

Editors' Note

Those of us who serve as federal historians, archivists, curators, or in numerous other history-related roles are constantly mindful of our special obligation to produce “useful” history, narratives that not only advance historical understanding, but inform and instruct. We recognize the essential value of such work whether in museum exhibits, national park monuments, or military historical studies. But general acceptance of public history work among academic historians has taken decades to achieve, and the struggle continues. We are pleased to publish this year’s Roger R. Trask Lecture by Philip L. Cantelon because it offers important insights into federal historians’ efforts to promote, encourage, and improve federal history work from 1979 to the present. Cantelon’s career and work as an “entrepreneurial” historian and founder of History Associates Inc., the Society for History in the Federal Government, and the National Council for Public History highlight not only the early organizational issues of federal historians but the technical challenges they faced in conducting agency research, especially in “contemporary” history. They often had to analyze current documents, work in teams, master new technological tools, and all the while uphold the highest standards of historical research and writing. The fascinating story of adaptation and service in Philip Cantelon’s career simultaneously reveals much about the history of our organization, and the presentation of the Society’s Franklin Delano Roosevelt Award to Cantelon in 2004 recognized his lifetime achievement in our mission.

Arnita A. Jones discusses a significant dimension of federal history work. Writing from her long and productive career with the American Historical Association and experience as a founder of the Society, she probes the role of federal historians in “applied” history—in policy history work. While federal historians are regularly called upon to provide historical background for government decision makers, they are not generally trained to do so. We must recognize the need, she urges, to re-introduce policy history instruction in our public history educational programs. David Haines also demonstrates the importance of historical analyses for policymaking in his review of the Refugee Act of 1980. In the formulation of that act, legislators learned from past mistakes in refugee policies to fashion an act that rationally “synchronized” U.S. foreign policy and domestic interests with refugee policies. Although such efforts have their limitations, he argues the need to aim for such correlation of interests in other policy areas.

Other articles explore fascinating eras and episodes in federal history. Christopher Warren examines the inconclusive post–World War I international debate on chemical weapons. He suggests that several issues, including the near impossibility of weapons inspection and verification, prevented broad agreements. Betsy Rohaly Smoot traces the career of the early 20th-century cryptologists Parker and Genevieve Hitt. Her research demonstrates Parker Hitt’s invaluable strategic and technological contributions to intelligence work, and Genevieve’s successful career as likely the first American woman in cryptological work. Philip Cantelon’s methodical history of the Federal Power Commission, 1920–77, provides a complex account of the evolution of energy policies in modern America, with changing energy sources, price fluctuations, business interests, politics, and legislative indecision. In the long view, the story suggests the ultimate limitations of bureaucratic effectiveness in a modern industrial society. George Herring’s piece was his introduction to NASA’s April 2011 conference proceedings on space and the Cold War. He stresses that from 1961 to 1981 the Cold War and its contours of tension and détente affected all policy and political considerations, even the conduct of space programs. That “backdrop” provided able context for conference presenters considering a wide range of space program developments in several nations, including India and China. Michael Brodhead presents a colorful account of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ survey of Nicaragua in 1929–31 for a possible second canal. The story not only details the reasons for the survey, but the difficulties and circumstances encountered, and the contributions of its officers, and explains why that canal was never constructed.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Federal History*, and welcome your comments.

Benjamin Guterman
Terrance Rucker
Editors, *Federal History*

FROM THE EDITOR:

This issue of *Federal History* brings to a close my service as co-editor. I wish to thank the writers who entrusted us with presenting their work to a worldwide audience. I also wish to thank my colleagues in the federal history community and the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, for their submissions, suggestions, and in some cases, last-minute proofreading of the article drafts. Last but not least, I thank Ben Guterman for encouraging me to participate in this project. I wish Ben and our board of editors the best of luck with the *Federal History* project and look forward to enjoying future editions on the Web and in print.

Terrance Rucker
Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives