MANAGING CASE FILES IN CONGRESSIONAL COLLECTIONS: THE HAZARDS OF PROPHECY

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G. Philip Bauer, member of the National Archives Staff in the Division of Labor Department Archives, wrote that to appraise in the archival sense meant to distinguish between the concept that certain records are inherently valuable and the concept that certain desirable uses are likely to be made of them. To anticipate research use and select documentation accordingly suggests prophecy, he continued, and prophecy is always suspect.[1]

Yet there is probably no choice; prophecy is the essence of archival evaluation. The nation through its system of repositories cannot preserve all that has potentail value, however noble that objective might be. Massive collections of papers created by United States senators and representatives, for example, tax the manuscript curator's ability to find additional space, discover necessary funds, and assign sufficient staff to process and make available the historical record of Congress. The archivist must find ways to cope with this situation by confronting squarely the fundamental task of appraisal. It is inevitable that many records with relatively well-established value will be displaced because of competition with even more valuable records for finite space and resources. Archivists have the responsibility to save that which is both useful and valuable as opposed to that which is merely valuable. The prophet's assignment is to determine what priority congressional records should receive in the universe of documentation.

Archivists recognize the hazards inherent in appraisal. After all, one purpose of professional exchange is to make us better prophets and enable us to escape the fate of some previous forecasters. General George Custer, for example, estimated that there were sixty Indians over the hill; he was wrong by 2800 percent. As keepers of the nation's historical and cultural heritage, archivists cannot afford the same margin of error.

This paper attempts to assess the value and usefulness of congressional case files as a preliminary step to their appraisal.[2] The routine constituent correspondence that comprises such a large portion of political collections has been excluded from this discussion in order to concentrate on those specific files collected as a congressional office performs a service for a constituent. They include immigration, social security, veterans', selective service, academy appointment, patronage, and public works files. To improve service to constituents, modern congressional offices designate certain staff members to handle case files. As a result, these files are identified and segregated in the course of daily office operation.

Admittedly somewhat arbitrary, this definition excludes files of legislative bills and working papers, issue-oriented correspondence, clippings files, campaign records, and other series common to virtually all congressional collections. In terms of volume, case files probably comprise ten to twenty percent of a modern congressional collection. To "appraise them away," so to speak, solely on the basis of bulk probably will not gain a repository much space.

A random examination of case files suggests that a researcher is likely to find the following basic information in them: an individual's name, the federal agency to which the case was referred, the nature of the action taken, the course of appeal, some indication of the nature and effectiveness of congressional intervention, the kind or amount of benefits, and the basis upon which benefits were awarded or denied. Often the correspondent will include a variety of socio-economic information and, less frequently, will assess the service he or she received from the government. Immigration, social security, and veterans' case files typically contain this kind of data. Selective service, academy appointment, and patronage files may be less comprehensive and more specialized; yet they too can contain significant socio-economic data.

The information included in a typical case file comes from a variety of documents and sources. Constituent letters and responses from executive agencies and congressional offices comprise the bulk of material. Social security, veterans', immigration, and selective service cases may also include medical records, employment histories and evaluations, and confidential memoranda for the congressman describing the process by which the agency evaluated a claim. Patronage files include personnel evaluations, resumes, statements of political

service, and letters of recommendation.

Public works files (which usually relate to communities rather than to personal cases) contain rich documentation for local history. They include a wealth of information about community expectations for federal assistance and economic rehabilitation, competing interests within the locality, the planning process for works projects, the amount of funds requested, the time it takes to receive federal clearances, economic and environmental impacts, and the present condition of local facilities. Public works case records also document short-term federal programs for disaster relief and longer-term flood control projects and infrastructure development.

Not all case files contain the same quality of documentation, and it is easy to over-generalize. The files will vary from collection to collection and according to the congressional staff assigned to casework, as well as over time.

The value and expected usefulness of congressional case files is a timely and controversial subject. In its checklist for a records disposition program, the Senate Historical Office, for example, recommends that incumbents consider disposing of service academy appointment records, job application and patronage files, requests for assistance in immigration cases, and veterans' files in order to reduce bulk and, presumably, to protect individual privacy.[3] A major repository holding a large number of congressional collections places all service cases at the top of its list of potentially disposable records.[4]

These recommendations are based on a number of debatable assumptions that, while they range far beyond this paper, deserve brief mention. Advocates of large-scale destruction of congressional collections, including casework records, rely on several justifications for their position: (1) reduced size will relieve an increasing burden on storage facilities; (2) reduced size will free archival staffs for more important tasks, particularly meeting the research demand for other kinds of historical documentation than those contained in congressional collections; (3) in decreasing collection volume, archivists will encourage research use by enhancing access to information, thereby remedying the problem of under-utilization; and (4) archivists have a professional responsibility to dispose of records of little or no apparent individual value.

Whether or not one agrees with these assumptions, and there is reason to dispute them, it is clear that they all figure in the proper

appraisal of congressional case files. To narrow the element of error in prophecy, and in light of the increasingly popular justifications for disposal, archivists must then answer this question: what research purposes can the information in case files serve?

In a basic sense, congressional case files shed light on the nature of representative democracy in modern times. They document the confluence of three prevalent government-related activities: individual citizen appeal, congressional action on behalf of a constituent, and bureaucratic response. From this three-fold perspective comes many of their research values.

On an individual basis, case files are really aggregate records of constituents whose correspondence is preserved because they relied on the federal government to meet some personal need. Their petitions, letters, and forms indicate citizens' attitudes about government and tell the congressman who wants what and how badly. Often case work records reveal many socio-economic variables for individuals, which can be manipulated in the aggregate to reach generalizations about citizen demands on government. The files may tell something about what makes a constituent seek government assistance, how the nature of constituent demands changes, and whether or not they vary by type of constituent, by geographical unit, by incumbent, or by another variable. Case records can demonstrate how well government, from the individual's perspective, serves the people. They may document cooperation or frustration, indifference or sensitivity, responsiveness or alienation. Recent studies in political science, especially the work on home districts by Richard Fenno, have demonstrated conclusively the need to understand the citizen's perception of government service as it relates to Congress' image.[5]

Case files also reveal much about the operation of congressional offices. Increasingly specialized and bureaucratic in their own right, the offices assign different priorities to case work. The level at which staff members handle these files indicates the importance the incumbent places upon case work. The process of appeal indicates which constituent complaints or requests are considered most important, for it reflects those for which the congressman fights the hardest. Consequently, these documents disclose information about the twin, competing, and sometimes contradictory roles a legislator fills: constituent service versus constituent representation. Does the representative or senator place a higher priority on constituent services or

on fundamental issues? Is he more interested in molding policy at its origin or in making it work for the district after it is implemented? How effective is he in the service of his constituents? At what point does neglect of one role jeopardize the other by bringing the incumbent's career to an end? And do these factors vary over time, by individual, by constituent group, or by district?

Since the quality of congressional service seems to be of growing importance to voters, how well an incumbent performs, judged in part by data in his case files, may even indicate whether or not Congress is suited for the ombudsman role. In the words of Senate Majority Whip Alan Cranston, "...if we fail to respond to the desires of constitutents, we don't get re-elected. So in self-interest, we have to watch the mail. We have to help constituents solve their problems...."[6]

Finally, case files hint at the characteristics of bureaucratic administration. By examining the treatment individuals receive, one can determine at what level, if any, the bureaucracy resolves problems and how responsive and effective it is, and can detect patterns of conflict or inconsistency within the government as different agencies handle the same problems differently or as the same agency varies its treatment. In this way, research into the bureaucratic response to individual needs may also help address the question of whether or not large organizations rationalize behavior or merely make it more irrational.

A continuous flow of communication from constituents to individual representatives and senators makes it possible for members of Congress to monitor the delivery of services from bureaucracies to the public. Although most members may pay little attention to the daily flow of constituent casework, the information is always there. A flash flood of complaints about the Veterans Administration or the Marine Corps or the Social Security Administration may well pique the interest of an incumbent in ways that an ordinary rainfall of complaints would not. In the words of political scientist Nelson W. Polsby, "some people would argue that this continuous flow of intelligence constitutes a significant bulwark of the plain citizen against the growth of arbitrariness in the federal bureaucracy, and thus in a sense the humble casework of a congressman provides an informational basis for the exercise of the central congressional responsibility of checking and balancing the Executive Branch."[7]

The congressional case file is a unique repository of information on all these questions, if only because information gathering is tied to the

mainstream of Congress' organizational life. It would be impossible to glean the same data from individual collections of papers because nowhere else are such files kept in a consolidated form. The official records of executive departments, such as the Veterans Administration or the Immigration Service, divide case files by agency, and many are in machine-readable format, restricted indefinitely, or otherwise of limited availability. The congressional office is the point at which individual need meets government response. One may be able to study other aspects of Congress or the federal bureaucracy from different sources, but these case files are repositories of unique information in their own right.

A closer look at specific types of cases demonstrates more clearly their potential use. What value does correspondence about disability, discharge status, death benefits, and home loans in veterans' case files have? In the aggregate, it shows what veterans expect from government and how well government responds. Congressional veterans' files represent a special subset of veterans' claims, largely from people frustrated by normal bureaucratic channels and forced to appeal through the political mechanism of a congressman's office. Who are they, why do they turn to Congress, and with what results? Are the claims of Vietnam veterans unusual in volume or character, for example, and what are the larger implications of an affirmative finding? Are some congressmen more effective spokesmen in their constituent service role than others, and why? Does effectiveness vary by party affiliation, service on military affairs committees, personal contacts in the executive branch, or closeness to re-election? What impact does the Veterans Administration have on veterans and is it consistent with legislative intent? These questions and many others require the kind of evidence preserved in military and veterans' case files.

Immigration records provide useful information about citizenship, immigration procedures, deportation, private relief legislation, the impact of changes in immigration law, refugee problems, student exchange programs, and the political influence of organized ethnic groups in a member's district or state. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that future case files will supply invaluable socio-economic and political data about the influx of Vietnamese refugees or Spanish-Americans through their requests for immigration-related services.

The variety of other individual case files promises similar rewards for the diligent and resourceful researcher. Military academy applica-

tions give some sense of the backgrounds and expectations of the nation's future military leaders. The differences between those who are accepted and those who are refused could be a topic of interest. Selective service cases likewise bear upon the social composition of today's armed forces. The range and depth of enlisted mens' attitudes toward military service emerges repeatedly in these records.

Social security files give insights into the problems of the aged, the impact of inflation upon fixed incomes, social distress and government action, and the qualities of the welfare state bureaucracy. Civil service and patronage files also contain social history and include the political component more directly than do other case files. Here can be seen, sometimes with embarrassing clarity, what political debts are owed to whom and how home state politics can lay claim to a congressmen's attention. Patronage politics has long fascinated historians of the 19th century, and there is no reason to assume that such questions will not continue to stimulate research.

There is, then, a reasonable case to be made for retaining congressional case files because of their potential research value. This may be and perhaps should be debatable, but these records do reveal much of importance about American society. The remaining perplexity is how to make these valuable documents useful in the face of the privacy issue, growing and competing demands upon our space and time, and current under-utilization of analogous records.

Some of the answers are remarkable if only for their commonness, but they bear repeating. Archivists must present records in a form useful to researchers. Proper arrangement and description are the fundamental keys to stimulating the use of any collection. Congressional case files typically pose few problems of arrangement, since they are already organized by subject and by a convenient case unit, the individual. Incidentally, the case unit is readily susceptible to computer manipulation. Descriptions need not be unusual or complex. It is helpful, though, to provide quantitative measures of the file and to describe the profile of information available. Publicity and promotion of the repository also help stimulate use.

The privacy issue undoubtedly poses the most serious difficulties for records administrators and potential users, as well as for the donors of the records, who understandably wish to guard their confidential relationship with the constituent. However, this may not be an insurmountable problem even in the short run.

Sociologists, for example, have developed one way to conduct research in confidential case files. In working with patient records at mental hospitals, researchers simply assign dummy variables to each case unit and then excise names either through quantitative methods or by editing. Archivists might have to check a researcher's notes to see that he or she abides by rules to protect confidentiality, but this should not be an absolute hardship. This is only one example of a way to permit use of materials while protecting individual privacy. Reasonable blanket restrictions that lapse after a specified period of time have been used successfully with other kinds of sensitive records. Both methods offer potential users access to congressional case files without imposing insufferable burdens upon anyone.

Finally, a broader and more demanding way to encourage research use of case files is to ensure that enough of the papers remain to provide a reliable documentary record. This observation, of course, relates back to the matter of appraisal. The advent of quantitative research methodology has opened new avenues of exploration in a variety of previously neglected documents, such as labor grievance records and army personnel files. In many cases, these records closely resemble the congressional case file in information and organization.

There is reason to expect that the research community will respond to the existence of these records and will make use of them. A variety of factors that have little to do with the intrinsic worth of congressional collections presently restricts use and inhibits research. These include lack of access to contemporary government archives, donor-imposed restrictions on private collections, and the lack of appropriate research methodologies. But there are signs of change. As time passes, restrictions on related collections lapse. As government influence grows, research interest in it increases. Organizational history and bureaucratic models in political science abound, each requiring empirical verification.

Perhaps most important of all in forecasting future use is to realize that the modern Congress has assumed a prominent role in American life. It is bigger than ever before, more complex, more expensive, commands more resources, employs larger staffs, creates more laws and regulations, and, as a result, invites growing comment and criticism. Because representative government starts with the legislative branch, citizens and scholars alike have an enduring interest in Congress. To understand it requires the preservation of its documentary record, including congressional case files.

Some will justifiably disagree with this estimate of the potential value and usefulness of congressional case files. In a majority of cases today, appraisal decisions probably rest on more than the functional, evidential, and information value of records. Demonstration of value and usefulness no longer guarantees retention and preservation. Many institutions find it difficult to employ traditional appraisal standards because of limited resources and conflicting priorities and research demands. In many instances, these latter considerations have come to dominate the assessment of research value, and perhaps have distorted an evaluation of the potential use of records.

It may be that to preserve records such as congressional case files, archivists must forsake the single-institution approach to appraisal. To summon the necessary resources may require cooperation among repositories. Organizations that cannot manage congressional case files or that lack the appropriate research clientele should not accept such collections. Regional archival centers might be able to administer these collections more professionally.

The precise method of case file appraisal is part of the larger problem of managing large political collections.[8] Uniform standards are impractical because collections and institutions and research needs vary widely. It is healthy that practices vary; such a system allows experimentation, independent thought, challenges, and professional development. The lack of definitive answers to appraisal issues is not a sign of unconcern or inefficiency. It signals flexibility and imagination. Even if the task of prophecy with regard to potential use becomes easier, the challenge of preserving the record remains with us.

FOOTNOTES

1. G. Philip Bauer, "The Appraisal of Current and Recent Records," National Archives Staff Information Circular No. 13 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1946), p. 5.
2. Frank B. Evans *et al.* define "case file" as "a folder or other file unit containing material relating to a specific action, event, person, place, project, or other subject." Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison, Edwin A. Thompson, and William K. Rofes, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 418.
3. J. Stanley Kimmitt and Richard A. Baker, eds., *Conference on the Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers: Proceedings* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, 1979), pp. 3-5.
4. Kimmitt and Baker, *Senators' Papers*, p. 177.
5. Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978).
6. Time Inc., *The Role of Congress II: A Study of the Legislative Branch* (New York: Time Inc., 1975), p. 71.
7. Nelson W. Polsby, "Does Congress Know Enough to Legislate for the Nation?" Time Inc., *The Role of Congress: A Study of the Legislative Branch* (New York: Time Inc., 1973), p. 34.
8. Kimmitt and Baker, *Senators' Papers*, constitutes one of the most useful single sources of information on the challenges of collecting, preserving, processing, and using large political collections.