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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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GENERAL GOVERNMENT  
DIVISION

JUL 31 1984

B-215932

The Honorable Thomas N. Kindness  
Ranking Minority Member  
Government Information, Justice and  
Agriculture Subcommittee  
Committee on Government Operations  
House of Representatives



Dear Mr. Kindness:

Subject: Observations on a General Services Administration  
Report on the National Archives and Records  
Service (GAO/GGD-84-95)

As you requested by letter dated July 2, 1984, we have reviewed the May 1984 General Services Administration (GSA) report on the National Archives and Records Service (NARS). That report presented the results of a study conducted by a team from GSA's Office of the Associate Administrator for Policy and Management Systems and contained 52 recommendations to counter the problems at NARS identified by the team.

Generally, the GSA team found that, "The scope and magnitude of the problems, both managerial and programmatic, now facing NARS far exceed current (and past) efforts by NARS management to resolve them." The problems cited by the team included: the lack of an effective planning process, longstanding and continuing personnel management problems, inadequate support for preservation efforts, and poorly planned automated systems and equipment acquisitions. In his reply to the draft report, the Archivist of the United States expressed strong reservations about the report's contents but noted that NARS had either completed, had an ongoing program to accomplish, or in a very few instances would take new action on 35 of the 52 recommendations. Further, NARS planned to consider 9 of the remaining 17 recommendations.

In 1982 and 1983, GAO conducted its own review of NARS management systems during which we worked with the Archivist and his staff to gain an understanding of the major challenges

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facing NARS and how NARS management could bring about needed improvements. We concluded that NARS needed a more systematic approach to address its challenges and suggested that the agency develop a strategic planning process, an improved management information system, and a bolstered evaluation function. Because NARS was in the process of developing management improvements which we supported, we made no formal recommendations. In his reply to the GSA team's report, the Archivist cited our letter as evidence that NARS had many improvements underway.

In response to your request, we reviewed the GSA report and met with GSA and NARS officials. We focused on issues that were addressed in both the GAO and GSA reviews and evaluated major issues where there was disagreement between NARS and GSA. NARS officials supplied us several pertinent documents, including the latest edition of their 1984 management plan. Based on our earlier work and the information supplied us by GSA and NARS, we selected for review several issues raised by the GSA team which appear to be significant to NARS' overall effectiveness. These issues are discussed below. Because of the brief time available, we were not able to make a detailed examination of these issues. We discussed our report with NARS officials who agreed with the material presented. Our work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

#### PLANNING, ORGANIZATION, AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The GSA report recommended that NARS revise its planning process and management plan to identify for each activity the resources required, include workload and/or performance measurement data, and include milestone dates and organizational responsibilities. NARS' management plan describes the planning process, identifies important elements of the external environment in which NARS operates, describes NARS' administrative structure and mission, and establishes agencywide goals. The plan lists 13 goals--6 "operating standards" and 7 program goals. The latter were prioritized, specific projects were listed, and in some cases, responsibilities had been assigned and milestones set.

In its response to the GSA report, NARS did not comment on this recommendation. NARS officials informed us that NARS did not comment on recommendations like this one that were already being acted on.

In our earlier study, we urged a more systematic management approach and noted the need for detailed objectives, milestones, and linkage of short- and long-term goals. The NARS management plan reflects a serious effort by top management to better plan

and organize NARS activities and includes many of the elements we believed were needed at the time of our study.

NARS recognizes that additional steps--generally consistent with GSA's recommendation--need to be taken or completed. These are:

- Developing the plan earlier in the fiscal year (planned for fiscal year 1985).
- Integrating the plan with the budget process, where appropriate, including the costing out of goal implementation.
- Tying NARS goals more closely to overall GSA/ Administration goals.
- Developing a tracking system to monitor implementation of NARS goals (in process).
- Making the goals part of Senior Executive Service and merit pay contracts (in process).

The GSA report also recommended that NARS be reorganized. Citing the Archivist's "excessively large span of control," the study team proposed consolidating NARS' six major offices into three and creating deputy archivists for operations and for regional operations.

The Archivist responded that GSA's proposed reorganization "would result in a very lopsided arrangement in terms of staff and resources for no apparent reason other than to solve a perceived span of control problem." NARS officials informed us that they would await action on legislation to make NARS an independent agency before making any organizational changes. We agree that congressional action in this case should precede reorganization decisions.

We did not specifically address NARS' organization in our earlier work other than to suggest that a person or group reporting to top management be assigned to develop and maintain systems for goal-setting, planning, and information management. Implicit was the need for a stronger focus on management.

#### RECORDS PRESERVATION

The GSA report, in its executive summary, cited as a major problem "a continuing failure to support preservation efforts at a level which would indicate management appreciation of the serious nature of the problems facing this area." In the report body, GSA noted that NARS had moved aggressively in recent years to improve the methods for handling the records preservation issues and workload. The team made several recommendations, including:

- Reorganizing the preservation activity and clarifying organizational responsibilities for preservation issues.
- Training conservators (persons responsible for deciding how a document should be preserved).
- Completing an inventory of the preservation backlog.
- Developing a plan detailing priorities, objectives, and timeframes for satisfying NARS preservation needs.
- Implementing a proposal to improve temperature and humidity controls in a vault-like storage area housing certain intrinsically valuable records.

In his response, the Archivist agreed that much more remained to be done. However, he noted that the executive summary statement on the failure to support preservation efforts was not supported and, in part, was contradicted by the report body. He cited increased funding and other efforts already undertaken, including preparation of a 20-year preservation plan.

GAO expressed concern in 1982 testimony<sup>1</sup> and an earlier report<sup>2</sup> about NARS' ability to cope with its preservation responsibilities. The 1982 testimony noted that the volume of records needing preservation, coupled with recent budget reductions, made for an uncertain future. Our management study identified preservation as a major challenge facing NARS.

NARS' management plan acknowledges the seriousness and complexity of the problem and lists preservation as the highest priority goal. It also lays out specifics for corrective action. In addition, the separate preservation plan lays out a 20-year program for addressing the problem.

Although there is still an extensive preservation backlog, NARS appears to be better positioned to address the preservation problems than when we conducted our earlier studies. Successfully carrying out their plans will depend in part on resource levels. NARS said further increases will be requested beginning in fiscal year 1986.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Impact of National Archives and Records Service's Budget Reductions on Its Preservation Activities and Other Activities," Statement by William J. Anderson in hearings before the Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights of the House Committee on Government Operations on March 4, 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Improvements Are Needed in the Management of the National Archives Preservation and Trust Fund Activities (LCD-80-13, Oct. 26, 1979).

### AUTOMATED SYSTEMS AND EQUIPMENT

The GSA report said that automated systems and equipment acquisitions were poorly planned and completed, did not meet user needs, involved lengthy implementation cycles, were not integrated across program areas, and did not follow procedures. Accordingly, GSA made 13 recommendations.

The Archivist responded that there was a "pervasive misunderstanding" of NARS automated systems, the premise on which the GSA 5-year automated data processing plan is based, the requirements for systems development and other fundamental issues. NARS disagreed with 3 of the 13 recommendations GSA made. These proposals entailed consolidating technical systems staffs, assigning systems planning and policy development to the Archival Research and Evaluation staff, and reallocating automated data processing resources within the Office of Federal Records Centers.

NARS' management plan recognizes the importance of effectively managing the information life cycle and making appropriate use of new technology. Assuring the best use of modern technology is listed as an "operating standard" goal. Advanced techniques, especially computerization, are to be applied.

In our study, we identified advancing archival and records center technologies as a major challenge, but we did not address the specifics covered by GSA. Based on our conversations with NARS and GSA officials, it appears that NARS has taken action, through its Archival Research and Evaluation staff, to address this challenge, albeit with some possible shortcomings pointed out by the GSA team. While NARS' primary focus appears to be computerization, attention is also being paid to other technologies, such as optical disc storage.

### OTHER SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

Appraisal and disposition of records, and personnel, were the remaining two issues addressed by the GSA study team which we believe are important to NARS' effectiveness. For the former, the GSA report recommended only that NARS implement recommendations contained in a 1983 report on appraisal and disposition policies prepared by a NARS task force. The Archivist informed us that NARS was already acting on the task force recommendations. The NARS management plan listed this issue, which we identified as a major challenge in our previous study, as the fourth of the agency's seven program goals.

For personnel, the GSA report cited "longstanding and continuing personnel management problems," including lack of training opportunities, which "contribute to low employee morale." GSA made several recommendations, but the Archivist responded that they were not supported by the evidence. He said NARS will expand recruiting and training when funds become available and

other actions have already been taken or are underway. We did not address this issue in our earlier study because of GSA's strong influence on NARS' personnel matters. NARS has identified the effective use of human resources as its sixth program goal.

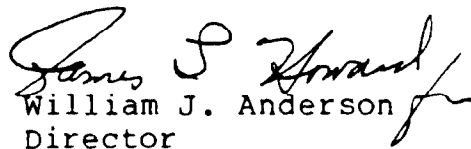
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In summary, both the GAO and GSA studies point to the need for further improvements in NARS' management so the agency can effectively address its major challenges. NARS will need to continue responding to the issues discussed above whether the agency remains in GSA or it achieves independent status. Many GSA recommendations pertain to the same issues discussed in our letter and, while NARS disagreed with some of GSA's recommendations, it is already acting on most of them. Although additional steps are needed to develop effective systems for managing NARS and fully address the agency's problems, our discussions with NARS officials and the contents of the NARS management plan indicated that NARS management is making a serious effort to identify and address many of the problems the agency faces.

As agreed with your office, we are also distributing copies of this report to the Administrator of General Services, the Archivist of the United States, and other interested parties.

Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely yours,

  
William J. Anderson  
Director