

**Testimony of
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Our Founders hoped to make this country different from England and the other monarchies of Europe. One way they wanted us to be different was the way we treat our history. The kings and queens of Europe were in favor of history, but only an official history. Documents and other evidence that showed their mistakes were suppressed or destroyed. They hired official historians to use this sanitized record to portray the past performance of their governments as a glorious parade of decisions perfectly made – no mistakes, no room for improvement.

That approach was great for the vanity of the kings and queens, but it wasn't really history. And it didn't do much to keep future monarchs from making mistakes similar to theirs, because their subjects were prevented from knowing about those mistakes.

The Founders of the United States knew all of that. Unlike the Europeans, they felt that for a country's political system, history should be treated not as a dangerous threat to be harnessed but as a mighty force that could make their country greater. Our early leaders felt that only if we knew our full history could we really know how and why our past leaders and citizens succeeded -- and how and why they failed.

They knew that the only way you could do that was to encourage American leaders and citizens to make a full, real-time documentary record of their daily decision-making and their daily lives. They venerated the true, unexpurgated primary source -- not some official history written by some bought court historian.

From the beginning, those Founders practiced what they preached. Go back to the closed-door debates of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and you will find the most detailed accounts of what they said and did. There are letters, transcripts, diaries and notes. Over two centuries later, we can hear those actual voices. And they speak to us. 223 years later, we Americans are still using those records to argue about those Constitutional debates – and about how our society in 2010 compares to the luminous expectations expressed in that crowded hall in early Philadelphia.

It is not too much to say that if the Founders came back today, they would love the fact that we Americans have created an NHPRC. They would feel that there is no more patriotic act than creating historical records, preserving them and then making them available as quickly as possible to the widest number of Americans so that we can all

learn from both the shortcomings and the triumphs of our tumultuous past. And the Founders would also love the fact that, in contrast to the old regimes of Europe, the NHPRC is not just concerned with the great and famous. It has shown itself just as eager to preserve and publish the letters of Swedish immigrants in my home state of Illinois as the letters of President John Adams and his Cabinet.

In this year of 2010, the work of the NHPRC is more important than ever. Unlike earlier generations of Americans, we don't write many letters or diaries. And not too many of us pour our innermost thoughts and emotions into an e-mail. Thus it couldn't be more vital for the NHPRC to be doing everything it can to encourage the creation of some kind of detailed historical record in what all too often seems to be an age of disposable history.

Let me offer one quick example from my own professional experience on the importance of the primary source. I have been working since 1994 on several books in which I transcribe, edit and try to explain the tapes that President Lyndon Johnson made of ten thousand of his private conversations on the telephone and in the Oval Office from 1963 to 1969.

Until those tapes began to be opened in 1994, almost no one knew that LBJ had secretly taped people he talked to without their knowledge. In retrospect, it was probably terrible that he didn't tell his friends and colleagues that their confidential comments were being captured for history, but for us historians and the American people, these tapes are an inexhaustible treasure.

Certainly LBJ wrote letters and left official memos, but if you want to understand what President Johnson did and why, you want to hear his voice in private. Some of LBJ's language on those tapes is not fit for me to repeat in this hearing. But in those tapes are about a million lessons for all of us Americans and our leaders to think about. One such lesson – which I'll close with – is one I don't think any member of this subcommittee will disagree with. And that is this: Presidents should listen to Members of Congress.

In May 1964, LBJ was talking to his old mentor, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, about whether he should go to war in Vietnam. Russell was known as Mr. Defense, but he thought the Vietnam War was a loser. On these tapes, he tells Johnson, “[Vietnam] is a tragic situation. It's just one of those places where you can't win. . . .It'll be the most expensive venture this country ever went into.”

How different the history of our country would have been had LBJ not rejected Russell's wise advice. Just like the records of the Constitutional Convention, this one conversation between one President and one powerful Senator should speak to all of us. It's a crucial, cautionary lesson for later Presidents and later American citizens. Listen to the wisdom of Congress. Be utterly careful before you send young Americans into harm's way. If it weren't for the kind of the work so well done by the NHPRC, we wouldn't even know that such a conversation between Johnson and Russell ever took place.