"In the Room with Peter Bergen" transcript: Episode 72

Extras

In this episode: Can Exposing American Secrets Make You Safer?

The Audible Editors
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Episode 72: Can Exposing American Secrets Make You Safer?

For almost 40 years, Tom Blanton and the National Security Archive have used the Freedom of Information Act to dislodge and declassify U.S. government secrets, from Cold War backchannels to intelligence failures in the Middle East. Blanton's "archival activism" is about seeing the full picture, in hopes that policy makers — and the American public — can learn from past blunders. Oh, and they unearthed the backstory behind that famous picture of President Nixon and Elvis Presley in the Oval Office.

Please note: Our show is produced for the ear and made to be heard. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the audio before quoting in print.

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Peter Bergen: Well, Tom, I'm a big fan of your work. In fact, I have some of it in front of me. Uh, you know, I love documents. And you must really love…

Tom Blanton: Welcome to the club! [BOTH LAUGH]

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Tom Blanton and I are sitting at a table strewn with papers: Once-secret letters, classified reports, diaries, memos, cables. Blanton is the director of the National Security Archive, an independent, non-profit research institute in Washington, D.C. For decades, he and his team of historians, researchers, and journalists have been exposing government secrets and getting a glimpse into the often-hidden halls of power — from American nuclear war plans to infamous Oval Office meetings. So, yes, he loves documents.

Tom Blanton: I mean, one of my favorite documents actually is one that the CIA — here, I brought a copy with me — oh, this is a real fun one.

These are the kind of primary-source documents that make historians salivate. And that fun document he's showing me now, well, it details one of — perhaps the — greatest American intelligence failures of the 21st century.

ARCHIVAL Dick Cheney: *Simply stated there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.*

ARCHIVAL 2000s Newscaster: *The Central Intelligence Agency is sure a nuclear infrastructure is in place.*

ARCHIVAL George W. Bush: *I take the fact that he develops weapons of mass destruction very seriously.*

ARCHIVAL Colin Powell: *Clearly, Saddam Hussein and his regime will stop at nothing until something stops him.*

In the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the administration of George W. Bush pushed the narrative that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction. The ensuing war killed some 300,000 civilians and more than 4,500 American troops. Weapons inspectors flooded into Iraq, but in the end they found nothing: no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, no nuclear missiles. The intelligence community faced a reckoning.

Tom Blanton: And then the CIA says to itself, “How could we get it so wrong?” Now, it's clear the White House was certainly cherry picking intelligence to drive the message for war. But at the CIA, they're professional intelligence analysts. “’How did we screw it up so badly?” And they did a series of papers looking back at their intelligence.

The document is dated January 5, 2006, but it was six years before the Archive helped make it public.

Tom Blanton: And they say — you can look on the back page — We just failed to look at our information through an Iraqi prism. We saw every piece of deception as covering up the existence of weapons of mass destruction. They were actually covering up the non-existence in a dangerous neighborhood.

Peter Bergen: Right, because Saddam Hussein had fought a war with Iran, and he didn’t want the Iranians to really think he didn’t have nuclear weapons.

If you sense some youthful exuberance in Blanton's voice, it’s not him celebrating a calamitous intelligence failure. That excitement is the reason he’s telling this story in the first place: It’s a recognition that from these failures — and from his team’s work uncovering them — maybe we can avoid the next failure.

Tom Blanton: One of our goals with these documents is to really enrich the education of future policy makers so they can go to the actual text, they can read the CIA's mea culpa about Iraq and get a huge leap into the core challenge, it seems to me, of American national security, which is understanding the other,

Peter Bergen: Right.

Tom Blanton: Understanding the adversary, and not sympathizing or hugging them, but where are they coming from, putting ourselves in their shoes.

There are few people more equipped to spread this message than Tom Blanton. His team’s exposés of government secrets illuminate the often hidden corners of American foreign policy… and they have put Blanton in the room — both literally and figuratively — with the most powerful people on Earth.

Peter Bergen: The great thing about documents is they can obscure and lie, but they're much less likely to obscure and lie than people.

Tom Blanton: Well, they're frozen in time, which people are not. Right? Memory is not frozen in time. But a document, it’s just, it's not truth, but it's evidence.

So let’s take a dive into modern American history, through the eyes of one of its most prolific archivists, and hear about decisions made by very powerful people behind closed doors — about America’s nuclear weapons and war plans and covert

operations — that have had the power to decide the fate of whole nations, and of the safety and security of people like you and me.

Through documents, he'll shine a light on the misguided, outright nefarious, and sometimes absurd, elements of American national security. And explain why the government's default toward secrecy is only making this work more difficult.

Tom Blanton: We're creating vastly more secrets than anybody else. And the hard part is we in the openness world, journalists, scholars are always just playing catch up to that incredible machine.

I'm Peter Bergen, and this is a special declassified-document edition of *In The Room.*

[THEME MUSIC SURGES THEN FADES]

Peter Bergen: I've seen you quoted saying you're not Chelsea Manning, who obviously released a whole bunch of secrets. You're not Julian Assange, who founded WikiLeaks. What are you?

Tom Blanton: We're a constant counter pressure to the national security system. The national security secrecy system is so biased toward over-classification, every incentive to keep things secret and withhold it.

Tom Blanton sees the National Security Archive as a counterweight to all this secrecy. A counterweight with institutional memory, with resources to bring lawsuits against the government, and with deep expertise. The Archive is housed at the main library of George Washington University, in D.C.'s Foggy Bottom neighborhood. In a seventh-floor office, Blanton and his team of nearly 30 staffers work among stacks of cardboard boxes, filled with once-secret documents on anything from Iran-U.S. relations to the CIA's wiretapping of journalists.

And to get those documents, one does not simply walk into CIA headquarters and start grabbing them. There's a formal, and often quite cumbersome process, laid out by a 58-year-old law called the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA.

Tom Blanton: The Freedom of Information Act is a national treasure and an international model, and now I think there's about a hundred countries that have all passed some version of that kind of information on demand. Public asks, government gives. The idea for the Freedom of Information Act arose in the 1950s when some members of Congress were trying to get information out of the Eisenhower administration about who got purged during McCarthyism.

ARCHIVAL Joseph McCarthy: *Even if there were only one communist in the State Department, that would still be one communist too many.*

Tom Blanton: And they wouldn't give exact numbers. They would just leave it vague.

So a Democratic Congressman named John Moss proposed an idea.

Tom Blanton: There should be a law that says, if you know government has some information, you ought to be able to ask for it and there ought to be some deadline for them to give it to you and some exceptions, right?

Peter Bergen: Because at the end of the day, I mean…

Tom Blanton: It belongs to us.

Peter Bergen: We're paying for this. [PETER LAUGHS]

Tom Blanton: You got it. Well, 1950s, none of the Republicans would go for it because they were defending Eisenhower. 1960s, that changed. Suddenly, Kennedy and Johnson were in power. Some Republicans in Congress wanted to hold them accountable. A young Republican congressman from Illinois named Donald Rumsfeld signs up to John Moss's idea of this freedom of information law. Moss wanted to open the bureaucracy to scrutiny and accountability and efficiency. Rumsfeld, in his speech, said the government has so many tentacles in so many parts of our lives we got to have ways to hold it accountable to restrain the government from all that interference.

It passed the U.S. House and Senate, but before that *bill* could become a *law*, it required one last signature, from a president who usually *reveled* in the showmanship of bill-signings: Lyndon B. Johnson. When the Freedom of Information Act landed on his desk, however…

Tom Blanton: Lyndon Baines Johnson was not happy. And he was planning to do what they call pocket veto, which means: ignore it [BOTH LAUGH].

But Johnson's press secretary, a man named Bill Moyers, was feeling the pressure campaign.

Tom Blanton: The newspaper editors are wailing and sending editorials. They're calling Bill Moyers, who's holding a press briefing every day. So Moyers, we now know, drafted this eloquent signing statement, which I brought you a copy just because you'd love it. [BLANTON RIFFLES THROUGH PAPERS]

Blanton starts quoting from the draft statement.

[PATRIOTIC MUSIC PICKS UP]

Tom Blanton: "This legislation springs from one of our most essential principles: a democracy works best when the people know what their government is doing. They must have access to the policies and rules by which agencies operate. Government officials should not be able to pull curtains of secrecy around decisions that could be revealed without injury. Good government functions best in the light of day." Lyndon Johnson crossed all that language out with a black marker. [BOTH LAUGH]

[MUSIC RECORD SCRATCH, MUSIC ABRUPTLY FADES]

Tom Blanton: Crossed it right out. This is the draft. From the presidential handwriting file where LBJ edits the statement. And this is Moyers, editing out all that nice language about the public's right to know. So fascinating, the signing statement ended up with more words about withholding information to the public than about releasing.

Thankfully for Blanton — and the public — some later amendments made FOIA a law with real teeth. A law that helped him get those early drafts of Johnson's statement. In 1974, with the country reeling from the Nixon administration's Watergate coverup, Congress added timeframes for the government to respond to requests, fines for withholding information, and language to waive fees for journalists and other public interest groups. In the decades since, Blanton's team has made more than 70,000 FOIA requests. They write letters to federal agencies, asking for specific files, memos, reports, cables. And most of these requests pass through the National Archives and Records Administration, a federal agency that's responsible for preserving government records.

I had my own stash of documents to ask about. For many years I've relied on some of the once-classified documents that the National Security Archive has shaken loose from the U.S. government. They've helped guide the research for my books about terrorism, and there's a particularly useful collection… showing the intense U.S. government efforts to get the Taliban to clamp down on Osama bin Laden before the 9/11 attacks and even hand him over to the U.S. Officials wanted him to face trial for his role in al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on two American embassies in Africa in 1998.

Peter Bergen: You know, you have a whole set of documents about the discussion around Osama bin Laden. The United States was putting tremendous pressure on the Taliban to extradite him. And one of the documents, which I actually have right in front of me, is the first and only time it seems that Mullah Omar, who founded the Taliban and was its leader, the supreme leader, talked to an American official. You know, basically it's Mullah Omar's, uh, talking points. I mean, this document doesn't lie. This is really probably a pretty accurate recount of this phone conversation.

Tom Blanton: It took about eight years to get it through freedom of information requests.

Peter Bergen: Wow. And most people don't either have the knowledge or the patience or the time. I mean, look…

Tom Blanton: You don't have the time! [BOTH LAUGH] Our whole organization is that, is time, is persistence. That's why we were started back in the 1980s by a bunch of journalists and historians — to have that persistence to pursue those freedom of information requests because they do take years. They can take years.

Peter Bergen: Well, let me ask you about the mechanics of that. Because obviously it takes time, but when you submit the request the government is inclined often to say no, I presume, right? Do you have to sort of know what specific documents you're requesting down to, like, the name of the document? Or…

Tom Blanton: That's ideal. That's the best Freedom of Information request. It's when we have a footnote in another document that gives the title, the date, who wrote it, and to whom it was sent, right?

Peter Bergen: Right.

Tom Blanton: Or, in the case of the Mullah Omar, I think we had a generic Freedom of Information request that said, any negotiations, discussions with the Taliban. And in the first group of documents released, they referred to a cable describing some conversation. We went back and said, we'd like that one, please.

Peter Bergen: But I mean some of the drudge work is — I'm preaching to the choir — I mean, you can spend a lot of time reading documents carefully and you'll find some real gems when you're…

Tom Blanton: Absolutely.

Peter Bergen: And so is that Christmas Day for you when you—?

Tom Blanton: It's almost every day. [BOTH LAUGH] Either, you know, what we get from our freedom of information requests today are either these diskettes that they send us by these FedEx envelopes or an email attachment. But almost every day it's like Christmas. We planted enough little acorns, should we say.

Peter Bergen: Right.

Tom Blanton: We've been busy little squirrels planting. [PETER LAUGHS] I think there's some nature magazine story one time that the squirrels don't really know where they've left the acorns exactly. But if they put enough of them in the ground, there'll be sprouts. There'll be food in the winter. And so we file these Freedom of Information requests, even if they take 12 years, which is what the backlog is today for George W. Bush presidential material that's almost 20 years old. It's outrageous. It's a combination of the National Archives has been on

starvation wages for 30 years. It's a combination of the vast overclassification, probably 50 to 80 percent of what's classified shouldn't be or should have an automatic sunset where it comes out after five years or 10 years. And about bureaucratic resistance like the Rumsfeld snowflakes.

That's a reference to the same Congressman who once championed FOIA: Donald Rumsfeld. He'd make his own rise in politics and national security. And by the time he landed at the Pentagon — as Secretary of Defense — he was subject to that law.

Peter Bergen: Donald Rumsfeld's snowflakes were, were memos that he would just send throughout the building about stuff that was on his mind.

Tom Blanton: And he would dictate, you know, there'd be, some were one sentence, some were two paragraphs, some were two pages, and they struck terror in the heart of the Pentagon bureaucracy because, "Is he serious?Does he really want to know this?" But we knew there were thousands of them. And so we're talking to the top Freedom of Information people at the Pentagon. We negotiate with the government on a pretty constant basis. Which of our requests should be more important? Which ones less? Which ones should we go to court over?

Peter Bergen: Do they regard you as a pest, or do they regard you as somebody that they'd sort of have to deal with? Or what, how do they look at you?

Tom Blanton: All of the above. Pest, nuisance, traitors. But we also help create their jobs by filing our FOIA requests.

Peter Bergen: Because if you didn't file, there wouldn't be anybody to deny it.

Tom Blanton: So here are these couple of retired military guys who are running the Office of Secretary of Defense's Freedom of Information shop. They look at us across the table and they said, 'You know, we agree with you. The snowflakes that we've seen, Donald Rumsfeld deliberately did not stamp classified because he wanted to be able to dictate them at home or in the car and not have couriers and safes and all the apparatus that goes with a classified document and protecting it. So he didn't classify them. But now that he's published some of them, the Joint Staff over here at the Pentagon thinks they all should be classified and they're really resisting this.' And we said, so, 'You know, we're probably gonna have to go to court.' Top retired, flag level guy running a freedom of information said, 'Yes, I think you're going to have to sue us. It'll give us leverage inside.' [BLANTON LAUGHS]

Peter Bergen: So you sued them?

Tom Blanton: So we sued and we won.

In all, the Archive has filed some 75 lawsuits to force the U.S. government's hand. And to understand how it grew from a small research center to a regular plaintiff against the federal government, you have to travel back to the mid-80s, when this group of journalists and historians started using FOIA to their advantage.

Tom Blanton: We were this tiny little non-governmental organization, just really started in late 1985, but we were collecting documents.

They called themselves The National Security Archive, and the founders were veteran reporters working at *The Washington Post* and *TheNew York Times.* Blanton was a Harvard grad from a small town in Louisiana. He also spoke some Spanish, so he was brought on board to dig into a story that had been bubbling: possible U.S. covert support of some right-wing revolutionaries trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 1: *President Reagan has approved clandestine operations against Nicaragua, directing the CIA to put together a paramilitary force of up to 500 Latin Americans…*

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 2: *Administration officials say President Reagan is fully committed to supporting the Nicaraguan rebels.*

The rebels were known as the Contras, and the Archive had amassed boxes of documents connecting them to the U.S. government. Blanton's job was to try and make sense of it all.

Tom Blanton: So we had built this backbone chronology just to keep track of all the stuff about the Contras. We'd interviewed Contras. They'd given us documents from inside the Contras.

At the same time, some of his colleagues were starting to focus on another big story in national security, a story that, at first, didn't seem to have anything at all to do with Nicaragua: American arms deals in the Middle East.

Tom Blanton: Our founder Scott Armstrong from the *Washington Post* had covered all Saudi AWACs deals, Iran hostages, you name it. So we had a chron that had all these U.S.-Iran cross currents from the seventies and eighties. And suddenly in November 1986 these all came together with a huge press conference at the White House where the president fires his national security advisor and his top aides…

ARCHIVAL Ronald Reagan: *Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North has been relieved of his duties on the National Security Council staff.*

Tom Blanton: And announces this internal investigation.

ARCHIVAL Ronald Reagan: *I'm deeply troubled that the implementation of a policy aimed at resolving a truly tragic situation in the Middle East has resulted in such controversy.*

That controversy would come to be known as the Iran-Contra scandal.

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster: *When President Reagan and Attorney General Edwin Meese appeared in the White House briefing room on short notice today, no one was prepared for their surprising announcements that money from the controversial Iran arms deal was secretly funneled to the Contra rebels.*

The basic facts are these: The administration of President Ronald Reagan wanted to fund right-wing rebel groups in Nicaragua. But Congress had made that illegal. At the same time, a crisis was brewing in Lebanon, where Iranian-backed terrorists had taken Americans hostage. Reagan was looking for leverage to get those hostages released. So his administration hatched a secret plan: the U.S. funnels arms to Iran — also illegal — Iran pressures the terrorists, the Americans come home.

Tom Blanton: And in that context, 'Oh, we're selling some arms to the Iranians to get our hostages back as the Iranians 'cause can lean on the captors in Lebanon, and people are making money. Oh, and there's profits from that. Okay, let's take that money and support the Contras too.' Follow the money, right? So the diversion of money was just one more in a series of illegal fundraising schemes, but it was the most controversial because Ronald Reagan and official policy and law in the United States was: you don't negotiate over hostages. Why not? If you offer a ransom, you're creating a market in hostages.

When a huge story like this breaks with multiple countries, many millions of dollars, and deeply-held government secrets involved, there's never any one journalist who uncovers it all. It's lots of reporters working on all the different angles. And in the fall of 1986, this story was *everywhere*.

[DRAMATIC MUSIC PICKS UP]

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 1:*Good evening. There's no way to overestimate how the Iran issue has gripped official Washington.*

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 2: *It was a day short on answers and long on political theater here in Washington, a city consumed by the Iran Contra scandal.*

Tom Blanton: Every day you'd have 20 different major stories about some new lead.

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 3: *Israeli television is reporting an unusual angle in the U.S. Iran arms sale controversy…*

ARCHIVAL Edwin Meese*The only persons in the United States government that knew precisely about this was Lieutenant Colonel North...*

Tom Blanton: And often these stories contradicted each other because they're drawing on different sources.

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 4: *The Iran-Contra arms deal may not have been Oliver North's idea.*

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster 5: *Everybody kept secrets from everybody else at the National Security Council.*

ARCHIVAL Ronald Reagan: *All of these indications that maybe I know more than I'm talking about… [SOUNDS OF CAMERA SHUTTERS CLICKING] I'm trying to find out, too, what happened.*

ARCHIVAL Robert McFarlane: *The President had made clear that he wanted a job done.*

Tom Blanton: So suddenly we became the switchboard. Because we had all these contra documents. We had all these Iran related documents. Here's this little non-governmental organization that just had a simple computer program, Dbase3.

[SOUND OF AN OLD MODEM STARTING UP]

Tom Blanton: It was a, just a way to organize data in a database to put stuff side by side. We had built this chronology and suddenly everybody, every reporter on this story, and it's the biggest story in national security in the decade, is coming to us and saying, well, can you check this? Is this right? I got told this. Is that this? And we pull up the Dbase3 and check the Chron and say, oh no, well, there's this document over here. You really ought to look at it. You should check that out. And wait a second, that date is off. That's off by a, by a day or so. So it was like we were a giant fact-checking enterprise.

And that fact-checking enterprise was so essential to journalists because the officials involved were not exactly forthcoming.

ARCHIVAL Oliver North: *On the advice of counsel, I respectfully and regretfully decline to answer the question based on my constitutional rights.*

ARCHIVAL 1980s Newscaster:*For his part, Mr. Reagan kept up his own silence today and let his spokesman do the talking.*

For Reagan, the scandal was a low point in his presidency. For Blanton, though, the saga was instructive.

Tom Blanton: Sticking to the evidence, citing and showing the documents — that was our strength. I was a kid. What did I know about the national security apparatus? I was in my twenties. Hadn't served in the military. Had a, you know, good education, but what did I know? Well, what I knew was you get into the documents and you can quickly see them in

their own words. The security officials and the securocrats and the decision makers. It's like, these moments, when the window opens into gigantic national security apparats, and suddenly you see with some clarity and with some evidence and with contrasting testimonies, how things really work.

It was also a moment that catapulted the Archive, and Tom Blanton, into the national spotlight.

[UPBEAT MUSIC PICKS UP]

ARCHIVAL Interviewer 1: *Tom Blanton is our guest, he's the director of planning and research at the National Security Archive…*

ARCHIVAL Interviewer 2: *My guest Tom Blanton has become an expert in finding out government secrets.*

ARCHIVAL Interviewer 3: *Here to help us understand the stakes for U.S. national security is Tom Blanton. He directs the…*

And the Archive grew: boxes of documents stacked higher, professional full-time staff, fellows. It's dug into secret CIA satellite programs, spy planes at Area 51, and backroom negotiations over climate policy. And the Archive also asks big questions. Like: How did nuclear stockpiles get so big? What *was* the U.S. plan if the Soviets attacked? So they do what FOIA experts do: they dig through old reports, consult old studies, and make specific requests, one of which turned up an 800-page document from 1956. It was marked "Top Secret." And it contained an astonishing plan in the event of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Tom Blanton: The only war plan, I think, American war plan for nuclear war that I think has ever been declassified.

A nuclear war plan that would have actually put Americans and American allies in the crosshairs.

Tom Blanton: And it turned out that not only did we have just hundreds of bombs targeted on Moscow, we had 91 bombs targeted on East Berlin. [BLANTON SHUFFLES PAPERS] Here, I'm just want to give you the list and you can see the target categories. It's like 91 nuclear warheads, each bigger than Hiroshima, targeted on East Berlin. Did nobody tell these guys that there were thousands of American troops in a place called West Berlin, right?

Peter Bergen: [BOTH LAUGH] Not to mention a bunch of West Germans.

Tom Blanton: And a lot of West Germans and Brits and French and allies, right? So how did 91 bombs get targeted on East Berlin? Well, because the intel people would find a factory or a railroad marshaling yard or this facility or that facility. You can see the list down the left-hand side.

Peter Bergen: Yeah, I'm reading — machine tools, metal forming equipment, optical equipment, population, ports, radio and television. These are the targets.

Tom Blanton: And the intel people would send that new target and its location and the people of the nuclear war planning would assign another bomb to it. And nobody got behind it until after the Cold, pretty much the end of the Cold War to understand the insanity of this.

Not everything the Archive uncovers is so deadly serious; not every document draws up plans for Armageddon. There have been some decidedly entertaining revelations as well. Take — for example — a single, silly little document from December 1970.

Tom Blanton: There was one document at the National Archives that was asked for by more Americans than any other document. It wasn't the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address or a copy of the Constitution. It was a copy of the photograph of Nixon shaking hands with Elvis in the White House in December 1970. [BOTH LAUGH]

Peter Bergen: In the Oval Office…

Tom Blanton: It was kind of like, what? This is the document more Americans want a copy of than anything else?

A staffer at the Archive came upon this photo and wondered: is there anything else in that file that might explain the circumstances of the president of the United States meeting the King of Rock'n'Roll? So she filed a FOIA request.

Tom Blanton: She got the handwritten letter by Elvis Presley on American Airlines stationery. Dear Mr. President, I respect you and blah, blah, blah. And this last sentence on page five: I'd really like to meet you if you're not in too much of a hurry. He says, you know, I'd like to do something in the war on drugs.

Peter Bergen: And this is a great bit from this report. Presley kept repeating that he wanted to be helpful, that he wanted to restore some respect for the flag which was being lost. He also mentioned that he's studying communist brainwashing and the drug culture for over 10 years.

Tom Blanton: Studying the drug culture for 10 years. [BOTH LAUGH] Think about the irony of that. The barbiturates that Elvis ultimately died from, right? So, turns out that what he wanted was the credentials of a federal agent. He was a collector of police badges and sheriff's department badges. And he wanted a Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs badge.

The notes from the Nixon-Presley meeting show a rock and roller keen on ingratiating himself with the Republican president. Presley denigrated The Beatles, calling them anti-American. And he brought up his own supposed credibility with the hippies and youth. And he ended the meeting by hugging the president, in what one Nixon aide described as a, quote, "surprising, spontaneous gesture."

Tom Blanton: For us, it's this amazing moment that shows the power of the documents to put you in the room,

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Tom Blanton: To let you see what they said to each other with all the stiffness and the hidden motives and the neediness on Elvis' part, but also it sort of demystifies stuff that before was behind the veil, but now, here, read it for yourself. [BLANTON LAUGHS]

That idea is central to the Archive's work: Lay it all out. Give the full picture, the real accounts of people in the room. There's one more story Blanton likes to tell about this. A story about Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro… and empathy. It was early 1992, fresh off the collapse of the Soviet Union.

ARCHIVAL 1990s Newscaster: *[USSR ANTHEM PLAYS SOFTLY] In Moscow the hammer and sickle is lowered for the last time and an era comes to an end.*

And it was a brief period of transparency. Even the former Soviets were opening up, releasing documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, that period in 1962 when the U.S. and the Soviet Union went to the brink of nuclear war over weapons the Russians were deploying to Cuba. The Archive was getting its own materials from the U.S. government: letters between President John F. Kennedy and the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the crisis.

But there was still one perspective that was missing.

Tom Blanton: And the Cubans say, 'Well guys, you know, the only protagonist who's still alive is down in Havana. Why don't, why don't you bring this roadshow down to Havana?'

That protagonist was Fidel Castro. And approaching the 30th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Castro agreed to a three-day conference in Cuba with former high-ranking U.S. and Soviet officials, historians, and archivists. Tom Blanton boarded a plane for Havana.

Tom Blanton: The week before, our freedom of information lawsuit gets the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters released. Fidel Castro comes to the conference. He's supposed to give an opening speech and a closing. Instead, he stays the entire three days. He says, 'Because I stayed up all night reading these letters where Kennedy and Khrushchev are bargaining my fate.' Right? That's the power of the documents to grip. And there's this moment where our

general counsel, who had won that lawsuit, makes a presentation to Castro of all these documents that we had gotten from 1987 through 1992 and he's just sort of like, well 'Here's the American narrative, and here's the American documents, and by the way, here's some Soviet documents, and we got some loud Soviet voices too, and where's yours?'

Tom Blanton: [BLANTON SNAPS] Castro snaps his fingers and suddenly these big guys come in the back of the room with banker boxes dropping on the table. [BLANTON LAUGHS] Castro says, 'Oh yes, oh yes, oh here's that letter Khrushchev wrote me, you know, after the crisis, apologizing for pulling out the missiles without telling me first, doing it on the radio. Oh yeah, he says, dear Fidel, you're young, passionate, revolutionary, the snow's falling on the birches. Why don't you come see me in the Soviet Union? We can kiss and make up.' It was a letter unknown to the historians.

Those banker boxes included other documents from 1962, a treasure trove for Cold War historians. But there's one letter, dislodged in that act of mutual transparency, that has really stayed with Blanton. A private letter from Fidel Castro to Nikita Khrushchev. It was written October 26, 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

Tom Blanton: Here was Castro writing to Khrushchev on the most dangerous day saying, 'We're going to get attacked this weekend, and Cuba will probably disappear, and that'll be a huge blow to the international socialist movement. So, you ought to use your nukes before the Americans attack you too.' Castro is calling for armageddon. It's Samson in the temple, pulling the temple down on himself, because he's going to die either way. So, begin to see, okay, take somebody's back to the corner. What are they willing to do? And it should give us real pause thinking about the treating of, you know, the North Koreans, or the Iranians, or anybody else. This empathy necessity is not about agreeing with them. It's just about understanding where they are coming from. What's driving them? What are they scared of? How do they see us?

[MUSIC FADES]

The question is: what can we learn from these documents? How can we avoid another Cuban Missile Crisis, another Iran-Contra scandal? At the end of the day, that's up to policy makers. Blanton would tell you: it's not about what he thinks. The documents can do the talking. His role is simple: Publish the documents, put them in context, and keep pushing for more transparency.

Peter Bergen: You practice something you describe as "archival activism." What does that mean?

Tom Blanton: It means keeping up the pressure with Freedom of Information requests. It means investigating what the government's doing, like this budget crisis at the National Archives where they're starving. They can't even keep up with the old paper records, much less the new tsunami of electronic records. It means responding when Congress calls us up to testify. I think I've probably testified 20 different times about ways to fix problems with the Freedom of Information Act, ways to get more resources in the National Archives, ways to change the rules on the secrecy system.

Peter Bergen: Well, you know, I think one thing that listeners probably don't understand is how many people in this country have Secret or Top Secret clearances.

Tom Blanton: My gosh. It's approaching four million have classification clearances. So it includes confidential, secret, and top secret.

Peter Bergen: Ok, so four million people going to work every day, producing a memo each. I mean just give us a sense of the volume.

Tom Blanton: This is a great question. We brought the lawsuit to save the Reagan White House email. We knew that Oliver North in Iran-Contra had used that email with his boss, Poindexter, had written him an email with the subject line, 'private blank check.' And Poindexter said, Ollie, just respond to this email anytime you're doing one of your covert ops, and it'll only come to me, not through the Secretariat of the Bureaucracy, right? So, they use that early email system. And at the end of the Reagan administration, one of our folks just asked them in the National Archives, 'So you're going to save all those backup tapes, right? And they said, no, no, no. It's been printed out. The Iran-Contra ones have been printed out, and that's all. The rest are just the equivalent of message slips.' We said, 'Are you kidding?' They're not message slips. These are substantive orders for carrying out covert ops, diplomatic negotiations, you name it. So we brought a lawsuit. That lawsuit saved — I'm circling back to your volume question —

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Tom Blanton: — saved 450,000 email messages. Some were duplicate. So, ultimately from the Reagan years, about 250,000. That's a lot of pieces of information.

Peter Bergen: And this was in…

Tom Blanton: This was 1980s.

Peter Bergen: Yeah, this is when the internet barely exists.

Tom Blanton: Right, exactly.

The next administration, under George H. W. Bush, left some 500,000 individual emails. By the time George W. left office in 2009, that number was 220 MILLION. And that's quite a burden for an archives system whose budget has essentially flatlined for three decades. Blanton testified before Congress last year, calling for sunset laws on state secrets… and proper funding for FOIA offices. Every day, he's fighting this opaqueness of power. Blanton knows that we, the people, aren't in the rooms where big decisions get made. We're on the outside, trying to get a look in. So he's doing his best to open that door. He says: look inside. Watch how power really works.

Peter Bergen: You seem like a very happy human being. You go to work every day and you… [BLANTON LAUGHS]

Tom Blanton: I'm learning something new every day, Peter. [PETER LAUGHS] It's like it's one of the joys. I think of being, were kind of a hybrid journalism, history, records and publishing outfit. But this is powerful stuff. It's evidence. It helps hold foreigners accountable. It should help hold our officials accountable, too. So, that's part of the enthusiasm, the passion. Everyday you're learning something new.

[MUSIC PICKS UP, FLOURISHES, FADES]

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If you want to learn some more about the topics we covered in this episode, we recommend *White House E-mail* by Tom Blanton and *The Declassification Engine: What History Reveals About America's Top Secrets* by Matthew Connelly. The latter is available on Audible.

CREDITS:

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