

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG president and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and SHFG's mission. Bill Williams served as chief of the Center for Cryptologic History (CCH) at the National Security Agency (NSA), Fort Meade, Maryland, from October 2002 through October 2016. He delivered the Trask Lecture at Fort Meade on October 2, 2020.

Federal History and Me: A Story

Bill Williams

Good Morning. My name is Bill Williams, and I was scheduled to present the Roger Trask Lecture, on March 14, 2020, at the annual conference of the Society for History in the Federal Government (SHFG) in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Unfortunately, the Coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of the conference, so I'm presenting the lecture today, on October 2, in an auditorium at Fort Meade, Maryland. There's a small audience, appropriately social distanced, that includes several current and former SHFG members.



Bill Williams.

Due to the pandemic, there have been numerous impacts on federal history offices, and that's certainly been true for the Center for Cryptologic History, which I'll be discussing today. I have not revised my presentation to reflect these changes. Instead, I'm going to ask you to do what historians have always had to do—imagine living in the past. I'll ask you to pretend it is March 2020, a few days before the pandemic shut down the SHFG conference. If you can do that, all of the statements in my lecture will be true. The impact of the pandemic on federal history programs is another important story, but I will not be addressing that in this lecture. That history will have to be written in the future.

Let me begin by saying that it's difficult to tell you how honored I am to be chosen to present this year's Trask Lecture. I didn't know Roger Trask personally, but I am inspired by what he, and the other founders of SHFG, accomplished in their efforts to preserve the independence of the National Archives and promote the importance of federal history programs. To have my name associated with Roger Trask and his colleagues is a humbling experience.

The title of my talk today is "Federal History and Me: A Story." The most important word in this title is "Story," for that is what good history is about: telling stories, as honestly and objectively as possible, about the past.

Unfortunately, the "story" part of history is lost in the way history has often been taught in our schools. Students are presented names, dates, and events that need to be memorized, and then their memorization of this stuff is measured with a multiple-choice test. Students, quite logically, question how this contributes in any way to their education or what value it has for anything they will do during their life. The answer is simple: this type of history is a waste of time.

What makes history come alive is a well-told story, and that's what led to my passion for history. I'm not sure when that passion began, but it was there by the time I was in the sixth grade. And it surged when I visited a national park.

I grew up just north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the 1950s and 1960s. As a young boy, I liked the exciting, but fictional, history portrayed in the cowboy shows on television. My father was not a historian, but he was interested in the Civil War, and with the centennial of that conflict approaching, he took our family to visit Gettysburg. When I saw the statues there, with men on horseback wearing what appeared to be cowboy hats, I was mesmerized. I was only 9 or 10 years old, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to know the story behind what happened at Gettysburg.

And so, I got hooked on history, thanks, in large part, to a national park and America's Civil War centennial. My engagement with federal history thus started at an early age.

My passion for history led me to choose it as my major at Kenyon College, in Ohio, where I was also in the Air Force ROTC program. After graduation, I was commissioned as an officer. I then spent four years in the Air Force working with radars, a job for which I had little aptitude. In 1975, I resigned my commission to follow my dream—getting a Ph.D. and becoming a history professor.

I began my graduate program at the University of Washington in Seattle and soon met folks a lot smarter than me, who already had a Ph.D. in history, but who were painting houses for a living. I realized I needed to reevaluate my goals.

I decided to stop my history program at the master's degree level, and then worked on getting certified as an archivist at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. Once that happened, I began to look for a job but didn't find anything quickly.

Then, I got a letter from the Air Force. There was an officer recall program underway that offered me an opportunity to reenter the military not as a radar operator but as an intelligence analyst. With no promising job prospects as an archivist, I rejoined the Air Force.

In my new career field, I discovered the skills I learned as a historian—how to do research, how to analyze evidence, and how to communicate my findings both orally and in writing—were exactly the skills needed to be an intelligence analyst. I could not imagine better preparation for becoming an intelligence officer than majoring in history.

My first assignments in the intelligence career field were in Colorado and then Korea. Because I had a master's degree in history, I was contacted during this time by the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs—which then had an all-military faculty—to see if I might be interested in joining the history department. I applied for the position, was accepted, and joined the faculty when my assignment to Korea ended in 1985.

In a strange way, my dream had come true. I was now teaching history at the college level. It was an exciting time, and I enjoyed every part of the job (except, sometimes, grading cadet papers).

After two years, the Academy offered me the opportunity to earn a Ph.D. in history. The good news was that the Air Force paid for my tuition and my salary as an officer. The bad news was that I only had two-and-a-half years to get the doctorate degree, which wasn't much time. I returned to the University of Washington, passed my field exams, and turned my master's thesis (on the mobilization of the shipbuilding industry in the United States during World War I) into a Ph.D. dissertation by doing extensive research at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC.

I returned to the Air Force Academy in 1989 and spent the next five years there. In addition to teaching, I picked up administrative duties and eventually became the history department's deputy head.

I was given the opportunity to spend the rest of my military career at the Academy, but I decided to return to the line of the Air Force as an intelligence officer. With my teaching responsibilities, administrative tasks, and other Academy-related commitments, I was working 60 hours a week or more. To be honest, I was a bit burned-out.

I knew that going back into the intelligence career field would also mean long hours, but I found my work as an intelligence analyst to be challenging and rewarding. In 2002, I became available for my final Air Force assignment; I had two-and-a-half years left before retirement. I never thought I'd go back into history, but I did—in a surprising way.

At that time, I was on a billet owned by the National Security Agency (NSA), whose headquarters is at Fort Meade, Maryland. The then-director of NSA, Gen. Michael Hayden, saw my resume. He had a master's degree in history and thought that I, with my experience in the Intelligence Community and my Ph.D. in history, might be able to raise the visibility of NSA's history program. I accepted the position of chief of the Center for Cryptologic History (CCH) without any hesitation.

This is where the Society for History in the Federal Government enters the story. Shortly after I arrived at Fort Meade, I met with the commandant of NSA's National Cryptologic School (NCS). His organization owned CCH, NSA's history office. The first advice he gave me was to link up with SHFG.

I'd never run a federal history program before, so I knew I needed to talk to folks who were already running such programs and grab any good ideas they might have. I'd never heard of SHFG, but it seemed like a good place to start.

I attended the Society's holiday reception in December 2002, and discovered what SHFG was all about: federal historians, archivists, and curators trying to help each other by getting to know each other. I introduced myself to as many folks as I could and shared my contact information with anyone who might be interested. I knew right at the start that becoming an SHFG member would be a smart move.

Thanks to the Society, I now had access to the entire federal history program in the DC area, and began visiting my new colleagues. I learned a lot from each of these visits. Two of them, though, were especially valuable.

One was at the Central Intelligence Agency's history office, where I saw a sign on the wall quoting a 1952 statement by Sherman Kent, a history professor at Yale University who left academia to play a key role in the development of the CIA. "In my view," Kent's quote began, "the only reason for reconstructing the history of a government agency is to further the operational efficiency of that agency. This cannot be history for history's sake. It must be history for the improvement of today's and tomorrow's operations." I found this to be a bold statement, but wasn't sure what it meant.

I asked the head of the CIA's history program to provide me an example of how CIA historians supported the agency's current and future operations. He showed me something his historians had recently been tasked to do. Unfortunately, I can't go into detail since this story is still classified. But I can tell you that the CIA was preparing to conduct operations in coordination with another federal government organization. The director of the CIA, to prepare for this effort, asked the history office to provide him information on how the CIA had cooperated with this organization in the past, what had been successful and what had not, and why. The due date was short, just a week or two.

I asked to see the point paper the CIA's history office produced. I was impressed by how useful its information could be to the CIA director as he prepared to meet with the other government organization. This was not "history for history's sake"; it was, indeed, "history for the improvement of today's and tomorrow's operations."

It took a while for me, with my background in academic history, to understand that this type of history was very different from what I did at the Air Force Academy. I eventually realized that this was "applied history," not "academic history," and I decided to make applied history the central mission of NSA's history program. I'll say more about this later.

The second visit that was especially helpful was to the Army's Center of Military History (CMH). When I met the chief of CMH's Histories Division, he told me it didn't matter how good the histories being produced by CMH were if no one was reading them. To have a successful history program, he said, it was necessary to create a "culture of history."

His comments resonated with me. During my Air Force career, I was assigned to numerous Army posts, and one of the things I remembered from those assignments was how interested the Army's officers and senior NCOs were in military history. They were reading military history, talking about military history, and participating in battlefield staff rides. I decided that one of the things I had to do was establish a similar "culture of history" at NSA.

I knew this would be a challenge. The workforce at NSA comes largely from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) backgrounds. These types of professionals do not normally have a natural affinity for history. I remember thinking: how am I going to create a "culture of history" at NSA?

As I pondered this dilemma, a *deus ex machina* appeared. I like the way *Wikipedia* defines this Latin phrase: "an unexpected power or event saving a seemingly hopeless situation." That's what I needed.

Here is the *deus ex machina* that appeared for me. NSA's internal communications team decided to create a webpage, called the "Daily Page," that would automatically appear whenever NSA employees logged onto "NSA Net," the agency's classified computer network. The communications folks needed content for this home page each day. Fortunately for the Center for Cryptologic History, they had trouble finding organizations that would commit to even weekly inputs. Somewhat desperate, they called CCH to see if we could help. I promised them a history input every single workday.

I wasn't sure how we could do this, but I approached Dr. David Hatch—NSA's most senior historian—for ideas.

I'm intentionally trying to avoid mentioning names in this talk. If I included the name of everyone who has been helpful to CCH, this lecture would be a long list of names. The many folks who played key roles in helping CCH accomplish its mission—people both inside and outside of NSA—know who they are. I owe every one of them my sincerest thanks. But one name I can't avoid mentioning is David Hatch.

Dave immediately saw the value of this webpage opportunity. In early 2003, we launched our "History Today" feature on NSA Net. Each "History Today" article had a brief story that Dave wrote—almost always accompanied by an illustration—that was connected in some way to the history of cryptology ("cryptology" can be

roughly defined as the making and breaking of codes and ciphers). NSA employees couldn't miss seeing "History Today" when they logged onto their classified computers because some days there would only be two items on NSA Net's "Daily Page," and one would always be "History Today."

One of the great things about Dave is that he believes in injecting fun, when possible, into history—and the puns, memories of days gone by, and unexpected plot twists he incorporated into his stories attracted attention. Folks talked about the stories they saw, shared them with others, and made reading "History Today" (which only takes a few minutes) a regular part of their "NSA Net" log-in.

Thanks to "History Today," CCH was able to let the workforce know we existed, and employees who previously didn't have any interest in history found themselves reading a short dose of cryptologic history every day. "History Today" quickly became the most popular feature on "NSA Net," and routinely had over a million hits annually. Other CCH historians started to make regular "History Today" submissions to meet the demand for new stories. Today, over 17 years after we launched "History Today," we can truthfully say we have posted a fresh story, with just a small handful of exceptions, every single workday since 2003.

We also looked for other ways to create a "culture of history." In 2003 we began publishing an unclassified cryptologic history calendar every year—an idea I grabbed from a visit to the Defense Intelligence Agency, which at that time was putting out a popular history calendar for its workforce.

Each month of the calendar we put together at CCH has a large illustration related to cryptologic history, which is accompanied by a short caption, one or two paragraphs long, telling a story about the picture. Additionally, almost every day in the calendar lists at least one significant cryptologic event that occurred on that particular day in history. We're now publishing over 15,000 calendars each year, and we distribute them all. They're in great demand because they contain interesting pictures, interesting stories, and always a bit of fun (such as the "Cryptologic Critters" feature that always appears on the last page).

Another thing we do to create a culture of history is to plug cryptologic stories about historical events into NSA's New Employee Orientation program. All of the new hires get a bit of classified history in an "NSA Overview Briefing" they receive

on their second day of employment. A week later they get a tour of NSA's National Cryptologic Museum.

The Museum, which is completely unclassified and open to the public at no cost, attracts 50,000–70,000 visitors each year. It is not part of the Center for Cryptologic History, but we provide historical support to the curators and lead tours for the new hires. We tell the new folks, who won't be able to talk about their classified jobs outside a secure facility (called a "Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility," or "SCIF"), that the Museum is the one place at NSA they can discuss cryptology, at the unclassified level, with their families, relatives, and friends.

The Museum's displays reveal the impact cryptology has had on world history and demonstrate how important cryptology continues to be today. That's an important message for the new employees to understand, and for their family, relatives, and friends to know.

As you might expect, creating a culture of history is not a project that comes to a finish—you can't say: "Now that we've created a 'culture of history' we can close that issue and move onto other matters." Building and maintaining a culture of history is like tending a garden; it requires constant attention.

But those "other matters" CCH has to deal with can't be ignored—they are the critical products and services that justify NSA's investment in a history program. To define these "other matters," based on what I learned from my interactions with federal history offices and SHFG members, I asked the historians in CCH to help me create a mission statement. Here's what we came up with:

The mission of the Center for Cryptologic History is to

- Provide objective, meaningful historical support to the National Security Agency leadership and workforce to enhance decision-making, cryptologic knowledge, and esprit de corps; and
- Advance an understanding of cryptologic history for the United States Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense, other government agencies, academia, and the general public.

This mission statement is designed to identify the types of things we do to provide NSA with history that can be used, as Sherman Kent put it, "for the improvement of today's and tomorrow's operations." This is applied history.

The first part of the mission statement, which talks about “objective, meaningful historical support,” means we don’t sugarcoat the history we produce. We are not, and will not be, “court historians.”

Ironically, one of my proudest moments as chief of CCH was when the agency’s senior leadership learned, based on research done by one of the Center’s historians, that NSA provided erroneous intelligence to the White House during the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. This botched NSA reporting, which was the result of misinterpreting intercepted radio communications, made it appear that North Vietnam had attempted a night-time attack on two American destroyers in international waters.

This inaccurate NSA report helped convince President Lyndon Johnson to retaliate with air strikes against North Vietnamese naval bases. The president also asked Congress for the authority to send American troops to Vietnam, which Congress approved overwhelmingly in what became known as the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.” It was this resolution that justified American participation in the Vietnam War.

Our historian discovered NSA’s intelligence blunder while doing research on the agency’s support to military operations in Southeast Asia. The evidence he found showed that the attack NSA reported to the White House never happened. There were, though, a lot of complicating circumstances, and it’s not clear that NSA was aware of this mistake until CCH prepared a classified article on the event in 2001. In response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, NSA decided to declassify the article, along with all the documentation the author used—plus all the other documentation the agency had on the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

This material, released in 2005 and 2006, is now available to anyone on NSA’s unclassified website (www.nsa.gov). These documents do not make NSA look good, but their release demonstrated NSA’s commitment to transparency. There was no justification to keep any of this material classified 40 years after the incident, so NSA did the right thing and released everything.

The importance of doing the right thing soon became apparent. One frequent critic of NSA at the National Security Archive, a nonprofit organization promoting government transparency, called the release “terrific.” Those of us in CCH agreed. NSA’s willingness to reveal its mistakes, and not try to hide them because they are embarrassing, helps give our history program credibility. Our commitment to objective history—our willingness to study the good, the bad, and the ugly—

gives our “good-news stories” a credibility we would not have if our histories only told positive stories. This commitment to writing objective history, in both our classified and unclassified publications, is CCH’s most fundamental core value.

Our mission statement also emphasizes the commitment we have “to enhance decision-making” at NSA. I could give several examples of how we do this, but I’ll focus on just one, which I believe is especially powerful.

Several times each year CCH leads a staff ride to the Antietam National Battlefield, in western Maryland. Our focus is on the impact intelligence had on this Civil War battle, which was the bloodiest single day in American history—September 17, 1862. During a roughly 12-hour period that day, there were more than 22,000 combined Confederate and Union casualties: over 4,000 dead, and over 18,000 wounded or missing.

The Union commander, Gen. George B. McClellan, was a cautious man by nature, and what better way to justify caution on a battlefield than to believe you are outnumbered. Then your caution isn’t a sign of timidity but rather prudent behavior in the face of overwhelming odds.

McClellan had about 90,000 troops under his command and needed to know how many troops his Confederate opponent, Gen. Robert E. Lee, was bringing into Maryland. To get this type of information, he hired Allan Pinkerton, head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, to be his intelligence officer.

No one at this time had developed a systematic way to measure the size of an enemy’s army, but Pinkerton had anecdotal information from undercover spies in Confederate territory, scouts reporting sightings of Confederate troops, and detectives reading southern newspapers. Most importantly, however, McClellan told Pinkerton not to be afraid to report “big numbers.” In other words, McClellan would welcome a worst-case scenario that would justify his cautious behavior on the battlefield.

Knowing McClellan was expecting a big number, Pinkerton provided him one: his estimate was that Lee was bringing 120,000 troops into Maryland. To use today’s jargon, the “customer” (General McClellan) was satisfied with the big number Pinkerton provided, and the “contractor” (Pinkerton) was delighted the customer was so happy. To put it bluntly, McClellan and Pinkerton both loved this intelligence assessment. The only problem with this intelligence was that it bore no relationship to reality.

In truth, Lee was bringing about 35,000 troops into Maryland, and McClellan's army of 90,000 men outnumbered Lee's by almost three to one. But McClellan would fight the entire battle as if he was outnumbered. In fact, he would keep one-third of his army—almost 30,000 troops, a force almost equal in size to Lee's entire army—in reserve. McClellan believed he had to have this reserve force available, at all times, to respond to any sudden attacks by Lee's tens of thousands of imagined troops.

During the staff ride, we show there were several times that McClellan could have destroyed Lee's army if he had committed his reserve. Lee held strong defensive positions, but suffered heavy losses, and the Potomac River was right behind him. There was no way he could make a hasty withdrawal.

McClellan, who also took heavy losses, never committed his reserve, despite evidence that suggested those imagined Rebel soldiers didn't exist. A day after the battle, Lee, under the cover of darkness, skillfully withdrew his forces. Instead of being destroyed in September 1862, his army would continue to fight until April 1865.

The lesson for today's Intelligence Community (IC) is one that becomes evident to everyone who takes the trip. As one very senior NSA official on the staff ride put it, McClellan and Pinkerton made the same kind of mistake at Antietam, in 1862, that the IC and senior government decision-makers made 150 years later (in 2002) about Iraq being on the cusp of developing nuclear weapons unless the United States took action.

Like McClellan and Pinkerton, the senior NSA leader pointed out, we loved this intelligence assessment, and like McClellan and Pinkerton, we ignored evidence that suggested it might not be true. The result was a costly war in Iraq based on intelligence that we were convinced had to be true, but wasn't.

That's a gut punch, but one that shows how something that happened over a century-and-a-half ago can provide useful historical perspective for decision-makers today.

This is applied history that makes an impact. Almost 2,000 NSA and IC employees have participated in our staff rides (which now also include a trip to Gettysburg), and the feedback we receive is extraordinarily positive.

Our mission statement also emphasizes our efforts to enhance "cryptologic knowledge and esprit de corps." This is the heritage part of our mission, and it's

very important. NSA employees, both civilian and military, need to know what a crucial role cryptology plays in our nation's security.

I can't share with you the classified stories we tell our employees, but we also have a wealth of unclassified stories that show how cryptology can have an enormous impact on world history.

We explain, for example, how a small group of Navy and Marine Corps cryptologists broke the Japanese naval code, JN-25, during the months after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. During the spring of 1942, decoded JN-25 messages revealed a plan by the Japanese Navy to ambush our aircraft carrier force. With this knowledge, the U.S. Navy was able to turn the table and set up an American ambush of the Japanese carrier force. This culminated in the Battle of Midway, where our carriers caught the Japanese by surprise. All of the big carriers Japan had in its large task force were sunk. The result was a decisive American victory.

Prior to Midway, in June 1942, the Japanese were on the strategic offensive throughout the Pacific; after Midway, Japan was on the strategic defensive until its surrender in 1945. If the United States had not broken Japan's JN-25 naval code, this victory, which dramatically changed the course of World War II, would not have happened.

We ask our workforce if this sounds like cryptology changing the history of the world. They nod their heads and better understand how important cryptology can be. Our ability to reinforce these unclassified stories with more recent stories, which are still classified, makes this point even more strongly.

This type of cryptologic history can have a dramatic impact on the morale of the workforce and help create a positive esprit de corps. In a significant way, this is another example of applied history—using history to help the workforce take pride in the job they're doing and recognize how important what they're doing is to our nation's security.

The final part of our mission statement tasks us with advancing “an understanding of cryptologic history for the United States Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense, other government agencies, academia, and the general public.” This refers to our outreach responsibilities, which are also part of our applied history efforts.

CCH strives to work closely with, and share information with, other history offices in the federal government. We have explored different ways of facilitating this important interaction among federal historians, and CCH enthusiastically participated in, and even led, interagency government boards and structures that resulted in impressive collaboration by history offices across the Intelligence Community.

Unfortunately, however, the federal government can sometimes be a frustrating place to work. For reasons I don't understand, most of the successful interaction mechanisms in the IC history community were shut down years ago. One chore for the future should be to see if we can reinvigorate this type of valuable interagency interaction among federal historians. The one organization that continues to do this, of course, is SHFG, which is outside the federal government, but which keeps the flame of interagency coordination and cooperation in the federal history community alive.

CCH also has an important outreach responsibility to the "general public," where we can help inform Americans about the agency's achievements and show how NSA has tried to learn from its mistakes. The Center for Cryptologic History does this by publishing unclassified history books and brochures; working with the National Cryptologic Museum on the development of exhibits; supporting the NSA Archives in the posting of declassified historical documents on NSA's public website; giving presentations about cryptologic history at universities and other public venues; and—every other year—co-sponsoring (with the National Cryptologic Museum Foundation) the world's largest and most prestigious unclassified conference on cryptologic history.

There's much more I could discuss: CCH's extensive oral history program; our history classes at the National Cryptologic School; our system for answering the multiple historical queries that come into our office each day; our coordination with NSA's TV studio to produce history videos; our support to NSA's awards programs; and our Scholar-in-Residence Program for distinguished historians in the field of unclassified cryptologic history (Liza Mundy, the author of the best-selling book *Code Girls*, is CCH's current Scholar in Residence).

There are so many more stories I could tell about what CCH does, but I now need to conclude. I'll do that by discussing what I consider my greatest failure as the chief of CCH: succession planning.

I retired from the Air Force in 2005, and then continued as the chief of CCH as a civilian. As the years passed and I grew older, I started thinking about who

could best lead CCH after I retired. Understandably, none of the historians in the office wanted my job. They were living the dream of being a historian: researching, writing, and talking about history. My job had a little bit of that, and a lot of working budget issues, looking after personnel matters such as hiring and billets, writing performance evaluations, working with the logistics folks to get an old heating and air conditioning unit to provide hot and cool air when needed, solving disputes with other organizations, attending staff meetings, and other bureaucratic matters. When I decided it was time to retire, in the fall of 2016, I had not found anyone interested in the job after they found out what it included.

Then, another *deus ex machina* appeared: the perfect replacement applied for my job. John Tokar is a retired Army officer who has a passion for history, who worked at the Army's Center of Military History for several years while in uniform, who has years of experience working at NSA, and who has an impressive network of agency, Intelligence Community, and Department of Defense personnel he can call upon. My succession planning failed completely, but fortunately, the right person showed up at the right time.

I'll finish with just one more sentence, albeit a long one with lots of semicolons:

I found my time at the Center for Cryptologic History to be very rewarding; I owe a great debt to all the historians and editors and staff officers who worked with me in CCH; I owe a similar debt to all the historians I learned from and engaged with in the Intelligence Community and Department of Defense; I also owe a tremendous debt to the Society for History in the Federal Government for helping me meet and grab good ideas from historians, curators, and archivists across the federal history community; and finally, I am truly honored, and humbled, to be presented with SHFG's Roger Trask Award.

Thank you.

Picture credit: Courtesy Bill Williams

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