research tips

The Thrill of the Hunt

Lessons from Archival Research into Cold–War Era Intelligence Decisionmaking

By Richard Mobley, with James Marchio and Gary B. Keeley

This essay is dedicated to John E. Taylor, the late career employee of the National Archives and Records Administration, who was the finest archivist I have known.

Having published two books and 19 articles based heavily on unclassified and declassified government documents, I have occasionally been asked about my research techniques. Now, with a quarter century of research into crises involving the nexus between intelligence and strategic decisionmaking during the period 1950–1990, I will seek to answer some of those questions and offer some lessons I've learned during repeated efforts to locate and seek declassification of such material.

I share only a few thoughts, as this is not intended to be a detailed "how to" manual. I also reference the work of James D. Marchio and Gary B. Keeley, both of whom have also done extensive work using US government documents. Although most of this article reflects my experience, I have flagged their efforts in two textboxes.

A Few Caveats

Let me offer a few caveats before I dig into the archives themselves.

- The work I have published since 2000 represented strictly personal initiatives. I always used totally declassified or partially redacted sources, although no project relied solely on them. Since I was an intelligence officer in some guise or another since the mid-1970s, all writing had to be on topics outside my then-current professional responsibilities. Each paper had to be approved for publication by various agency security approval processes—an effort that was usually fast and painless.

- The research entailed North Korea or the Middle East, although more recently I was asked to revisit the Vietnam War. Topics included intelligence failures before the Korean War; flaws in US intelligence assessments and military planning during several incidents involving Pyongyang; disputes in the Persian Gulf during the 1960s and 1970s; Syria's incursion into Jordan during 1970; and decision-making, diplomacy, and operations required to support the U.S. Navy's escort of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers in during 1987 and 1988.

- I wrote to enhance public knowledge of controversial topics by mining more recently released government documents that would offer additional details—and perhaps insights—into events that had occurred decades before the documents were released. I particularly hoped the articles would assist a professional intelligence or military audience. Since the research and writing were merely an avocation, I was under no pressure to publish. I simply picked the topics that interested me and had not been fully explored.

- My approaches to research varied, depending on the topic. Consequently, I would not offer a sweeping template for archival research writ large. I honed some of my research skills while doing original research in the US National Archives during graduate school at Georgetown University in the late 1970s. I was investigating US policy toward the short-lived Kurdish Mahabad Republic in 1946. I had benefited from the assistance of world-class archivist John Taylor,[a] the recent declassification of hundreds of documents and photographs on the topic, and the accessibility of individuals who had been involved in the crisis. This occasional, fortunate combination of the "right" archivists and recently released government documents helped me in several writing projects, including my first book.

General Recommendations

A few lessons/recommendations follow for those who might to want to use government documents to explore similar Cold War–era topics.

Government documents rarely will tell the full story. I have learned never to rely entirely on government documents to draft articles. Since decades had usually elapsed between when the event(s) occurred and the declassification of documents related to them, I always did a thorough literature survey to assess the value of the newly acquired material and to put it into context. My articles normally focused on how our understanding of an event had improved rather than the documents themselves.

Do not plan on one-stop archival shopping. The dispersed nature of government documents, the multiple agencies producing them, differing policies on document retention, and the state of declassification/mandatory review/release stack the odds against your finding all the documents you need in one place. Don't expect to hop onto a single website and solve all of your archival research problems with a few simple keyword searches. I consistently found that I had to use hard copy documents in multiple archives—let alone lots of non-archival sources—to tease out a complete story.

Exploit the results of FOIA requests and archival document citations used by previous researchers. I was

---

a. NARA's obituary for Mr. Taylor can be seen at https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2008/nr08-150.html

especially attentive to the results of previous attempts to use government documents during my literature surveys. My preliminary reviews afforded me opportunities to gauge public awareness on the topic, but they also provided the precise, detailed citation information often required to order documents in an archive. I never relied on someone's research to write my paper, but their citations sometimes facilitated my archival research. A parallel approach would be to use documents constituting each volume in the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, although production of additional contributions to the FRUS series seems backlogged. The series can be reached at https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/about-frus

Do not expect FOIA or Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests to be helpful if you are planning to publish soon. These processes can seem slow and ponderous, particularly in situations in which a large number of documents have been requested, the request involves complex case, or documents require the protection of the equities of multiple agencies. It is not unusual in such situations for a request to take years to be fully processed (and perhaps appealed). Certain aspects of intelligence work, particularly documents pertaining to human intelligence, understandably enjoy special protection in government executive orders. Consequently, although I submitted FOIA and MDR requests to help future researchers, I did not expect to use them to support my own writing efforts, which usually had publication timelines of only a year or two.

The government agencies relevant to my research all have FOIA reading rooms and gateways and instructions for submitting requests. In addition, the National Security Archive at George Washington University is a responsible, skilled user of FOIA and other requests. Their website (https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/) provides detailed recommendations and comments about how to make the process work.

Searching for Digitized Records (non-USG Websites)

You'll probably use the internet heavily during your initial research, although you should also plan archival visits to find unique material in hard copy. In most of my writing projects I found that the bulk of government documents I needed were available *only* in hard copy despite government efforts toward digitization. For digital material, however, I often started research using two commercial databases: the **Digital National Security Archive** and Gale's **U.S. Declassified Documents Online** (formerly called the Declassified Documents Reference System).

Both sites require subscriptions to access their vast holdings; I used the online portals in the Library of Congress to access them. The following Library of Congress link provides guidance in using these and other sites for virtual access to declassified government documents: https://guides.loc.gov/finding-government-documents/declassified-documents

Also consider using Texas Tech's Vietnam War Virtual Archive as a gateway for research into that war. The archive's website includes not only a vast number of government documents but also links to non-government sources like letters, oral histories, photos, etc. Searches will also produce citations for copyrighted documents in the collection although the archive does not post such material online. See (https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/)

For digital access to government documents from around the world, I recommend the site maintained by the Wilson Center's **Cold War International History Project (CWIHP)**. Organized topically and thematically, the website also offers essays on the context and significance of the documents. See https://www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project

Try to use the National Archives of the United Kingdom—best archives ever! Formerly called the Public Records Office and located at Kew Gardens just west of London, the UK archive is the most accessible of the eight archives I used in the US and overseas. Only a small percentage of its holdings are digitized, but you can access the search engine used to retrieve either digital documents or to order hard copy documents for research onsite. Requesting retrieval of hard copy documents—whatever their provenance within the UK—was easy and paperless (unlike in every US archive I used). I ordered hard copy documents online before departing Washington, and they would be waiting for me when I arrived at Kew Gardens the next morning. Link to the archives webpage at https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/.

I used the UK archives to find documents falling into one or more of the following categories: London's understanding of a threat and appropriate responses; UK-US diplomatic, military, and intelligence cooperation; and purely UK intelligence/policy issues. The Brits also seemed more capable of declassifying their documents on their advertised 30-year declassification schedule. Consequently, I used British documents that were declassified and just past 30-years old—a point when many US counterparts still remained classified. The UK archives website also advertises new releases of government documents and typically highlights features of each batch being released.

Searching for Digitized Records (USG Websites)

You can find many declassified documents in websites maintained by the US National Archives and Records Administration. A link to access government records via its online catalog follows: **https://www.archives. gov/research/electronic-records/access-in-catalog-faqs**. NARA's specific guidance for using declassified material in College Park or the Presidential libraries follows: https://www.archives.gov/research/declassification.html**.**

Consider using online government FOIA reading rooms. The Justice Department maintains an overall FOIA website for the entire government, but it offers links to the FOIA pages for other government websites: https://www.foia.gov/agency-search. html?id=35f2f6b9-28a6-448e-b61a-806d2bb3b3af&-type=agency

State and CIA both maintain large and frequently updated document collections online. I particularly liked the CIA website because of its extent, variety, depth, and currency. In addition to the vast collection of individual documents present (more than 11 million) in the "FOIA Electronic Reading Room," CIA has posted more than 70 collections of documents on particular themes, issues, and time periods. (See screen capture at the end of this piece.) Search engines for both CIA and State are easy to use. Links follow:

- CIA: https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/

- State: https://foia.state.gov/Search/Search.aspx

Several intelligence agencies' less populated webpages also highlight declassified documents. The NSA approaches the problem by including studies prepared by historians for public consumption. For example, the Center for Cryptologic History prepared several booklets about the Cold War, which can be reached at https://www.nsa.gov/History/Cryptologic-History/Historical-Publications/#cold-war.

NSA also has posted several "historical releases" containing declassified internal histories and raw cable traffic associated with specific events (Cuban Missile Crisis, Gulf of Tonkin incident, USS *Liberty* attack, etc.). See the section of the NSA website titled "Declassification and Transparency Initiatives." The section containing historical releases on at least historical topics will be of interest to historians of events

occurring during the Cold War. (https://www.nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/NSA-FOIA/Declassification-Transparency-Initiatives/Historical-Releases/). Some of these releases played an important part in my articles.

Other specialized releases may be found on websites maintained by NRO, DIA, FBI, and DoD. However, I found these sources to be of little use for the topics I had chosen to investigate. Links follow:

- NRO: https://www.nro.gov/About-NRO/history/

  https://www.nro.gov/foia-home/foia-declassified-historically-significant-documents/
- DIA: https://www.dia.mil/FOIA/FOIA-Electronic-Reading-Room/

The Naval History and Heritage Command has posted a wide range of documents online, including those on the Navy during Vietnam War. Links to Cold War era NHHC's online document collections follow. Note there several other search categories broken down by conflict and crises, and individual ship histories also may be useful.

- See https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/cold-war.html

The NHHC's hard copy files were critical for both of my books. Unfortunately, access to the archives by unofficial, public researchers has been disrupted by Covid and the NHHC's attempts to move its holdings to better, more environmentally protective storage. The NHHC website warns that its archive is currently closed to all researchers while it is moving to a new facility. The reopening date is undetermined.

Plan to repeat your digital searches years later because the universe of publicly available government documents expands gradually as the scheduled release process continues and various FOIA/MDR requests are processed. For example, when I wrote a book on

North Korea's seizure of a US intelligence-gathering ship, the USS Pueblo, in 1968 and the shootdown of an EC-121 SIGINT aircraft in 1969, I never expected to return to the topic given the hundreds of documents the government had already released. Yet, eight years after my book was published, NSA declassified/redacted two lengthy internal histories on the incidents. These newly available documents provided so much additional information that I quickly wrote another article to highlight changes (and potentially more lessons) from the USS *Pueblo*/EC-121 stories.

With such pleasant discoveries in mind, I routinely repeated digital searches on my favorite topics to monitor what additional tantalizing information might just have been released. I also keep a watchful eye on USG websites that advertise releases of recently declassified documents, such as the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) releases that have been posted since 2012 at https://www.archives.gov/declassification/iscap/releases.

Hard Copy Document Research

Using government archives for hard copy research generally demands a painstaking, convoluted research effort that is substantially harder than merely doing keyword searches on the Internet. To make the most of a relatively brief visit to a brick-and-mortar archive, you need to prepare by carefully reading the archive's online guidance for researchers, the finding aids available to support your project, and documents listing the POCs who might best support your visit. I typically scheduled my visit beforehand with e-mails describing my project and listing at least record groups, if not specific collections or boxes, that I hoped to use. Each archive has its own procedures for supporting unofficial researchers; you need to follow these steps to get the most out of what should be a busy, productive visit.

> ### *James Marchio on Additional Military and Conflict-Related Sources*
>
> *James D. Marchio* is a retired US Air Force officer and former product evaluator in the ODNI. He has contributed several articles to *Studies in Intelligence*, most recently "Fostering Creativity in the IC: Lessons from Four Decades Ago," *Studies* 65, no. 4 (December 2021). Other archival work of his includes: "Days of Future Past: Joint Intelligence Operations During the Second World War," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Spring 1996): 116-23; "Casualties of the Cold War: `Operation Think' and the Air Resupply Communications Service," *Air Power History* (Winter 1992): 19–23; and "Risking General War in Pursuit of Limited Objectives: US Military Contingency Planning for Poland in the Wake of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising," *Journal of Military History*, 66, No. 3 (July 2002): 783-812.
>
> Writing on military and conflict-related topics—ranging from the development and use of Joint Intelligence Centers during the Second World War to US military planning on how to leverage resistance groups behind the Iron Curtain to blunt an expected onslaught from Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces should World War III erupt—I have had to exploit resources beyond those identified and described elsewhere in this article.
>
> These archival sources allowed me to discover material not found in the National Archives and Presidential libraries. On one level, Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and military service resources provide organizational and leadership perspectives on various national security policy papers and issues that are absent or more limited than those found in the respective record groups at the National Archives. In some instances, senior-leader oral-history transcripts also are available. On another level, unit histories located at service historical centers and unified military commands can shed light on their respective roles and the challenges they confronted in planning for and executing their Cold War missions.
>

The National Archives at College Park was central to many of my projects, but given its size and complexity, it was difficult to use without archivist assistance. In some cases, I had to work with at least two archivists—one who could steer me in the general direction of sources I might need and one who would be a specialist in the most relevant record groups. I was helped immeasurably in researching my first book when College Park's John Taylor pulled dozens of boxes for my use when I arrived from overseas late one night. He merely took my brief written request and ordered all the documents he thought I needed. He was a delight to work with, and I still cannot thank him enough nearly 20 years later.

I found Presidential libraries easier to use than College Park, given relatively smaller collections and more specialized knowledge of the archivists. In some instances, the archivists themselves already had pulled the boxes they thought I would need and arrayed them in a cart next to the desk that would be assigned to me when I arrived.

Photo archival research can be fun, creative, and make your article more attractive. Although the bulk of my research called for textual material, I was encouraged to do a lot of photo archival research for a contribution to the Navy's series of heavily illustrated publications

---

(Marchio tips continued) Where to Start Finding Sources?

  Although the list below is not all inclusive, the sites identified represent a good starting point for anyone interested in conducting Cold War military or conflict related research. Most of these research centers now have websites with digital access to some of their materials. However, many records and files remain accessible only through an onsite visit.

Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense

- **JCS Joint History and Research Office** (https://www.jcs.mil/About/Joint-Staff-History/)
- **Joint Forces Staff College/National Defense University Libraries** (https://www.ndu.edu/Libraries/)
- **Historical Office, Office of Secretary of Defense** (https://history.defense.gov/)

Military Services
Army

- **U.S. Army Center of Military History** (https://history.army.mil/)
- **Home-Army Heritage Center Foundation** (https://www.armyheritage.org/)
- **Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library** (https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/)

Air Force

- **Global College of PME** (https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/GCPME/)
- **USAF Collection, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL** (https://www.afhistoryandmuseums.af.mil/)

Marine Corps

- **USMC History Division** (https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/History-Division/)

NATO

- **NATO Archives Online** (https://archives.nato.int/)

Unified Commands and subordinate elements, e.g., US European Command and US Army Europe
- **USAREUR Units and Kasernes, 1945-1989** (https://www.usarmygermany.com/Sont.htm?https&&&www.usarmygermany.com/Units/HqUSAREUR/USAREUR_HqUSAREUR.htm)

Papers of Senior Military Leaders, e.g., George C. Marshall
- (https://www.marshallfoundation.org/research-library/library-collections/)

---

on its role during Vietnam. My co-author and I relied heavily on assistance from photo-archivists in the Naval History and Heritage Command as well the photo library at the U.S. Naval Institute. I believe we both enjoyed choosing the most eye-catching pictures and that the book was better for the effort.

  The photographic archives in NARA College Park helped in other writing projects. Archivists found photographs depicting the incident that provoked a major crisis involving North Korea in 1976: the killing of two US Army personnel by North Korean guards in the Joint Security Area. I think the photos were the highlights of the article, which *Joint Forces Quarterly* published. For my *Pueblo* project, the archive provided imagery depicting how the ship had been located in Wonsan harbor. In my graduate work on Iran, I discovered photographs depicting the execution

of the Kurdish leadership of the Mahabad Republic. The photos would have made for a significantly more marketable article had I tried to publish the work.

Citations: If you know the editorial style your publisher will use for your footnotes or endnotes, it will be easier to submit the draft in that format rather than to engage in a series of negotiations with an editor late in the production process. Source citations for archival research can be painstaking and complex. Some publishers like them that way; others prefer a shorthand form of note. The "guidance to contributors" sections of publisher websites should help you start the drafting process on the right foot.

In conclusion, I have shared portions of my lengthy, personal research journey to help non-historians make better use of archival documents released by US and foreign governments. Archives are inherently difficult to use for hard copy research, but at least the internet offers multiple ways to do preliminary research into which government documents might be available. Remember, though, that even the juiciest government documents are unlikely to provide a complete account of an issue. Using government documents should be merely part of an extensive, thoroughgoing research plan. ∎

Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room

Requestor Portal

Historical Collections

✳ Overview

Air America Collection

A-12 OXCART Reconnaissance Aircraft Documentation

Animal Partners

Aquiline

1973 Arab–Israeli War

Argentina Declassification Project – The "Dirty War" (1976–83)

Bay of Pigs

Berlin Tunnel

Berlin Wall Collection 1

Berlin Wall Collection 2

Bosnia, Intelligence, and the Clinton Presidency

CAESAR, POLO, ESAU Collection

CIA Analysis of the Soviet Navy

CIA Analysis of the Warsaw Pact Forces

Civil Air Transport

Consolidated Translations

Browse the Collections | Advanced Search | Search Help

Search Query for FOIA ERR:

[   ]

[Search]

Ⓐ Ⓐ Ⓐ

Historical Collections

An important part of CIA's ongoing effort to be more open and to provide for more public accountability has been a recognition of the importance of declassifying historically significant Agency documents. The process of opening up the Agency's historical record began in the 1980s when then Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) William Casey authorized the declassification and transfer of nine million pages of OSS records to the National Archives and established the Historical Review Program.

A more formal Historical Review Program (HRP) was established by DCI Robert Gates in 1992. Reaffirming the principle that the US government's records should be open to the public, the program called for significant historical information to be made available unless such release could cause damage to the national security interests of the United States. Subsequent DCIs R. James Woolsey and John Deutch, and current Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet have supported a vigorous historical declassification program.

CIA's Historical Review Program, with the exception of several statutorily mandated requirements, is a voluntary declassification program that focuses on records of historical value. The program's managers rely on the advice and guidance of the Agency's History Staff, the DCI's Historical Review Panel, and the general public in selecting topics for review. Under guidelines laid out for the program, historical records are released except in instances where disclosure would damage national security-that is, for example, where it would reveal sensitive foreign government information or identify intelligence sources and methods that are currently in use and that are subject to denial and/or deception. The Historical Review Program coordinates the review of the documents with CIA components and other US Government entities before final declassification action is taken and the documents are transferred to the National Archives.

Our Historical Collections are listed below. For more, visit our Collections archive.

Aquiline

(July 30, 2020)

Aerial intelligence collection platforms have played a critical role in US national security from the earliest beginnings of aviation. CIA's 1960s OXCART Program and its use of U-2s are examples of collection innovations that have kept US leaders informed about adversaries' capabilities and intentions. Despite their success, however, use of these platforms carried significant risks and repercussions, including detection and even pilot loss, such as the downing of the U-2 flown by Francis Gary Powers in 1960. Ever-evolving research by the CIA led to the development concept of *unmanned* aerial vehicles (UAVs) as collection platforms. An innovative Agency program in the 1960s codenamed Aquiline was the very first to test this concept. Based initially on the study of flight characteristics of birds, Aquiline was envisioned as a long-range vehicle that could safely and stealthily provide a window into denied areas such as the Soviet Union through photography and other capabilities, and would even support in-place agent operations. While it never became operational, the concept proved invaluable as a forerunner to today's multi-capability UAVs.

Gary B. Keeley on US Government Intelligence Documents and Their Uses

Gary Keeley retired from the CIA History Staff in 2022. Earlier in his career, he worked for NSA, including two years in NSA's Center for Cryptologic History. He has written several articles on how documents related to intelligence are created, organized, and released. His article, "Understanding US intelligence Records: How Journalists and Scholars Can "Get It Right," (*Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies* (Winter-Spring 2024)) is an excellent piece that addresses these themes. Mr. Keeley's article independently elaborates on some points I have attempted to make in my essay, so I would cite a few of his conclusions below.

- The challenge with intelligence records is not that too few exist but that vast numbers fill archival shelves and digital repositories. Much more remains classified than has been redacted and released, especially in the universe of single-source reports (HUMINT, IMINT, SIGINT reports, etc.)

- The documents are not as easy to declassify—without risking damage to ongoing collection—as imagined by those who routinely advocate for increased and more rapid declassification. Given the large volume and reach of intelligence and the continued classification of the majority of those records, Cold War scholars are mostly unable to reach definitive conclusions about the role and value of intelligence in most past events.

- Everyone researching an intelligence topic or an event in which intelligence may have played a role should begin with cia.gov, nsa.gov, and the other public-facing IC websites, as well as the records of those agencies in the National Archives and similar archives and websites for the intelligence agencies of other nations.

- Each of the public-facing IC websites has sections for history and declassified records. These websites host not only millions of pages of unclassified and declassified records, at least in the United States, but also, importantly, long studies, periodical articles, monographs, and books written by officials of IC agencies, often not long after noteworthy events have occured.

- Researchers should, in particular, avidly seek out declassified histories written by IC historians because these histories were informed by classified records and by the personal knowledge of many who contribute to the histories. In many instances, internal histories, once declassified, become "primary" sources for uncleared historians who never see the primary sources relied upon by the cleared authors.

- Authors should also routinely caveat their conclusions (based on declassified/redacted government documents) with clear statements that future declassifications could alter their assessments.

Mr. Keeley has also recommended some other sources on the subject:

- Gary B. Keeley lecture for Johns Hopkins students, "How to Find and Research Declassified Intelligence Documents" (2023). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zx8Mi5FqEM&t=51s).

- Gary B. Keeley, "The Imperative of Intelligence Services to Protect from Exposure the Sources and Methods of Intelligence Collection," *The Intelligencer*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Winter-Spring, 2022.

- Dr. Robert M. Clark, "The Protection of Intelligence Sources and Methods," *The Intelligencer*, Fall 2016.