

April 29, 2008

Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20408

Dear Dr. Weinstein:

We are writing to express our serious concerns about the National Archives and Record Administration's decision to not capture and preserve a "snapshot" of government web pages at the end of the current Administration. Federal websites are federal records and, therefore, must be treated as such and preserved appropriately. As the site for the 2004 Presidential Term Web Harvest indicates, the first such snapshot was "intended to document Federal agencies' presence on the World Wide Web at the time that the Presidential Administration term ended in early 2005." Indeed, NARA also captured House and Senate public web sites as they existed prior to December 11, 2006, at the end of the 109th Congress (2006). A precedent, thus, has been clearly established for this important method of preserving a moment in our country's history.

In NARA's March 27, 2008 memo (NWM 13.2008), the reasons for this decision include that:

- Existing, private entities such as the Internet Archive (www.archive.org) already record federal web pages; and
- NARA does not consider such a snapshot to possess enough historical value to warrant conducting and preserving a government-wide web snapshot.

The work of organizations like the Internet Archive, while valuable and meriting support, does not supplant the responsibility of our national government to protect and document its own history and the NARA snapshot is the critical component of the Nation's historical record. A NARA snapshot of federal agency web sites at the end of an Administration is as critically important as the snapshot of the White House and Congressional web sites. These records are essential components of our Nation's history. No other agency has both the public mandate and the public accountability necessary for protecting historical records.

Moreover, depending on private, non-profit organizations to keep our Nation's digital history poses serious risks. How do we ensure that these records will be and remain accessible and freely available without limitations on their use? While it is clear that entities such as the Internet Archive plan to continue such services, it remains the responsibility of government to ensure such access through its own records.

A snapshot of federal web pages is, indeed, of great historical value. They provide the public with an image and understanding of the government at a particular point in time that can be then compared and contrasted with other such images over Administrations.

Such comparison is of immense historical value because it allows the public direct access to federal digital records at a given time in history. As Congress and Federal agencies continue to move more and more of their work online, proactive and detailed digital archiving is essential for public awareness and government accountability.

We urge you to rescind your decision and continue NARA's web harvesting program by archiving a snapshot of all federal web pages at the end of the current presidential term. Not capturing federal web sites now may mean losing millions of pages created during the Bush administration. Allowing such a loss is contrary to the trust in and the core mission of the National Archives and Records Administration.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns. Thank you in advance for considering this request. Please contact Patrice McDermott at 202-332-6736 with any questions.

Sincerely,

American Booksellers Foundation for
Free Expression

iSolon.org

Liberty Coalition

American Conservative Defense
Alliance

National Coalition Against Censorship

American Library Association

National Coalition for History

Association of American Physicians and
Surgeons

National Security Archive

9/11 Research Project

Association of Research Libraries

Nova Southeastern University's Law
Library and Technology Center

Coalition on Political Assassinations

Electronic Frontier Foundation

OpenTheGovernment.org

Essential Information

Project on Government Oversight

Feminists for Free Expression

The Reporters Committee for Freedom
of the Press

Indiana Coalition for Open Government

Cc: Senators Joseph I. Lieberman, Chair, and Susan M. Collins, Ranking Member, and Senator Thomas R. Carper, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

Representatives Henry A. Waxman, Chair and Thomas M. Davis, Ranking Member, and Representative William Lacy Clay, Oversight and Government Reform.