

The Promise of Policy History in the Public History Curriculum

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“In Adopting Harsh Tactics, No Inquiry into Past Use” was the title of a front-page *New York Times* article that recently caught my eye. In reporting on the origins of interrogation techniques used by the United States to gain information from suspected terrorists after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the story provides a cautionary tale for government decision makers. Contained in the *Times* account were details of how members of the Bush administration and leaders of key congressional intelligence committees in Congress came to a consensus on the use of interrogation methods that were a part of American military training known as the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape program (SERE). These methods had been designed during the Korean War to prepare American troops for the possibility of capture and torture. But according to *Times* reporters Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, neither CIA Director George Tenet nor other officials who were persuaded to use the SERE program in 2002 knew that it traced its origins back to the Korean War and the torture methods, including waterboarding, that were used against Americans there. “Waterboarding,” they reported, “had been prosecuted by the United States in war-crimes trials after



Professor Robert Kelley led the establishment of the first formal public history program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the late 1970s.

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World War II and was a well-documented favorite of despotic governments since the Spanish Inquisition; one waterboard used under Pol Pot was even on display at the genocide museum in Cambodia.”¹

One observer, historian Philip D. Zelikow, who had worked in the George H. W. Bush White House, and who later served as Executive Director of the 9/11 Commission, commented that “Competent staff work could have quickly canvassed relevant history, insights from the best law enforcement and military interrogators, and lessons from the painful British and Israeli experience. Especially in a time of great stress, walking into this minefield, the president was entitled to get the most thoughtful and searching analysis our government could muster.”² Would knowing the full historical context have made a difference to the decision makers who inaugurated the controversial interrogation techniques undertaken in the wake of the 9/11 attacks? There is no way to be sure, but what this newspaper account surely demonstrates is that ignorance of the historical context of a policy can be dangerous and is, ultimately, no excuse.

It is also fair to ask if there are historians prepared to take on such efforts, for there are few academic programs that pay much attention to the role of historical research in policy and decision making. Certainly there is a good argument to be made that many of the skills needed to do policy research can be gained from established programs of graduate study in history, but few doctoral programs train their students to undertake the highly targeted research that is often required, usually on short deadline and through team effort. Nor do they routinely establish good relationships with institutions where historical policy research is used so that students can gain practical experience through internships and other employment. And, it must be said, there is a reticence on the part of some departments to consider government work as an appropriate goal for their students.³

Graduate education in history might have taken a different course in the 1970s, since policy history was originally a focus of several early public history programs as they began developing in those years. Ironically, while public history as a field

¹ Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, “In Adopting Harsh Tactics, No Inquiry Into Past Use,” *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 2009, 1, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 15. The best critique of the failure of decision makers to utilize historical research remains Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: the Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

³ Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman provide a contemporary critique of history graduate education in “A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History,” *Perspectives on History* 49, no. 7 (October 2011): 5–7.

and as a degree program for history professionals has expanded substantially in recent decades, and while policy history as an academic field has grown as well, with its own national meetings and scholarly publication, the *Journal of Policy History*, the place of policy history in graduate training remains elusive. If anything, it is now less associated than it once was with preparation for professional practice in public history degree programs, as most curricula currently emphasize coursework focused on developing museum exhibits, and managing historical sites and cultural resources.⁴

Federal historians have something to offer here. While it is true that the celebrated—if sometimes controversial—national museums on the mall in Washington, or the many monuments and historic sites cared for by the National Park Service and other agencies, are much better known to both the general public and the historical profession, policy research continues to engage many contemporary federal historians. Their work is essential to the effective operation of our military and civil government agencies, offering the kinds of comparative analyses and analytical perspectives for which historians are uniquely trained. Their preparedness for the challenges of such work can most readily be assured if public history programs reclaim this part of their original mission, and begin to help students understand that historical research to inform policy and decision-making is no less important a goal than educating undergraduates in the classroom or producing a scholarly monograph. This article briefly outlines the development of federal government policy history work in the past century and explores several programs and efforts currently underway that can serve as models for academic historians, and public history programs and their students.

Early Roots of Public and Policy History

When the public history movement emerged in the mid-1970s, some of its key leaders hoped that policy history would have a central place within it, but the roots of policy history trace back much farther. In the early years of the 20th century we find historians in the large public universities of the midwest like Benjamin Shambaugh of the State University of Iowa, who headed the state historical society in addition to his academic job, and started an applied history publication series

⁴ Donald T. Critchlow, “Editor’s Preface,” in Julian Zelizer, ed., *New Directions in Policy History* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005) vii–ix; Thomas Bender, Philip M. Katz, Colin Palmer, *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 124–28. See also the web site of the National Council on Public History at <http://ncph.org/cms/publications-resources/> for links to web sites of several dozen public history programs.

to inform the work of government officials. Progressive historian Charles Beard, who became an influential member of the faculty at Columbia University, at one time worked for the New York Municipal Research Bureau, and enjoyed a long career as a consultant. But it was not until the New Deal that there was a great expansion of the number of historians employed by the federal government, many of them out-of-work graduate students. Historians played an active role in promoting the establishment of the National Archives, which soon became an important employer of historians, as well as other programs such as the Works Progress Administration's Historical Records Survey. Other New Deal efforts employed hundreds more, writing state histories and surveying state and local records.⁵ Little of this work could be characterized as policy research, however, and it was not until the coming of the Second World War that historians found themselves drawn into more institutional and policy-related history.

The Impact of the Second World War on Federal History

A new era of federal history began, according to one account, when "Some of the elder statesmen of the American Historical Association, early in the war, approached President Franklin D. Roosevelt with the idea of starting a program on narrative interpretive history."⁶ Roosevelt agreed, and in March 1942 issued an executive order mandating that all government agencies collect records and write a history of their part in the war effort. That initiative, according to contemporary sources, resulted in hundreds of historians being employed in historical programs at 54 federal government agencies.⁷

The greatest effort, however, was directed toward the armed services, where highly credentialed senior historians were recruited. Williams College President James Phinney Baxter and former Johns Hopkins University history department head Kent Roberts Greenfield agreed to help develop the army history program, while Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morrison signed on to write *History of Naval Operations in World War II*, an effort that eventually ran to 15 volumes. Documenting the war effort did not end with the war; rather a steady stream

⁵ Rebecca Conard's *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002) is an excellent account of the career of one of the pioneers of policy history. See also Ina Tyrrell's *Historians in Public: the Practice of History, 1890–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 158–84, for an overview of this period.

⁶ Maurice Matloff, "Government and Public History: The Army," *The Public Historian* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 44.

⁷ "Report and Recommendations of the Committee of the American Historical Association on the Historian and the Federal Government (1952), box 444, file "Committee on the Historian and the Federal Government," AHA Papers, as quoted in Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 186.

of multivolume military histories continued for years thereafter, while a number of the wartime historical offices that had been established remained in place, gradually carving out a multifaceted role within the various services.⁸

Elsewhere after the war the federal government continued to house a number of historical offices and in many cases expand them in ways congenial to policy research. Historians' interest in the practice of history within the federal government grew steadily during these years to the extent that the American Historical Association (AHA) established an Ad Hoc Committee on the Historian and the Federal Government at its Annual Meeting in 1949 to monitor and encourage the establishment of historical programs.⁹



Wayne Rasmussen, historian at the Agriculture Department, wrote institutional histories, but also provided policy support on such issues as price supports and agricultural protest movements.

Wayne Rasmussen, for example, had joined the Department of Agriculture while working on a doctorate at George Washington University in the 1930s, was drafted, and served in the Office of Psychological Warfare during the war. Returning home, he took up his old job at Agriculture, became Chief Historian there in 1952, and spent his career writing institutional and policy histories and, not infrequently, providing policy support on such issues as price supports or agricultural protest movements.¹⁰ Richard Hewlett, a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Chicago, joined the Atomic Energy Commission as a program analyst and became its first historian in 1957. He spent his career at the AEC, sometimes doing policy research and also writing a prize-winning series of institutional histories on the development of atomic power in the United States.¹¹ Historical activities at the U.S. Department

⁸ Maurice Matloff, "Government and Public History," 44, 45; Benjamin Franklin Cooling, "History Programs in the Department of Defense," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 45–55; and Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 189–201.

⁹ Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 199–200.

¹⁰ Arnita A. Jones and Wayne D. Rasmussen, "Wayne Rasmussen and the Development of Policy History at the United States Department of Agriculture," *The Public Historian* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 11–29.

¹¹ JoAnne McCormick Quattannens, "Richard G. Hewlett: Federal Historian," *The Public Historian* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 53–83; Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 199–200.

of State began as early as 1861 with the publication of *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs*, the predecessor of today's well-known *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series. Expanded during World War II, by the 1950s the historical programs at the Department of State included a Division of Historical Policy Research in addition to extensive documentary collection and publication activities.¹²



Richard Hewlett became the first historian at the Atomic Energy Commission in 1957.

The enormous expansion of higher education in the two decades after the war,¹³ and then later the clash between the academy and the government over the war in Vietnam, as well as a growing preference for social over political history on the part of a new generation of historians changed the direction of the historical profession. Thus it was that by 1977, when the AHA, the Organization of American Historians, and several other historical organizations agreed to staff a joint effort aimed at identifying federal and other employment opportunities for a new generation of Ph.D.s who could not find jobs, there was hardly any institutional memory of the earlier connections between academic and federal historians and little interest in policy history. The impact on graduate education had been negligible.¹⁴

Federal Policy History Today

Julian Zelizer, in a recent survey of the development of the field of policy history, argues that it owes its origins to the public history movement that began in the late 1970s, in masters and a few doctorate-level programs, chief among them the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Carnegie Mellon University.¹⁵ Robert Kelley, the man

¹² Kristin L. Ahlberg, "Building a Model Public History Program: The Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State," *The Public Historian* 30, no. 2 (May 2008): 9–28.

¹³ Bender, *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-First Century*, 6–7.

¹⁴ The author was appointed in 1977 to be the first staff associate for the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, as this joint effort was called.

¹⁵ Julian E. Zelizer, "Clio's Lost Tribe: Public Policy History Since 1978," *Journal of Policy History* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 369–94; Julian E. Zelizer, "Introduction: New Directions in Policy History," *Journal of Policy History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 1–11.

who coined the phrase “public history,”¹⁶ and who led in the establishment of the first formal program at Santa Barbara, advocated a useful history that could include the dimension of time in the formulation of policies or the planning of initiatives, and take into account not only the substance but the process, over time, by which policy debates and choices developed. That was 1978, one of the worst years of an employment crisis that enveloped the discipline of history that left hundreds of young Ph.D.s locked out of positions in American higher education (The profession had generally digested the huge number of baby boomers and ceased its dramatic growth.). Kelley and his colleagues in the new field of public history hoped that policy work could lead to new kinds of jobs for historians, pointed to existing examples of federal history offices as models, and developed new curricula with that goal in mind.¹⁷

Robert Kelley was right about federal government history, even if his optimism about the role of policy history within academic public history programs was misplaced. Over the past three decades the federal government has seen a substantial expansion of the number of federal historical offices and programs. The Society for History in the Federal Government’s 2003 *Directory* listed 472 history offices and programs nationwide, the majority of them in the military services and the National Park Service. That figure does not include the numerous offices in “Resource” agencies—Library of Congress, National Archives, and Smithsonian Institution—that perform history-related work.¹⁸ The central work of federal historians continues to focus on creating and maintaining agencies’ institutional histories and making them available to managers and the public as well as to scholars and journalists. Many offices have particular museum or historic preservation functions; others are more heavily involved in management of archives or responding to Freedom of Information requests, while others are established to commemorate a special project or event. But all must be prepared to field specific requests from managers for information needed to develop a particular policy or provide context for a particular decision, although some serve this function more than others.¹⁹

¹⁶ Personal communication with G. Wesley Johnson, Robert Kelley’s colleague in developing the public history program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 2009.

¹⁷ Robert Kelley, “Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 16–28; also Kelley, “The Idea of Policy History,” *The Public Historian* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 35–39.

¹⁸ Society for History in the Federal Government, *Directory of Federal Historical Programs and Activities*. Published with the assistance of the American Historical Association (Washington, DC, 2003).

¹⁹ Still the best concise overview of the work of federal historians is *Historical Programs in the Federal Government: A Guide*, published in 1992 by the Society for History in the Federal Government, Washington, DC. The Society’s web site at <http://shfg.org/shfg/publications/directory-of-history-offices/> contains up-to-date information about a number of federal history programs.

The Military Model: The U.S. Army Center of Military History

The military historical offices of the federal government (including those of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and U.S. Coast Guard) have a long tradition of supporting research and documentation, but only gradually did they develop into more complex operations that combine policy research with narrative history, education, museum and heritage, and public information functions. While most of these and other military historical offices engage in historical research to support planning and decision making by officers and civilian leaders of the armed forces, the balance of policy, heritage, education, and museum work varies widely. One of the best examples of policy research as a part of an office's core mission is the Army's Center of Military History (CMH).

The U.S. Army Center of Military History traces its roots back to an 1874 effort by the Secretary of War to compile a documentary history of the Civil War, but its more immediate predecessor was the General Staff historical branch established in 1943 as a part of FDR's effort to chronicle the history of the Second World War. Among other developments, it was this organization that established the role of combat historians (currently organized in Military History Divisions [MHD]) who not only collected documents and wrote narratives but also "brief combat monographs . . . that highlighted lessons learned during the war's operations."²⁰

Recent leaders of the Army's Center for Military History view policy work as their first priority, supporting "the Army staff with a wide range of historical studies and activities providing information for staff plans, actions, current operations, and training, thus contributing directly to informed decision making at the higher reaches of the department."²¹ The Army's publication program of narrative histories was launched in 1947 with a 79-volume official history of World War II. Since that time it has continued the well-known narrative publication series and also maintained a network of 59 army museums; a professional journal, *Army History*; and an oral history program. In addition, the Center supports history education for officers in the various army schools: the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Army's Command and General Staff College, the School of Advanced Military Studies, as well as ROTC programs in colleges and universities.²²

²⁰ Robert J. Dalessandro, "The Chief's Corner," *Army History* (Summer 2011): 3.

²¹ "U.S. Army Center of Military History" in American Historical Association, *Directory of History Departments, Historical Organizations, and Historians*. (35th edition, 2009–10): 725.

²² Dalessandro, "The Chief's Corner," 3, 44–45; Richard W. Stewart, "The U.S. Army Center of Military History," *The Federalist: Newsletter of the Society for History in the Federal Government*, no. 26 (Summer 2010): 3–5; Richard W. Stewart, "The Historian and Distance Learning," *Army History* (Summer 2011): 46–47. See also the Center's web site at <http://www.history.army.mil/html/about/overview.html>.

Policy history is securely embedded with a larger mission that the CMH describes as “ensuring the complete and accurate use of military historical experience in professional military issues.”²³ Among the Center’s policy-related activities are special studies providing historical perspective on such issues as the high rate of suicide within the service, low rates of reenlistment, procurement of weapons systems, or previous periods when the army served as an occupying force. Regularly, the CMH provides transition assistance in the form of a digest of issues (“smart” books on the last 10 or 15 occupants of the office) that new appointees can use to build on the experience of their predecessors: “brutally frank” accounts of the problems and/or successes of these individuals, including whether they had awkward relationships with Congress; or other issues.²⁴

Civilian History Offices

The impulse to consider historical research and context in planning and decision making often has to be deliberately cultivated in the civilian offices of the federal government. Though the Center for Cryptologic History in the National Security Agency has in its mission statement the mandate to “provide objective, meaningful historical support . . . to enhance decision making,” Chief Historian William J. Williams argues that the office has had to create what he calls a “culture” of appreciation for historical work. Decision makers consequently value studies of the past for insights that improve the quality of their decision making. The Center works to create this environment by an extensive education program inside the NSA, providing regular information to staff about its history and claiming a major role in orientation of new employees and special leadership training efforts as well as outreach to scholars and the public.²⁵

Since the beginning of the National Park Service in 1916, its leaders have considered research to be an essential element of park management. Legislation in 1998 re-emphasized the need for research, not only to support historical interpretation and programming in the nation’s parks but also to guide its management, which the current NPS mission statement makes clear in describing its extensive administrative history program: “Park managers bear significant responsibilities for decisions about park resources that affect how future generations will see this multifaceted natural and cultural heritage. Administrative histories inform them about the decision making of

²³ Interview, Arnita Jones with Jeffrey Clarke, Director of the U.S. Army Center of Military History, May 28, 2009.

²⁴ William J. Williams, “Making History Relevant for the National Security Agency (NSA),” *The Federalist*, no. 29 (Spring 2011): 15, 16.

²⁵ “U.S. Army Center of Military History,” 725.

their predecessors in the NPS, and about how NPS decisions have reflected and reflect broader social, economic, cultural, and political trends and interest.”²⁶

The Office of the Historian at the Department of State has played a major role in federal history, in particular its diplomatic documentary series, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, now published for 150 years. Recent research suggests that it was originally intended not so much as a tool for decision makers; than the scholarly, methodical publication we know today, and that rather it grew out of tensions between Congress and the President during the Civil War.²⁷ Concerns about politicization of the series in the wake of World War II gave rise to substantial academic oversight by representatives of the American Historical Association and other academic associations in the form of an Historical Advisory Committee, created initially in 1957, and subsequently strengthened by congressional mandate.²⁸ During most of the 20th century, however, the Office of the Historian, under various titles, continued to conduct policy research in response to special issues and concerns raised by the State Department’s leaders through briefing memos, special studies, or larger research projects. According to the Office’s current mission statement, it “prepares policy supportive historical studies for Department principals and other agencies.” These studies provide “essential background information, evaluate how and why policies evolved, identify precedents and derive lessons learned. Department officers rely on institutional memory, collective wisdom and personal experience to make decisions; rigorous historical analysis can sharpen, focus, and inform their choices.”²⁹

New Federal Policy Initiatives

Several recent efforts within the federal government have taken policy history in important new directions, especially the growing use of historical research in non-departmental government institutions and agencies that focus on a range of policy issues and that typically support and disseminate social science policy research as a basic part of their mission. A good example is the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which was founded in 1968 expressly to connect

²⁶ See <http://www.nps.gov/nps/history/hisnps/NPSHistory/adminhistory.htm>. See also Lu Ann Jones, “Capturing the Spirit of History: Oral History in the National Park Service,” *The Federalist*, no. 27 (Fall 2010): 3–5.

²⁷ Aaron W. Marrs, “Publicizing Foreign Relations in Time of War: The Foundation of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Released June 24, 2011. <http://history.state.gov/frus150/research/foundation-of-frus> (accessed Sept. 1, 2011).

²⁸ Joshua Botts, “‘Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire’: the Politics of the Yalta FRUS,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Released June 24, 2011. <http://history.state.gov/frus150/research/politics-of-the-Yalta-frus>. Joshua Botts (accessed Sept. 1, 2011).

²⁹ “What We Do,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, <http://history.state.gov/about> (accessed Sept. 10, 2011).

the worlds of scholarship with those engaged in the practice of policy and decision making and which offers support for scholars in the form of residential fellowships. The Center's robust public programming, which includes lectures, conferences, seminars, and publications, also serves to focus attention on scholars' research and to establish a larger conversation between policy-makers and historians.³⁰ While historians were never excluded from the Center's activities, it was only recently that a History and Public Policy Program was established to encourage a dialogue between historians and policy makers, journalists, diplomats, and others about the role of history in decision and policy making. An outgrowth of the Center's Cold War International History Project, the History and Public Policy Program focuses particularly on diplomatic history, regional security issues, and nuclear history, as well as global military and security issues.³¹ In 2010, the program joined the American Historical Association's National History Center to establish a weekly Washington History Seminar. It now provides a forum for the in-depth discussion of important new historical research and perspectives on international and national affairs on such topics as weapons of mass destruction, counterinsurgency, and the Anglo-American "special" relationship.

Another federal agency that supports the work of policy-oriented scholars is the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), an independent, nonpartisan federal institution created by Congress in 1984 to promote the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts through research, education, and other programs. Several years ago the USIP undertook a history initiative that aimed to explore "how divided societies recovering from violent conflict can teach the



The Woodrow Wilson International Center's History and Public Policy Program encourages dialogue between historians, policy makers, and others about the role of history in decision and policy making.

³⁰ See <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/about-us>.

³¹ Interview, Amrita Jones with Christian Ostermann, Director of the History and Public Policy Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center, June 12, 2009.

conflict's history, so as not to re-ignite it or contribute to future cycles of violence and to participate in a larger process of social reconstruction and reconciliation."³²

USIP's efforts are often directed as much to ordinary citizens involved in conflict as to elected leaders and elites. One project, for example, funded the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, to revive the teaching of national history in Rwanda after the genocide there in 1994. Here historians worked with the widest possible assortment of stakeholders, including government officials, but also different ethnic groups in the community, returned exiles, and history teachers at all levels, focusing on the most difficult events and working through the issues they presented to develop curricula and texts and to train master teachers to use them.³³

USIP was also one of a number of foundations to support the Scholar's Initiative led by Purdue University historians Charles Ingrao and Thomas Emmert of Gustavus Adolphus College. This project brought together historians and other scholars whose work has focused on the Balkans to examine evidence on historical events leading to the violence that engulfed the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, always including in each group historians with opposing ethnic and political views. Their goal was to address particular elements of the conflict such as ethnic cleansing, war crimes, or the role of foreign powers, and—over several years—work through this material to build a narrative or set of facts on which all or at least most could agree and that could be the basis of future cooperation.³⁴

Not an entirely new role, but perhaps increasingly visible and important is the work of historians employed as staff or consultants to government commissions—special investigative bodies established to understand or address a crisis, a problem, or a watershed event. Historian Hugh Graham, for example, had served on the staff of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and was co-editor of the 1969 report *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*.³⁵ Several

³² Elizabeth A. Cole and Judy Barsalou, "United or Divided? The Challenges of Teaching History in Societies Emerging from Violent Conflict." A Special Report from the U.S. Institute of Peace, #163 (June 2006): 1–16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7, 8.

³⁴ Richard Byrne, "Rebuilding Balkan Bridges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 10, 2006, A12–A15. See also Charles Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert, *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (Washington and West Lafayette, Indiana, 2009).

³⁵ W. Andrew Achenbaum, "Public History's Past, Present, and Prospects," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 5 (December 1987): 1162–1174, especially, 1167. See also Zelizer, "Clio's Lost Tribe," and Hugh Davis Graham, "The Stunted Career of Policy History: A Critique and an Agenda," *The Public Historian* 15, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 25–37. In Memoriam: Hugh Davis Graham, *Perspectives Online* 40, no. 6 (September, 2002). <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2002/0209/0209mem2.cfm> (Accessed November 4, 2011).

historians also served on the Kennedy Assassination Board, which was established to address persistent rumors of a domestic and/or international conspiracy in the November 22, 1963, death of President John F. Kennedy by finding and making public all possible government information on the event.³⁶

Historians played a central role in producing the *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, otherwise known as *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The 9/11 Commission was established in November 2002 to investigate the facts and circumstances relating to the events of September 11, 2001. It was an initiative that came not from the White House or Congress, but rather at the insistence of the families of those who died in the attacks and who wanted a full accounting of what happened and why. Based on reviewing more than 2.5 million pages of documents and 1,200 interviews in 10 countries, as well as numerous public hearings,³⁷ the *9/11 Report* was a combination of fast-paced narrative chronicling the events of the separate hijackings and the personal history of the attackers, the story of the response and the responders, as well as recommendations for prevention of future terrorist attacks and for reorganization of the U.S. government to that end. As the Commission's senior advisor Earnest May put it, the report provided the "long background."³⁸

The historical nature of the report was no accident. The Commission's co-chairs began with a healthy respect for history. Lee Hamilton had been a member of Congress for several decades, and was by 2001 head of the Woodrow Wilson Center described above.³⁹ Thomas Kean, the Commission's chair, was a former

THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT



The *9/11 Commission Report* authors conceived of the eventual report as a narrative history that would influence public policy.

³⁶ *The Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board: Final Report*, September, 1998. <http://www.archives.gov/research/Fk/review-board/report/> (accessed August 20, 2010).

³⁷ Thomas Kean, chair; Lee Hamilton, vice chair. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, authorized edition (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), preface, xv–xviii.

³⁸ Ernest R. May, "When Government Writes History: A Memory of the 9/11 Commission," *The New Republic*, May 23, 2005: 30–35, especially p. 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31; see also a brief sketch of Hamilton's interest in history at <http://www.historians.org/prizes/AWARDED/RooseveltWilsonWinner/10Hamilton.cfm> (accessed Aug. 1, 2011).

governor and college president with an advanced degree in history. He believed that University of Virginia historian Philip Zelikow's experience in government and academe made him ideal for the post of executive director of the Commission.⁴⁰ While several other historians held key staff posts, the most important connection with the discipline was the naming of Ernest R. May, a distinguished Harvard historian, as senior advisor. May was the author, with Richard Neustadt, of *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, a book that has had substantial influence on the field of history and public policy. From the beginning, May and Zelikow conceived of the eventual report as a narrative history that, according to May, influenced the recruitment of staff. Moreover, they convinced the Commission, drawn from leaders of both political parties, that staying as close to facts and creating as simple a narrative as possible would in the end avoid a partisan split.⁴¹ The 567-page report sold more than 2 million copies, while another 6.9 million copies were downloaded from the Commission's web site. Though controversy over the lack of full implementation of the report's recommendations continues, it clearly has had substantial influence.⁴²

The report is not without its critics. It does not, for example, fix blame—not on either the Clinton or the Bush administration, nor the security organizations such as the FBI, the CIA, the Department of Defense, nor the civilian agencies like the Federal Aviation Administration, nor the local civilian authorities in New York City and Washington—though the detail of the report, and sometimes particularly the footnotes, allow readers to form their own conclusions. For this it has been soundly criticized, but according to the commissioners, their intent was to provide the most complete account of the events of September 11 that they could, just “what happened and why” in an effort to create “a foundation for a better understanding of a landmark in the history of our nation.”⁴³

Looking to the Future

Institutional and policy research supported in various parts of the federal government is and should be recognized as an important component of the field of

⁴⁰ Philip Zelikow had worked in the administration of the first President Bush and held several other government posts; he had also served in the transition for President George W. Bush after the 2000 election. See Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, USA, 2008), 58–62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 386–87.

⁴² May, “When Government Writes History,” 35.

⁴³ *9/11 Report*, xvii.

public history as well as of the graduate programs that train the next generation of historians. My own experience teaching and lecturing at public history programs bears out the interest in and potential of such instruction. A course in history and public policy I taught recently at American University attracted not only public history graduate students but also undergraduates from the university's schools of policy and international studies, as well as interns in the Washington Semester, which places students for work experience in government and nonprofit agencies. Other institutions, Arizona State University for example, take advantage of cooperative training arrangements with government agencies such as the National Park Service, while George Washington University has made a course in "The Uses and Abuses of History" a part of its core graduate curriculum.⁴⁴ Many federally supported internships, fellowships, and research grants are available from various federal agencies and programs. If these potential connections can be publicized and strengthened, then perhaps public history programs can realize their early promise of training historians to engage in public policy research, and thereby build a better understanding of the value of historical research and analysis both within and beyond the boundaries of the discipline.

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⁴⁴ Personal conversation with Jann Warren Findley, Arizona State University, March 2011; presentation by Hope Harrison, George Washington University, Washington History Seminar, Woodrow Wilson Center, October 17, 2011.