agency's illegal wiretaps and attempts to assassinate foreign leaders. The archive filed its FOIA request for the *Family Jewels* in 1992. Fifteen years later, in 2007, the CIA finally released them, and they made headlines around the world.

"Information doesn't belong to the Government, it belongs to all of us," says Blanton, 53.

His office at the archive, which is headquartered in George Washington University's Gelman Library, is piled high like all the other rooms with cardboard boxes, each of them full of documents. And more documents arrive nearly every day.

Despite its official-sounding name, the National Security Archive is not a government agency. It's an independent, non-profit institute created in 1985 by a handful of reporters, historians and activists who'd been filing FOIA requests for documents related to American activities in the guerrilla wars then raging in Central America.

Its first director was Scott Armstrong, a former Senate Watergate Committee staffer and *Washington Post* reporter. Armstrong finagled a grant from the Ford Foundation and borrowed office space at the Brookings Institution and soon he was filing hundreds of FOIA requests, many related to the big scandal of the 1980s, the Iran-contra affair.

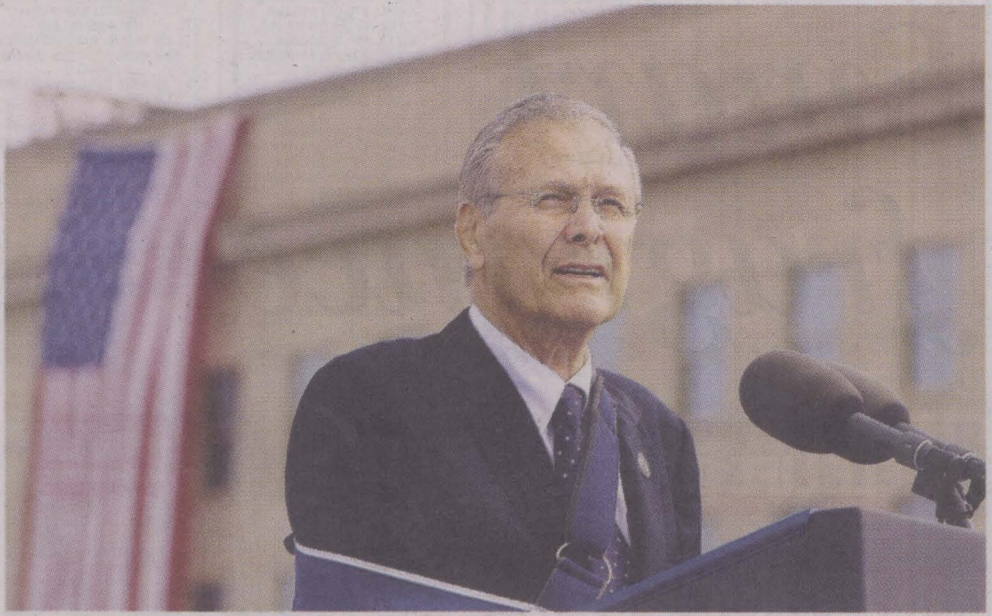
Naturally, these activities made him extremely unpopular with the Reagan administration.

In January 1989, Armstrong learned that the Reagan administration planned to erase all White House e-mail before leaving office a few days later. Quickly, the archive filed a lawsuit to prevent the destruction of the e-mail.

Armstrong beat Reagan in court, the e-mails were released and Blanton collected the best of them in a book titled *White House E-Mail* published in 1995.



Secret society: (From left) Peter Kornbluh, Joyce Battle, Malcolm Byrne and Tom Blanton in the Washington office of the private National Security Archive, where they pore over piles of government documents.



Saddam's buddy: The National Security Archive obtained government documents that detailed former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (pic) telling the late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein that the United States and Iraq had shared interests in preventing Iranian and Syrian expansion.

By then, Armstrong had left the organisation, Blanton was director and the archive had moved to its current box-filled warren of offices at George Washington University.

Once perceived as a hotbed of radicals, the National Security Archive is now a major Washington institution with a staff of 35 and an annual budget of more than US\$3mil, most of it donated by foundations.

The documents it has gathered have been quoted in countless newspapers, books and documentary films. The archive has won Emmy, Peabody and Polk awards, and in 2004, avant-garde artist Jenny Holzer projected 30 of its documents on the walls of tall buildings in Bregenz, Austria, in a work she called *Truth Before Power*.

Every year, the archive files roughly 2,000 FOIA requests and collects about 75,000 documents, many dealing with the most important events of the past 60 years – the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam, the collapse of the Soviet empire, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran.

The documents are posted on the archive's website, and readers around the world download nearly a half-million pages a day. Hundreds of researchers come to the archive every year to study the documents – grad students, journalists, historians, even the occasional retired spy writing his memoirs.

Gems and blackouts

Sometimes, working at the National Security Archive is like living in a Kafkaesque bureaucratic hell.

You're interested in some specific government action so you file a FOIA request, asking for the documents related to it. Then you wait. And wait. And wait. Months go by. Sometimes years go by. Then, if you're lucky, you get a stack of documents – thousands and thousands of pages.

Pulsing with excitement, you start reading, only to find yourself slogging through reams of hideously boring drivel. But you wade through it and finally you come to the good stuff, the diamonds hidden in this dung heap and – they've been blacked out, obliterated by some censor, or, as the bureaucrats call it, "redacted".

Redaction is the bane of an archive staffer's existence, and they love to tell redaction horror stories.

Peter Kornbluh, an archive analyst who specialises in Latin American affairs, remembers receiving the US Defense Intelligence Agency's profile of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet only to find that "it was entirely redacted except his name and the phonetic pronunciation of his name."

Malcolm Byrne, the archive's director of research and resident Iran specialist, tells the story of the CIA's secret study of the famous coup it staged in Iran in 1953, overthrowing the prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, and installing the Shah in power.

In 1999, the archive filed a lawsuit to obtain the 200-page study. The CIA responded by redacting every word in the document except for one sentence: "Headquarters spent a day featured by depression and despair."

Joyce Battle, the archive's Iraq expert, recently filed a FOIA request asking the FBI for documents relating to any possible connection between Iraq and the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

"They released 122 documents," she says. "That was pretty exciting, but when I took a look at them, virtually all of them were redacted in their entirety."

Faced with a totally blacked-out document, what's a researcher to do?

"You can appeal," says Battle, "and we do that often." When that doesn't work, the archive sometimes files lawsuits. In the long run, Blanton says, documents tend to come out.

History reviewed

The office decor at the National Security Archive consists mainly of cardboard boxes stuffed with government documents, so it's not surprising to find that the decorations on the office walls consist mainly of government documents, enlarged and framed.

Byrne is giving an impromptu tour of this gallery of greatest hits. There's a page from Oliver North's notebook from his Iran-contra days. And a copy of Richard Clarke's now-famous January 2001 memo warning Condoleezza Rice of the threat from al-Qaeda. And the notes from a 1987 White House meeting in which Reagan's defense secretary, Caspar Weinberger, urges his colleagues to give more support to Saddam Hussein in his war with Iran: "We should not only be supportive of Iraq, but should be seen to be supportive."

And there's a Defense Department memo, written at the height of the 1994 Rwandan genocide that killed an estimated 800,000 people, rejecting a suggestion that American planes jam the broadcasts of the radio stations that were inciting the mobs of machete-wielding murderers. The flights would cost too much, a Defense official wrote, "approximately \$8,500 per flight hour."

Byrne reaches up and grabs one of his favourite documents off the wall. It's an enlarged copy of an order that's handwritten in Russian, the order for Soviet troops to invade Afghanistan in 1979.

"This is the invasion order," he says. "It came out of the Soviet archives when Yeltsin put the Communist Party on trial."

"This is a good example of how our view of history has changed now that we have access to the other side's documents."

American documents reveal, Byrne says, that the Carter administration believed the Soviets invaded Afghanistan as part of a long-range strategy to expand southward in pursuit of warm-water ports.

But Soviet documents show that the Russians invaded because they feared that the new Afghan leader, who'd been educated in the United States, might be an American spy.

"This is something," Byrne says, "that you constantly see in these documents – how little we or anybody else knows about our adversaries." – LAT-WP