

## Credit Where Credit Is Due

*By Max Holland*

Newspapers constantly make mistakes.[\[1\]](#)

Anyone who works on an issue that makes news knows this. Reporters, in their haste to convey the gist, invariably gloss over nuances that mean everything to the people who follow an issue closely. Complexities are reduced to inaccurate simplicities, that is, when there is any kind of effort to describe them at all.

Yet sometimes it is not reporters' fault. A case in point was the recent release of tens of thousands of historical records from the [Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library](#). The release was portrayed as if it were the Nixon Library's initiative, when in fact, the most arresting documents only came to light because of the diligence of individual requesters and independent institutions, like the [National Security Archive](#).

The November 28 release totaled approximately 122,800 pages of records, which were made publicly available for the first time at the [National Archives](#) in College Park, Maryland.[\[2\]](#) The Nixon presidential records have been the subject of contentious litigation for decades (lawsuits were filed by parties ranging from Professor Stanley Kutler to Nixon himself), and documents that otherwise might have been released years ago are only now being opened to the public and garnering the attention they deserve.

This cache of documents covered a variety of newsworthy topics, ranging from the White House's file on W. Mark Felt, aka "Deep Throat," to National Security Council (NSC) memos about US policy toward Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Soviet Union, and Salvador Allende's Chile. Some issues have changed so little in 35 years that many of the documents read like they had been ripped from today's headlines. Consequently, major news organizations, including *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and the Associated Press prepared good-sized stories about the documents.

The caveat to the release was that its most interesting portion by far — some 10,000 pages — was not initiated by the Nixon Library, but came about solely because of requests submitted by researchers under the mandatory declassification provision of the Executive Order governing classification of federal documents. This provision permits individual requesters to press the government to review classified documents to see if they merit continued secrecy.

With the exception of the [AP](#), which ran a story about FBI agents' campaigning to have Mark Felt appointed as director, the news organizations zeroed in on the NSC documents relating to the Middle East, all of which were released because of mandatory

review requests. The lede from [The Washington Post's](#) story concerned messages between Saudi Arabia's King Faisal and the US government about terrorism and Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. Articles in the [Los Angeles Times](#) and [New York Times](#), meanwhile, focused on another issue that still reverberates: Israel's nuclear arsenal, which ran counter to established US policy on weapons proliferation during the Nixon administration, and complicates US diplomacy in the region to this day.

What these stories all had in common, though, was that they suggested the impetus for release came from the Nixon Library or National Archives, when in fact the documents were only disclosed because of the initiative of requesters.<sup>[3]</sup> As the director of the National Security Archive, Tom Blanton, later noted, "Without those requests, which compelled the government's review, the documents could have remained secret indefinitely." Analysts working at the National Security Archive had submitted about half of all the mandatory requests reflected in the November 28 release, and still had many more requests pending — approximately 75 — that had yet to be processed by the Nixon Library. Some of the requests dated as far back as 1993!

Who or what was responsible for incompletely informing the reporters? The National Archives and Nixon Library were apparently so eager to claim credit for the releases's most interesting portion that both agencies, in their respective press releases, glossed over the instrumental role played by requesters.<sup>[4]</sup> This self-congratulatory posture was underscored during the November 28 press conference held to publicize the documents' availability.

The sole speaker, [Tim Naftali](#), executive director of the Nixon Library since 2006, effusively complimented the archives and library staff for making the once-classified documents available. Indeed, Naftali seemed to be praising everyone in sight except the requesters who had actually initiated the mandatory review requests — that is, until he was reminded of that fact by one of the requesters, who was in attendance.

[1] Michael Bugeja and Jane Peterson, "[How Complete Are Newspaper Corrections?: An Analysis of the 2005 'Regret the Error' Compilation](#)," *Media Ethics*, Spring 2007.

[2] The Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California, which became part of the federal presidential library system only this past July, is undergoing an expansion so that it may accommodate the enormous trove of documents generated during Nixon's six-year presidency. Previously, the privately-operated Nixon Library housed only a small portion of the total volume of Nixon papers, some 6.2 million pages of pre- and post-presidential records. Incorporating the presidential records alone will add 42 million pages to the previous collection, not to mention an enormous quantity of still photographs, film, video, and audio recordings. For an account of the Nixon Library's unusual history, see James Worsham, "[Nixon's Library Now a Part of NARA: California Facility Will](#)

[Hold All Documents and Tapes from a Half-Century Career in Politics,](#)” *Prologue*, Fall 2007, Vol. 39, No. 3.

[3] The initial *New York Times* story on its website dated November 28 stated the “documents . . . were released today by the National Archives.” A subsequent version (and the version published in the newspaper on November 29) was amended to read “. . . released today by the National Archives under an executive order that requires that classified documents be reviewed and possibly declassified after 25 years. The latter explanation was an improvement, but still neglected to mention that mandatory review requests must be initiated by outsiders. To its credit, on December 7 the newspaper of record published a [clarification](#), which stated that the release of previously classified documents was “the result of declassification requests by researchers at the National Security Archive . . . and elsewhere.” David Stout, “Nixon Papers Recall Concerns on Israel’s Weapons,” *NYT*, 28 November 2007; David Stout, “[Israel’s Nuclear Arsenal Vexed Nixon](#),” *NYT*, 29 November 2007; [For the Record](#), *NYT*, 7 December 2007. Accounts of the records’ release in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and by AP were virtually identical to the initial *NYT* story, describing only that historical materials were released by the National Archives. Theo Milonopoulos, “[Nixon White House Opposed Israeli Nuclear Efforts](#),” *LAT*, 29 November 2007; AP, “[Nixon Papers Illuminate Deep Throat Link](#),” CBS News, 28 November 2007; Walter Pincus, “[1973 US Cable on Mideast Mirrors Current Events](#),” *WP*, 29 November 2007.

[4] Media Alert, “[Nixon Presidential Library to Release New Materials at the National Archives](#),” National Archives & Records Administration, 21 November 2007; “[Mandatory Review Documents](#),” Nixon Presidential Library & Museum, 28 November 2007.