



Images from the Cuban missile crisis, now declassified, part of the National Security Archive's online collection.

# A national security treasure

In the 1960s a small number of scientists and proto-computer geeks prophesied a global network of electronic documents containing embedded links to primary sources, related documents, just about any data in the “docuverse” they were sure was about to be created. They coined the idea “hypertext,” which eventually led to HTML and the World Wide Web. It was supposed to be a gold mine for researchers.

A few decades later we got Web search engines, which are great for finding tons and tons of general information and endless commentary, but are often terrible at turning up primary sources.

Enter the National Security Archive, based at George Washington University in Washington D.C., which has mated the reporter’s “best friend”—the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request—with a variety of on- and off-line media resources. The result is an ever-expanding collection of declassified government documents available in their entirety. And it’s a good example of how “hypertext” can be used to organize primary and secondary

sources in a way that’s actually helpful.

Not all of the archive’s offerings are online. Some have been published in book format, some are on microfiche, but a growing collection is available on the National Security Archive web site, [www.nsarchive.org](http://www.nsarchive.org).

The archive’s approach: Assemble a staff of experts in international affairs, news analysis, law, and library science. Make a list of the declassified documents likely to be of value to the public. Send out thousands of FOIA requests. Mix in a lot of patience, and the result is one bulging archive.

The archive, which receives no government funding, charges a nominal fee for some of its material, but a good deal is free. Every month the archive posts a “document of the month,” for example. Recent postings include: The “Bush–National Archives Agreement,” the “Weinberger File,” the “Woerner Report on El Salvador,” and *Possible Intention of Mexican Drug Organizations*. There are also special online exhibits covering juicier moments in history like the Nixon-Elvis exchanges.

When visiting the site, a

look through the Electronic Briefing Books is a must.

This is where to find critical declassified records on specific issues, including U.S. national security, foreign policy, military history, intelligence policy, and more. Of particular interest to *Bulletin* readers is a section on nuclear history.

While the archive’s staff provides easy-to-read analysis and explanations to ease visitors through the complexities of government documentation, the biggest thrill is being able to see and print out scans of the documents themselves, all decorated with the thick black markouts left behind

by zealous government declassifiers.

The not-for-profit National Security Archive was founded in 1985 by journalists and scholars who wanted a centralized location to store government documents they had obtained through FOIA requests. Today it is the largest non-governmental library of declassified documents, with 90,000 records of released documents, more than 15,000 authority files for individuals and organizations in international affairs, and more than 20,000 FOIA requests filed by archive staff and contributors.

—Bret Lortie

