The History Professional

An Interview with Stephen P. Randolph

Dr. Stephen P. Randolph responded to these interview questions shortly before retiring as The Historian of the Department of State, a position he held from 2012 until 2017. He previously served the Department of State’s Office of the Historian as General Editor of the Foreign Relations of the United States series in 2011, and served as a faculty member, department chair, and Associate Dean consecutively at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, from 1997 until 2011. Dr. Randolph graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1974, and served twenty-seven years on active duty in the Air Force, retiring as a colonel in 2001. He earned a master’s degree in the History of Science from the Johns Hopkins University in 1975, and a Doctorate in History from the George Washington University in 2005.

Interview by Thomas Faith

When you accepted the position of Historian of the Department of State six years ago, what did you hope you would be able to accomplish?

My objectives were both personal and institutional. From a personal perspective, I had been on the faculty at the National Defense University for nearly fifteen years in a number of leadership positions. I wanted a new set of experiences and opportunities, and to continue growing.

During the hiring process, I had two opportunities to meet with the members of the Office en masse, and in those conversations I gained a fairly clear idea of what needed to be done. We needed to develop a program to move our Foreign Relations publishing rate back toward the 30-year timeline directed by law. We needed to rebuild the institutional relationships that are integral to our work—within the Department, with our Historical Advisory Committee (HAC), with the community of government history programs, across the interagency policy community, and with our stakeholders in the academic community. We needed to focus on internal team building and collaboration, and begin our preparation for next-generation challenges in documentation, declassification, and publication of our work.

The 2009 OIG Review of the Office of the Historian characterized employee morale as exceedingly low before your arrival. How did you work to improve things?

I had two great advantages going in. First, over the previous three years, Acting Historians Ambassador John Campbell and Ambassador Ed Brynn had led the office masterfully, and had begun the recovery from the low point in 2009. Second, the Ambassador Ed Brynn had led the office masterfully, and had begun the recovery from the low point in 2009. Second, the office, and we kept our members up-to-date on developments with recurrent emails on the situation and the plans being developed.

It seems odd to say about a fire and flood situation, but it all worked out to the lasting advantage of the Office. Our quarters in Columbia Plaza were crowded and visibly aging; the evacuation and recovery gave us an opportunity to paint the space and reduce the clutter, leaving us with a much better work environment during the last year and a half there. During the whole sequence,
we worked closely with the Department’s Real Property Maintenance (RPM) professionals, building close relationships that have been important to the Office ever since. And I think it was an important moment for the Office as we faced a very complicated situation and managed it effectively. Even the nature of the flooding worked out for the best: the water cascaded into the area of the Office where we worked on classified material, so our work was all locked up in safes when the flood occurred. If the flood had hit the other side of the Office, it would have been a real disaster for us.

How did you maintain a productive working relationship with the Office of the Historian’s independent advisory board, the HAC?

That was very easy, given the members and the goals of the Advisory Committee. I always assumed that the HAC and our office had exactly the same objective: to build and sustain a productive program for publishing the Foreign Relations of the United States series. I wanted them to have all the information that was available to me, so that they could form clear judgments of our work. The Chairman of the HAC, Dr. Richard Immerman, and I talked frequently so we could exchange views and I could keep him updated on the state of the Office; and over time we developed preparatory material for our quarterly meetings capturing every aspect of the work of the office. Over time the relationship broadened and we conducted two professional development field trips, visits to the Gettysburg and Antietam battlefields, which I had studied during my time at NDU.

Our goal was always to enable the HAC to execute its statutory responsibilities, and to go beyond oversight of our program to become advocates for us, and conduits to the broader academic community. That came about very quickly, and has been immensely important for our program.

How can the Office of the Historian continue to engage academic and public audiences about the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series in the 21st Century?

Our digital development program is our major line of action toward that requirement, and I have been an avid proponent of that work since I got to the Office of the Historian. We have undertaken a multi-year program to publish both our new Foreign Relations volumes, and the back catalog extending back to 1861, on our website (https://history.state.gov), along with eleven different data sets on the history of the State Department and U.S. diplomacy. We have executed the back catalog program through a series of quarterly releases, about 16-20 volumes per quarter, timed for the arrival of our quarterly HAC meetings. This past release took us into the 19th century, and we expect to finish publishing the complete Foreign Relations corpus by the end of 2018. Beyond that, we have a five-year plan for publishing diplomatic documents back to the origin of the Republic. The Foreign Relations digital archive now includes over 270,000 documents, all in a single unified searchable database. And last year we had 7.5 million individual visits to our website, a number that continues to grow year after year.

Beyond this enormous content and reach, we have paid constant attention to the technical development of our website. Just last week we incorporated a chronological search capability into our search engine, and it basically revolutionized our use of the online archive.

The brief description of our program above does not do justice to the complexity of the effort: from conceptualizing the overall structure and objectives of the digital program, to working through the administrative requirements, to establishing a production process that routinely processes thousands of documents every quarter. It is really a testament to so many members of the Office who have combined the vision, the perseverance, and the administrative and technical skills to enable these extraordinary achievements.

In your career experience, what are the main challenges of government transparency?

During my tenure, the greatest challenge has been declassification, with the agencies responsible for conducting declassification reviews just overwhelmed with the volume of material to be reviewed. That mismatch between capacity and requirements is continuing to grow. There are technical developments in progress that are imperatively important in addressing this situation, but there are serious obstacles to fielding these capabilities across the agencies involved—culture, priorities, processes, and money.

We are getting into the era of emails in our work now on the Reagan Administration, and I think the challenges for transparency will grow tremendously due to email, which poses one problem after another, all through the records management process: capture, retention, declassification, and search.

How did you promote cooperation among the FRUS series’ key interagency stakeholders?

One of the special aspects of the work of the Office of the Historian is that we operate daily within a community of communities in producing our work. The Foreign Relations series is established in law as a government-wide program under the leadership of the State Department. We depend on agencies across the government for access to the documentation, and for declassification of the documents.

There is inherent tension built into the system as we seek to open as much of the record as we can to the American people, and as we seek the right balance between transparency and security with our declassification partners. I would cite three approaches as critical. First, I have found it essential to meet with our counterparts in other agencies on an as regular a basis as our schedules permit, in order to build individual trust across agency boundaries. Second, we always prepare carefully for those meetings, especially with respect to ongoing declassification status, so we can engage in a fact-based discussion. Third, both during
my tenure and with my predecessors, we found it very important to build administrative bridges between our programs. The best example is our agreement with the CIA, which provides for a joint historian working both for the CIA and for the State Department. It is an ingenious and creative measure that has been extremely important in our work.

You oversaw the declassification and publication of two of the most anticipated FRUS volumes in recent history—Congo, 1960-1968, and Iran, 1951-1954. What considerations should federal history professionals make when dealing with controversial subject matters?

In these cases, there were both foreign policy-based and intelligence sensitivities that had to be accounted for in declassification and publishing the volumes. The first lesson is to be patient. Both of these volumes took decades to research, compile, declassify, and publish. The second lesson is to be persistent. We, our Advisory Committee, and our leaders in the Bureau of Public Affairs were all tireless in seeking opportunities to publish the volumes. The third lesson from my time here is that when we do publish these sensitive volumes, the reaction overseas is one of matter-of-fact acceptance and gratitude that we have brought this historical information into the light.

What are the biggest lessons you learned in providing useful historical policy support to decision makers?

Policy support is among the special aspects of a government history program, as we place our expertise as historians directly into the service of the Department. We consider this among our major missions in the Office, and when necessary we mobilize anyone in the Office, regardless of their ongoing assignment, to support our response. It’s an area in which the State Department’s approach to organizing its history program pays off very well: all of the Department’s historical expertise is concentrated here in the Office of the Historian, so we have incredible depth and breadth of background here, enabling us to respond quickly and capably to any historical question that might arise. It is a good change of pace for our Foreign Relations compilers, to use a different set of skills and to play directly in the policy process.

We have learned, or more accurately re-learned, some lessons in executing this mission. First, the policy makers in the Department are inherently receptive to historical background; the hard part is to connect our expertise with the policy makers. Our structural approach has been to organize our policy support historians in alignment with the regional bureaus, and they work hard to build and sustain relationships with the relevant policy makers, against the handicaps of frequent rotations and full schedules. Our intent is to know the work of the bureaus well enough to anticipate their requirements for historical background.

Second, we have found the policy community to be appreciative of our skills, and completely accepting of the importance of historical professionalism and integrity in our work.

Third, this is an area where we need to be alert and adaptive to meet the needs of the policy community as they arise. Over this past year, for example, we have had much more demand for institutional history than ever before, especially with respect to historical efforts at strategic planning, budgeting, and organization. That remains an ongoing area of emphasis, in which we are providing a full range of support: the narrative history, analysis, and access to key primary documentation as appropriate.

Overall, this has been a major line of action for the Office, and a real success story. While there is always more to be done, we have provided a constant stream of timely, relevant background for the policy makers, and fully met our responsibilities as government historians.

The Office of the Historian moved to a new physical location under your direction. What advice would you offer to other offices contemplating the same challenge?

My office organized a working group of five historians to work with the GSA and the Real Property Maintenance (RPM) office in the State Department, who were responsible for reconstructing the building on Navy Hill that had been allocated for our use. That working group was in constant communication with everyone involved in the design and construction, making sure the new office space would meet our requirements. That close communication was invaluable on all fronts—first in ensuring that we had thought through our requirements carefully, and then in working with GSA, RPM, and the contractors to ensure that our requirements were embedded in the planning. It also had the effect of creating an atmosphere of trust and easy communication between our office and those preparing our new home. It was a massive undertaking, transforming a building built in the early 1900s as the nurses’ quarters for the Washington Naval Hospital into a modern workspace.

Our move into our new quarters was one of the brightest memories of my tenure. The working group had done a meticulous job planning out the logistics of the move, getting about 50 people relocated into our new space and moving securely about 140 safes of classified material. Everyone pitched in, and we executed this massive effort without any loss of productivity in our primary mission. It was something to see.

It took about two years of constant planning and coordination to prepare for the move, but it has proven to be worth all that and more. Our facility here on Navy Hill has transformed our work environment and multiplied our productivity. It is a beautiful, efficient, and historic space, perfect for our work.

What do you believe you will miss most after you leave your current position?

That one’s very easy. I will miss the people with whom I have been privileged to work.