

Hak Chan '71

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

31100
T. Hall
8/4/71
August 4, 1971

(D)

MEMORANDUM FOR:

HENRY A. KISSINGER

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

FROM:

T. Hall
TOM LATIMER *Y*

SUBJECT:

Henry Owen's Letter on History
and Classified Documents

Attached is a letter to you from Henry Owen calling your attention to a recent column he wrote in the Washington Post on the subject of good history and classified government records. He is championing Ernie May's proposal that all classified records, except for "those few" whose disclosures would directly, surely, and powerfully prejudice national security be opened after a set period of time to qualified professional historians. Those historians would launch a major effort to produce scholarly histories of U.S. postwar foreign policy.

The idea is basically sound but, of course, there are the always present hookers. For example:

- How could we open the files to some historians but not others?
- What fixed period of time should we choose? State now operates on a 30-year time frame. President Nixon told the NSSM 113 Ad Hoc Group he thought most documents could be released after 10 years. Professor Langer has suggested 8 years.
- Mr. Owen did not mention cost. The Archives estimates it will cost over \$6 million to completely review and declassify the bulk of World War II material still classified.
- The administrative burden of pre-screening could be avoided by letting historians look through the files for what they want, then submit for review what they have chosen and at that point a decision could be made as to whether or not any particular item can or cannot be released.

The disadvantages to this proposal are obvious.

- It is doubtful that CIA, among others, would surrender to any group of academicians the right to look through classified files which might contain still sensitive material.
- Moreover, who could be sure that some historian (what was Ellsberg?) will not take notes or somehow reproduce what he wants and use it even if denied permission?

Henry Owen suggests that you might meet with a few historians of wide repute--himself, Ernie May, Bill Langer, James McGregor Burns-- to discuss the idea of a series of studies on postwar foreign policy utilizing now-classified records. Good, sound historians deserve a boost, God knows, and you might well want to meet with such a group. You might also consider including in the meeting some men who have served in the White House and who are or were members of the academic community; for example, Eric Goldman, John Roche, Arthur Schlesinger, Walt Rostow, and McGeorge Bundy.

Among the subjects such a group might discuss are when and under what circumstances presidential papers should be opened to historians, what is a reasonable time frame for keeping sensitive files classified, i. e. intelligence assessments, diplomatic correspondence, internal government working papers and memoranda, etc.? You could tell them what we are doing to open up the files and what we plan to do to make it easier in the future to declassify material.

Henry Owen suggests that he get a group together but I believe it would be better for you to host the meeting and invite who you want.

RECOMMENDATION:

That you approve your staff setting up such a meeting.

Approve HK Disapprove _____

If you disapprove, you should sign the simple thank you note to Henry Owen which is attached.

Attachments

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

Dear Henry:

Thank you for your letter and the copy of your thoughtful article in the Washington Post. As you may be aware, the President is very interested in making more classified material available to historians and the public in general. He has personally taken an interest in the release of the bulk of World War II material which is still classified. In addition, we will soon have some recommendations on ways to make much more classified material available after a much shorter waiting period than at present.

I recall Ernie May's proposal for a series of histories of postwar foreign policy. I believe the steps we will be taking shortly will open up a great volume of material which will make the task of the qualified professional historian much easier.

Warm regards,

Henry A. Kissinger

Henry Owen
Director
The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington D. C. 20036


31100

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

August 3, 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR TOM LATIMER

FROM


Jack Murphy

SUBJECT

Henry Owen's Suggestions
on Declassification...

Will you please take this in tow and prepare a
reply for Mr. Kissinger's signature.

For control purposes we have logged it "in/out".

Thanks.

*Mr. Gregg Barnes
Schlesinger
Eric Goldman
John Roche
Mac Bundy
Walt Rostow*

31100

The Brookings Institution



1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE N.W. / WASHINGTON D.C. 20036 / CABLES: BROOKINST / TELEPHONE: 202 HUDSON 3-8919

Foreign Policy Studies Program

July 30, 1971

Dr. Henry Kissinger
Special Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs
The White House
Washington, D. C. 20505

Dear Henry:

I know that you have more pressing matters than history to worry about -- but that won't stop me from sending you a copy of the attached column, which was published while you were away.

You may remember that, in a brief conversation some months ago, you expressed interest in Ernie May's proposal for a series of histories of postwar foreign policy. As the attached column points out, what Ernie has in mind are histories based on full access to government archives (except for those documents whose disclosure would seriously damage US security), to be done by respected historians in universities. The same notion has also recently been championed by Bill Langer and James McGregor Burns.

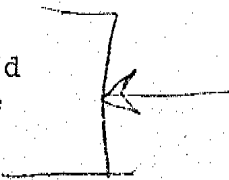
In present circumstances, the advantages of this proposal seem even more evident. Whatever may have been the risk of damage to national security in publishing the Pentagon papers, the risk of our being subjected to bad history is surely vastly greater. The best assurance against bad history, and against the recrimination which is all too likely to follow in its wake, is to develop a procedure for getting expert and disinterested historical treatment of US foreign policy into the public domain within a reasonable period of time. Ernie May's proposal still seems to me the best way of doing this.

I have no doubt that if the President were to move in this direction, his action would be greeted with loud hosannahs in the academic community. I'm also clear, from the soundings I've taken to date, that unless the President moves, the idea will get nowhere in the executive branch.

Which is why I'm writing you. If you find the idea of interest, we'd be glad to bring together a few historians of wide repute -- such as Ernie May and Bill Langer, among others -- to discuss the idea with you.

Yours,

Henry Owen
Director



Press Release

* See GSA announcement 8/3/71

Open Files Reveal the Complicated Truth

A Deadline for Declassification?

By Henry Owen

The current furor over secret Vietnam documents fits into a familiar pattern. The public's view of the origins of each major conflict (save Hitler's war) in the last century has been marked by three successive phases: Phase I, when the wartime official view was readily accepted; Phase II, when a spate of memoirs and other secret documents persuaded people that it was largely the fault of their own wartime leaders; and Phase III, in which professional historians showed the truth to be a lot more complicated than any of these "devil" theories would suggest. We are now in Phase II on Vietnam; the need for moving as soon as possible to Phase III can be better understood if we look to past experience.

CASE ONE: In 1914-18, the view that the Kaiser had single handedly brought on the war was universal outside Germany. Then came postwar memoirs and the publication of Austrian, German and Russian secret documents; this led such revisionists as the late Harry Elmer Barnes to suggest that the war was largely the fault of Poincare and the Russian military. Finally, serious historians got to work. While they differed among themselves in distributing the blame,

a succession of professional studies — culminating in Albertini's definitive three-volume history published in the 1940s — suggested that both the wartime and revisionist theories were at fault. None of the statesmen involved had wanted a general war; there were divided counsels in each government; and there was a large amount of miscalculation and at least as much incompetence as criminal intent all round.

CASE TWO: On December 8, 1941, most Americans were fairly clear that Hirohito had attacked a peaceful America out of the blue. After the war smoldering hos-

the reasons why such men as George Ball and Averell Harriman have warned against trying to draw sweeping conclusions from these documents.

One remedy was suggested by three noted historians before the current storm broke. In 1969 Professor Ernest May of Harvard proposed that all classified government records, except for those few whose disclosures would directly, surely, and powerfully prejudice national security, be opened after a fixed period to qualified professional historians. Professor James McGregor Burns of Williams followed with a similar, if more general, proposal and suggested that the waiting period be fixed at eight years. In light of recent events, this period might well be shortened. The proposal was promptly endorsed by Professor Langer, who pointed out that "systematic declassification is patently impossible: the records are so voluminous that it would take large teams of highly qualified personnel years to complete the assignment."

Professor May had in mind that a group of these historians, based in universities, would then launch a major effort to produce scholarly histories of U.S. postwar foreign policy

— perhaps under a foundation grant, which might be managed by an appropriate professional association or by a group of these associations. Outlining the advantages of such a historical program in persuasive terms, Professor May concluded: "Policy-makers and their staffs would possess more reliable knowledge about events which they use as trend gauges and action indicators . . . Legislators, journalists, and others commenting on current actions would have less excuse for basing comparisons on legend rather than reality . . . and students



Drawn copyright Newsday.

'Abe, I Got A Great Idea For Fooling All Of The People All Of The Time...'

President Roosevelt exploded in a burst of revisionist commentary, which suggested that he had tempted and provoked Japan into firing the first shot. The U.S. Government, in a burst of candor, gave two eminent scholars—William Langer and Everett Gleason—the run of its archives and invited them to form and write their own view. Phase III, which began with their two-volume work in the early 1950s, has been reflected in a succession of scholarly studies ever since. These studies have reached varying conclusions, but no one who reads all of them is likely to return to the simplistic theories of the 1940s: The failures of last-minute U.S. and Japanese efforts to avert war are, as John Toland points out in his recent work, too tragic and complicated a business to be explained by seeking out heroes and villains.

On Vietnam, we are now in Phase II. Secret documents have been revealed; wartime leaders are being discredited. But the revealed documents are inevitably a partial record: They do not include White House files; and they do not indicate either the context in which, or the tactical purposes for which, the memoranda they cite were written. They cannot fully reflect the doubts and torments of officials reaching for decision—which are, by the very nature of the government's operations, rarely committed to paper. The authors who analyzed these papers were not able to conduct interviews with the participants; as indicated in these volumes' preface, they sometimes lacked the research experience required to assess evidence which was necessarily, as a Washington Post editorial has pointed out, neither complete nor balanced. These are some of

would leave the classroom with somewhat more awareness than now seems common that the world is a complicated place and that the color of truth is often gray."

At the time these professors' proposals were made, they attracted scant attention. In light of current events, they warrant serious exploration. The President might appoint a mixed commission of eminent American historians and government officials to study the matter and report back to him with specific recommendations. This would be a different operation from the inter-agency study on declassification which is already underway in the U.S. Government.

In the meantime, private studies can make a modest contribution in pointing the way. Leslie Gelb, who coordinated the compilation of Pentagon documents, is embarked on a three-year analytical history for the Brookings Institution of how five successive U.S. administrations perceived and acted on U.S. interests in Indochina from 1940 to 1965. His object is not to figure out who struck whom and why, but to show the inter-relation between official decisions and the international and domestic environment in which they were taken. His research is based on public sources; the first published results, published recently in Foreign Policy and the "Outlook" section of The Washington Post, suggest that his conclusions will be both more balanced and perceptive than those now being widely drawn from the Pentagon documents often by people who haven't even read them, but have heard of them at second or third hand.

Whatever may be the verdict of history in Vietnam, one thing is sure: It will differ from many of the verdicts now being pronounced with such speed and enthusiasm on the basis of a scattered and incomplete returns.