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American Historical Association

November 28, 2008

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, D.C.

Dear Secretary of State Rice:

Foreign Relations of the United States Documentary Series

Fully conscious of the serious nature of the issues raised in this letter, I must write to you about the future of the Foreign Relations series and of the related issues of plummeting morale and mismanagement within the Office of the Historian. I have served on the oversight body of the series, the Historical Advisory Committee, for nearly ten years, five of them as chairman. I am a past President of the American Historical Association. Along with all other members of the advisory committee, I am guided by the Congressional mandate to ensure that the Foreign Relations series represents a trustworthy, full, and honest documentary record. In our judgment, the prospective fate of the series has now become so grave that it would be a failure of responsibility on my part were I not to call it to your attention.

The significance of the Foreign Relations series can be summed up by stating that, as required by Congressional legislation (Public Law 102-138), it provides the public, both here and throughout the world, with a thorough, accurate, and reliable documentary account of US foreign policy. Members of Congress, government officials, scholars, journalists, and interested citizens depend on the timely appearance of the series for an understanding of the course of American foreign affairs. This historic mission is now in danger, and, for reasons I shall explain at the end, there is a certain urgency to this letter.

My concern, along with that of all members of the committee, arises from mismanagement by the Historian himself, Dr. Marc Susser. So large are the numbers of staff members leaving, or contemplating departure, that the integrity of the Foreign Relations series is now in jeopardy. To give you a rough idea of the extent of the problem, 15 historians or compilers in a staff of about 35 have left in the last three years during Dr. Susser's tenure.

Let me list and explain the nature of the evidence I am presenting to you, then I shall give you the conclusions I draw from the testimony.

Attachment 1. A memorandum by the former General Editor, Edward Keefer, who served in the Historian's Office for 35 years, 33 of them on the Foreign Relations series, until he felt obliged to resign in August of this year in protest against office mismanagement and the probable deterioration of the series. Dr. Keefer is held in highest esteem by all members of the committee. He dedicated his career to the Foreign Relations series and has upheld the highest documentary standards. His statement is perhaps the single most important part of the evidence.

Attachment 2. A memorandum by Thomas Schwartz of Vanderbilt University, a member of the committee until a few weeks ago when his appointment was not renewed by Dr. Susser. Professor Schwartz is the President of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. It is virtually unprecedented for an appointment not to be renewed for another term when the chairman and other members of the committee support reappointment.

Attachment 3. Anonymous testimony by twelve members of the staff, past and present, their reasons in some cases for leaving the Office of the Historian, in other cases their assessment of the present problems. The statements have been submitted individually at my request. I attest to the honesty and general accuracy of the testimony.

Attachment 4. A comparative statistical study of staff attrition, and the reasons, under the last two Historians, William Slany (1993 - 2000) and Marc Susser (2001 to present).

From the evidence, I draw the following conclusions. Cumulatively what strikes the reader about the testimony is not only the honesty but also the overwhelming consensus of judgment. The members of the staff who have submitted statements are dedicated, hard-working, and skilled historians, but they have been driven to the point of despair. The Historian's Office has become an intolerable place to work; the exodus of experienced historians is significant; and the future of the Foreign Relations series is at risk. Compiling the volumes is a unique endeavor. It takes many years to train an historian to judge the significance of documents, to determine which ones should be included in the collection, and to acquire the necessary skills to edit and comment. At the present rate of attrition, the Foreign Relations series faces as grave a crisis as at any time in its history.

The urgency I mentioned at the beginning of the letter has to do with the appointment of the next General Editor. The General Editor should have intellectual qualifications as well as the temperament of an acknowledged, even-handed leader. In any event he or she must have the respect of academic and professional colleagues and have both the experience and the skills to manage a complex operation of editing and publishing.

In emphasizing the crucial role of the General Editor, let me also briefly mention the role he or she plays in supervising another critical mission of the Historian's Office, that of declassification. Part of the charge of the Congressional mandate is to facilitate public access to records that are 25 years or older from the date of issue and to publish the Foreign Relations

volumes roughly within a 30 year period. These deadlines in turn put pressure on other agencies to review records for declassification. The General Editor thus fires the engine of declassification throughout the entire federal government.

I have two recommendations:

(1) a thorough and comprehensive general review of the leadership and management of the Historian's Office, conducted by a panel to be led by an independent, impartial, external organization with impeccable credentials, such as the Social Science Research Council, the National Academy of Public Administration, or the National Academy of Sciences. The panel should include representatives from at least three of the following professional associations from which the Historical Advisory Committee draws its membership: the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the Society of American Archivists, and the American Society of International Law.

We request that such a review be set in motion before you leave office.

(2) major actions to be frozen pending the outcome of that review, particularly the appointment of new members of the Historical Advisory Committee and the hiring of a new General Editor of the Series.

The rationale behind the two recommendations is that the Historian has lost the confidence of the Historical Advisory Committee and thus it is necessary to appoint an independent review panel with unimpeachable qualifications; second, this is a critical time because the transition to the new administration could mean that much time might be lost, to the detriment of the quality of the series. You will recall the meeting you convened with members of the committee. I thus know of your commitment and dedication to the Foreign Relations series. Therefore my appeal to you to take action before the end of your tenure in office.

I'll close with a word on the general significance of the issue at stake and why such action seems necessary to members of the committee. The Foreign Relations series is a continuous record of US diplomacy since 1861. It is regarded throughout the world as a model of its kind, indispensable to the American public, the Congress, and above all the Department of State itself. It is a tribute to the US Government that such an accurate and comprehensive series exists. In short, the Foreign Relations series stands as a symbol of commitment to openness and accountability. It would be no less than a tragedy to allow the series to falter or decline.

Sincerely yours,

Wm. Roger Louis
Chairman, Advisory Committee on Historical
Diplomatic Documentation

I would like to make a comment as a chairman whose tenure has come to an end, and my statement will followed by two other comments by members of the committee who have requested to speak before the election of the new chairman. My statement consists of a letter I have written to the Secretary of State, and by reading it I am making it a public document. Although I take responsibility for the letter, it represents the views of the entire committee and I speak for all of us as well as myself. It is written on the letterhead of the American Historical Association because I am the AHA's delegate to the committee.
