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Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum

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A happy coincidence draws the attention of Americans to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and George Orwell's 1984 within a twelve year period. Seldom has the United States had such an opportunity in a time of relative peace to consider the basic liberties upon which the nation was established. It is also an appropriate occasion to compare the three documents to determine what they suggest concerning the philosophy and ethics of archivists.

The Declaration of Independence has two phrases which pertain most closely to the work of archivists in the list of "injuries and usurpations" by which the King intended to establish "an absolute Tyranny". One is tangential to the role of archivists: "He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their substance." It is an inescapable fact that most archivists are bureaucrats working in larger institutions, whether a religious order, a corporation, a university, or a government. To be an archivist, particularly one working for the government, is to withstand the barbed taunts of "bureaucrat" from an unhappy public. The public must be persuaded that the archival role is important to them. Indeed, archivists often provide the college transcripts that allow employment, or the baptismal certificates that allow marriage in the church, or proof of payments that allow participation in a pension program.
The signers of the Declaration of Independence recognized the value of records in another of their complaints about the king. "He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole Purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures."

When the Constitution was written a few years after the Declaration of Independence, the value of public records was still recognized. Article I concerning legislative powers provides, "Each House shall keep a Journal of its Proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such Parts as may in their Judgment require Secrecy; and the Yeas and Nays of the Members of either House on any question shall, at the Desire of one fifth of those Present, be entered on the Journal."

It was clear that records of legislative deliberations were to be available to all people of the United States so that they might more knowledgably serve as enlightened citizens. Legislators were to be accountable. Members of the legislature would have their votes on controversial issues recorded for all to see if only a very small part of the legislative body demanded it. And yet some secrecy was to be allowed, although the circumstances were perilously unexplained.

The journal is mentioned later in Article I providing that if a president refused to sign a bill "he shall return it, with his Objections, to that House in which it shall have originated, who shall enter the Objections at large on their Journal, and proceed to reconsider it." In this instance, if a president chose to overrule the deliberative decision of the House and Senate, he too had to put his position and reasoning on paper before the public. He was held accountable.
Recognizing the role that taxation played in the alienation of the colonies from Great Britain, Article I also provides that "a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time." Again, the issue of accountability was emphasized. The people of a democracy must have a full written record of the collection and disbursement of public money.

Article II stretched accountability to include the bureaucrats of the executive branch. The president "... may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices ...."

Article IV recognized the importance of the public record, as something immutable that all parties of a dispute must accept: "Full Faith and Credit shall be given in each State to the public Acts, Records, and judicial Proceedings of every other State. And the Congress may by general Laws prescribe the Manner in which such Acts, Records, and Proceedings shall be proved, and the Effect thereof."

The twenty-fifth amendment to the Constitution also calls for a written record, though more to prevent disputes than to assure accountability. The term "written declaration" appears six times to describe the means by which presidential disability may be determined and authority transferred.

Lest too much be made of accountability in writing and the absolute value of the written record, the sixth of the Bill of Rights provides that defendants in criminal cases shall be entitled to confront prosecution witnesses. It is impossible to cross-examine a written record, and the authors of the article recognized that a criminal defendant deserved more than written testimony against him.
Perhaps the most important constitutional amendment to archivists, and among the most important of the Bill of Rights, is the fourth: "The right of people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated ... ." Here is the protection of the privacy of personal letters and written records of all types.

In the society described in 1984, no such protection exists. Hero Winston Smith is an archivist who works in the Records Department at the Ministry of Truth, the purpose of which is to distort history at the whim of the ruling regime. (There are not a lot of archivists as major characters in fiction, although the villain in Winter Kills, a recent movie concerning the assassination of a handsome, young, liberal American president, is an archivist.)

The party slogan is "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." Winston is part of that control of the past. His job is to alter or "rectify" old issues of the Times. When the government wishes changes in old newspapers, the orders are passed to Winston and others like him, whose task it is to write replacement articles. The old issues are then reprinted and reprints are used to replace all existing old issues, which are destroyed. This is done not only to newspapers, but to any literature or documentation that might run counter to the current party line.

An example of Smith's work demonstrates his role concerning those who commit Thoughtcrime. Those guilty of Thoughtcrime normally disappear in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. To avoid embarrassing questions, any evidence that the Thoughtcriminal ever existed must be "rectified". All newspaper references to the person and all birth, marriage, tax, employment, and medical records are altered or eliminated to remove the Thoughtcriminal.
Even physical evidence of the past often must be altered. Street names, cornerstones, statues, films, and photographs are among the artifacts that must be "rectified". In order to have villains against which the party can measure itself, some people are not eliminated but discredited. A bureaucrat whose factory has produced well in the past, but who has fallen from favor, would find the past production records meticulously altered.

Although his work is the most satisfying part of his life, Winston has become disenchanted with the party and with his role as an expurgator of history. In part, his alienation is for personal reasons. He can barely remember his own youth, his family. With no personal records of his own past, he cannot be sure that his memory is correct; he is not even sure of the year of his own birth. In part, his disillusionment is political. The party alters history so that it is impossible to compare the present with the past. Winston believes there must have been an earlier, better time, but he cannot remember the past in detail, and he knows the written records to be falsified.

Winston has begun to challenge the party (he hopes secretly) by keeping a diary, so that he can make a personal imprint on the future. He knows the diary will never serve a useful purpose, but only lead to his downfall. Enter the woman. Julia becomes a helpmate in Thoughtcrime and even conspiracy. Her attitude is more cynical, less philosophical. Of the past, Julia cares nothing. Of the future, Julia cares nothing. Winston finally persuades Julia to join the conspiracy of The Brotherhood, but they are quickly imprisoned.

The true charge against Winston, the deviation that causes his lapse into conspiracy, is that he is
aware of history. It becomes clear that just as the party controls records, so it intends to control memory, thus totally controlling the past. Winston had earlier pondered his own sanity. He had consoled himself that he was not insane to believe that the past could not actually be altered. Imprisonment and torture and mind control eventually lead to Winston's surrender: "He accepted everything. The past was alterable. The past never had been altered."

Some recent books, such as Ernest R. May's "Lessons" of the Past, Frances FitzGerald's America Revised, and Oscar Handlin's Truth in History have analyzed the use of the past in American society. Historians and archivists should also study Big Brother's use of the past, and the heroic archivist of 1984 who addresses the role of the keeper of the records of the past.