Morgan R. Davis, University of Kansas

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, American forces captured 43,000 boxes of government documents and thousands of hours of previously unknown audio recordings. This landmark research collection at National Defense University was the topic of the 2011 Dole Institute Archive Visiting Fellowship at the University of Kansas.

Records documenting the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and records from Afghanistan documenting Al-Qaeda and related organizations are housed at the Collections at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC). Of particular note are audio recordings of high-level meetings among Saddam Hussein and his generals and advisors.

Records Treatment

Visiting Fellow David Palkki, deputy director of the CRRC, explained how the material came into U.S. possession. Warning: Graphic mishandling of documents may be disturbing to archivists. "Often you'll have a 21- or 22-year-old GI over there collecting the stuff and putting it all in the back of a truck," says Palkki. "So things aren't done ideally the way archivists or historians would want. There are a lot of unanswered questions."

Palkki related a second-hand account of soldiers opening a safe full of documents by dropping it off the top of a building. In most instances there is less-than-ideal documentation of context. He says, "You get recordings that say they came from a building, but there were a lot of rooms in that building and there were a lot of desks in that building."

Although the methods of capture may draw gasps from archivists, the importance of seizing records during periods of conflict is obvious. Palkki made a comparison to recent events in Egypt, where a mysterious fire at the Interior Ministry building is widely speculated to have been set to destroy files of the secret police.

"The Egyptian people in the street are furious because they heard about the destruction of records," Palkki says. "So you can see right away, the same thing has happened in Iraq. When U.S. troops went into the Ministry of Defense there were a couple of floors worth of documents that were fire bombed, and the Iraqis didn't want the coalition troops to get them. I think it was really important at the time for U.S. troops to get these records out of Iraq to preserve them so they won't be destroyed."

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U.S. Transaction

Copies of documents and recordings were brought back to the United States for analysis by the CIA and other government agencies. They looked for strategic and tactical information, including any information relating to weapons of mass destruction. Documents and recordings were digitized at that point and stored in a secure governmental database.

In 2008, under pressure from congressional Republicans who believed document analysis was proceeding too slowly, the Bush administration authorized the release of 11,000 records to the public through a website called "Operation Iraqi Freedom Document Portal." Although the online documents were subject to a triage review process, which included a quick examination by Arabic linguists (the specifics of the review process remain classified), it was discovered that they included documents on the fabrications of nuclear devices. The document portal was shut down after less than a year of being online.

The scholarly value of these records beyond national security interests was brought forward in 2008 by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates when he called for the creation of a research center that would make copies of captured materials available to the public. In a speech to the American Association of Universities, Gates said, "To date only a small number of documents have been exploited. Further research could yield unprecedented insight into the workings of..."
dictatorial third-world regimes. We cannot fully realize the value of these resources unless we find some way of making them publicly available.”

**Protecting the People**

The problem with making the documents available online was already evident and remains one of the major challenges of the CRRC. From its inception, the center put great care into protecting people who may be mentioned in the records and preventing release of dangerous information. Categories of screening criteria are used to determine which records will be made available. For example, only those Iraqi records that were created prior to the 2003 invasion are available; anything from the occupation period is not accessible.

The CRRC also screens for classified information and personally identifiable information that could be potentially harmful, such as the names of Kuwaiti collaborators. The process is slow-going and is further hindered by the paucity of Arabic translators and the cost of translation services. The researcher database at CRRC makes English translations available to the public as well as digital copies of Arabic originals and audio files.

Documenting authenticity is another part of the review process at CRRC. Although forged documents from Iraq do exist, they do not comprise a large portion of the captured records. The center works with document experts on suspected forgeries and CRRC staff enters no known forgeries into the database.

**Another Perspective**

Materials in the researcher database provide a perspective on events much different from what researchers are able to find in American declassified documents. On February 24, 1991, U.S. ground forces began the liberation of Kuwait, and there were three recordings made that day in the office of Saddam Hussein in which the events unfold minute by minute. One section of the transcript describes the burning of Kuwaiti oil wells:

**Saddam Hussein: Does our artillery have enough range?**

**Sahir: Yes, it does, Sir. And today, the weather was on our side, thank God. They were not able to fly, the weather was too bad.**

**Saddam Hussein: What about the oil fields? Have we set them all on fire?**

**Sahir: Yes, Sir. They were set on fire. Yesterday they announced that these 350 km long black clouds were obstructing their ability to fly sorties.**

President Bush called the burning of the oil wells a scorched-earth policy, and this was one of his justifications in ending negotiations with Iraq. However, the transcripts reveal something entirely different, according to Palkki.

“Saddam, it turns out, actually pre-delegated authority to burn the wells. He actually wasn’t even the one who issued the order at the time. He gave the order to commanders, apparently, to burn the oil wells not as a scorched-earth policy, but to create clouds of smoke that would make it harder for coalition planes to hit Iraqi targets,” Palkki says.

Other recordings in the center indicate the mindset of Saddam Hussein and his opinions of the United States. In an article in the *Journal of Diplomatic History*, Palkki describes the Iraqi leader as paranoid, believing that the United States was behind the Iranian revolution in the 1970s and, later, in the 1980s, believing that the United States was trying to assassinate him.

Still other recordings show a different side of Saddam Hussein. Following the invasion of Kuwait, he called his advisors together...
Lessons Learned

Many academic archives house rich collections that document historical periods of campus unrest. A broad spectrum of student dissent remains woven within the fabric of campus culture even today. Although the documentation of the Sodexco protests by the Emory University Archives was ultimately successful, the process was essentially ad hoc, which only reaffirms the need for college and university archivists to establish a consistent set of criteria for archiving campus protests and demonstrations.

The Emory experience suggests that archivists documenting student dissent or other campus controversies (whether via targeted Web crawls or by more traditional means) should be guided by the following principles:

- Develop meaningful dialogues with the various constituencies on campus (students, faculty, administrators, and staff) as a matter of policy, so that potentially important relationships are in place prior to a contentious event. Establish communications with “unofficial” student groups—like SWS at Emory.
- Be familiar with the resources, whether technological or personnel-related, that the archives has at its disposal. When documenting student protests in the digital age, timeliness is crucial.
- During and immediately after a campus event, seek balance among the different types of donors who are contacted and aim for a variety of perspectives, including those of students, faculty, and administrators, in addition to the protestors themselves.
- Archivists should strive to keep abreast of potential developments and campus controversies. The archivist in the 21st century needs to keep an ear to the ground and be willing to move quickly.

Documenting Captured Records

and asked for a discussion of what their next move should be. The proposals were far ranging and widely different. "I kind of thought that Saddam was Iraq, Iraq was Saddam. That's a common phrase that people used to say," Falkki notes.

Future Development

The CRCC plans to continue to build the research database, increase the number of documents made available, and begin an oral history program. The center is exploring the possibility of obtaining new collections outside of the records of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Saddam's Iraq.

"A lot of people have asked us, where are those records that were captured in Panama?" says Falkki. "I've found very different answers, ranging from they were left in a couple of vans in Southern Florida and everything was destroyed to hearing that they remain in a basement somewhere."

In the war on terror, primary source documents are instrumental in understanding political regimes and institutions.