

Archival research in the age of Wikileaks

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, SEP 11 2011

In the age of Wikileaks, and Cryptome, intrigue into the hidden goings-on of governments has transcended the realm of the diplomatic historian and the broadsheet columnist. The ability to pry into top-secret diplomatic traffic at the click of a button has captivated widespread public attention.

It is a small irony that document based research/archival research, the staple of the diplomatic historian – a methodology and practice that had become rather unfashionable throughout the latter half of the 20th Century – has become almost ‘cool’ again thanks to Wikileaks. Dedicated journals such as *Diplomatic History* represent the best output of scholarly work based on archival sources, yet getting your hands on actual primary sources is something that has become easier than ever.

If you are lucky enough to live in a relatively free and bureaucratically well-organised country, you will probably find that you have access to quite comprehensive government records at your national archive or library (and also various Presidential libraries if you are in the US). A general period to await declassification applies, usually between 12-30 years, after which material begins to flood into the public domain. In my own experience, the US has the most comprehensive archival records, with the Federal Government even having its own archival administration, NARA, who actively manage and release material. Unfortunately, most countries don't have a NARA type agency, but there are freedom of information legislations in most western countries, and archives are available in some format, ready for a researcher to discover and use them.

For a new generation captivated by the revelations of sites such as Wikileaks, there is a veritable treasure trove located at the the George Washington University, who hold a unique online collection of declassified archival material on all aspects of US foreign policy in the contemporary era via its Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). Although the main collection in the archive is subscriber only, the institution does maintain a sister site here, in which a fascinating array of collections of documents are freely available. If you happen to be in Washington D.C you can also visit the archive in person and freely access the entire collection. Although the vast majority of the documents are available elsewhere in physical archives throughout the USA run by NARA and the Federal Government, the fact that the DNSA collates them in one place, organised into collections, is a unique facet, and makes for a powerful research tool for those who do not have the facility to reach those various archives physically.

Although nothing can beat visiting physical archives for the dedicated scholar, the benefits of such online archival resources as the DNSA to students are immediately obvious upon viewing the spread of information available. Far from the often chaotic information dump mentality that characterises Wikileaks, the DNSA represents a highly organised collection, maintained and catalogued by professional archival researchers. Unfortunately it is not open to personal subscriptions. However, if you want to read Henry Kissinger's phone call transcripts, or intelligence briefings on WMDs going back 30 years (for example), you can petition your university/department (as I did) to run an institutional subscription – or at least to sign up for a free trial in which you will have a few weeks to access the archive freely and see its benefits for yourself.

Archival research can also be quite entertaining; my personal favourite ‘nerd’ moment was coming across a memo that was put in President Jimmy Carter's in-tray during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 (presumably to lighten the sombre mood in the White House) about a man who had tried to rob a refrigerator truck of (what he thought was)

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high value beef cuts. Instead, the hapless culprit had inadvertently driven away a truck-load of worthless *Cows backsides* before being apprehended by the Police and jailed – to which Carter's Chief of Staff had annotated 'What an Asshole'. On a more serious note, Richard Nixon's audio tapes are also brimming with interest.

In sum, Wikileaks has done archival researchers a good turn. Diplomatic History as a discipline was making waves long before Julian Assange bought his first bottle of peroxide. Yet, in an academic age when the study of *History* is dominated by social and cultural history, and *International Relations* is a discipline governed by theoretical and political science based approaches – the validity of engaging with foreign policy archives is more relevant than ever. As noted historian Thomas W. Zeiler stated in 2009, an era of innovation among diplomatic historians is upon us.

We *should* study what our governments are doing in the realm of foreign policy; after all, the resources are right there online for us to delve into, and this blog post is but the tip of the iceberg.

About the author:

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