



Washington's war on history

Michael Rubin

July 5, 2016 2:32 pm | *AEIdeas*

As a historian, I get paid to predict the past and, admittedly, I only get that right half the time. Future historians are going to have more difficulty, however, as vanity in Washington and contemporary leaders' obsession with historical depictions of them has made it nearly impossible to conduct proper history.

Consider former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's e-mail scandal. The FBI has decided not to recommend Clinton's criminal prosecution, but this related only to the legal and security issues involved in her handling of classified material. A broader — but non-criminal — issue was Clinton's motivation to make the call about what to keep private. Now, Huma Abedin — perhaps Clinton's closest aide — has admitted that Clinton used to [destroy her daily schedules](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/07/05/huma-abedin-admits-that-clinton-burned-daily-schedules.html) rather than archive them, all the better to promote the image she wanted over the reality of her record.



<http://www.aei.org/wp->

content/uploads/2016/07/RTX2HNYU_hillary_clinton_book-e1467743291771.jpg

A supporter holds the book “Hard Choices” by Hillary Clinton at a campaign event in Raleigh, North Carolina, June 22, 2016. REUTERS/Jason Miczek.

Clinton, of course, is not the only official to fall into the vanity trap and confuse a desire to craft public image with the public’s right to know. Sandy Berger, her husband’s late national security adviser, [smuggled documents](http://www.spectacle.org/0804/wilson.html) (<http://www.spectacle.org/0804/wilson.html>) relevant to the Clinton administration’s approach to Al Qaeda out of the National Archives; he later destroyed them. He pled guilty, paid a fine, and lost his security clearance, but he achieved his goal. Without documentation, no historians can be definitive in their conclusions.

The problem is bipartisan. In the aftermath of the 1983 Marine Barracks bombing in Beirut, US intelligence knew where those responsible were hiding out. Caspar Weinberger, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of defense, reportedly signed off on a decision to launch military strikes in Lebanon and perhaps Syria to target the Hezbollah and Iranian agents involved. Prior to taking the decision to the president, he also met with several Arab ambassadors. During the subsequent White House meeting, he reversed course to the surprise of those who had laid the grounds for the operation.

The delay in taking action meant many of those responsible (including perhaps Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s choice of [defense minister Hossein Deghan](http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-secret-history-of-hezbollah/article/767144) (<http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-secret-history-of-hezbollah/article/767144>)) escaped. In subsequent years, as Iranian terror continued, many of the documents and memorandums related to the discussion and debate simply disappeared, thereby absolving Weinberger of any responsibility for missing an opportunity to respond.

Without documentation, no historians can be definitive in their conclusions.

Ditto many of the CIA files on the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran. For decades, the CIA refused to release them. The CIA subsequently [acknowledged](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/29/us/cia-destroyed-files-on-1953-iran-coup.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/29/us/cia-destroyed-files-on-1953-iran-coup.html>) that they had “mistakenly” destroyed them.

The sheer proliferation of documents since the rise of email presents a daunting challenge to archivists and historians. The belief that politicians should have the right to craft the judgment of history with the ease with which they message a campaign, however, effectively means the [end of history](https://www.amazon.com/End-History-Last-Man/dp/0743284550) (<https://www.amazon.com/End-History-Last-Man/dp/0743284550>). Perhaps Francis Fukuyama was right, but for all the wrong reasons. History continues; vain politicians just refuse to allow its writing.

Learn more: [Of Clinton's Wall Street transcripts and journalistic integrity](http://www.aei.org/publication/of-clintons-wall-street-transcripts-and-journalistic-integrity/)

(<http://www.aei.org/publication/of-clintons-wall-street-transcripts-and-journalistic-integrity/>)

| [Kerry should blame Clinton's judgement, not investigators](http://www.aei.org/publication/blame-clintons-judgement-not-investigators/)

(<http://www.aei.org/publication/blame-clintons-judgement-not-investigators/>)

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/washingtons-war-on-history/>