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## In Response to Reagor

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# In Response...

JOHN Y. SIMON\*

In urging us to rethink the issue of federal financial support for historical editing down to the fundamental level of what deserves this support and why, Ms. Reagor has done us all a favor. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has a long prehistory dating back to the seminal thought of J. Franklin Jameson; a period of good intentions and inactivity (1934-50); the age of Jefferson—or of Julian P. Boyd—(1950-64); expanded powers with the addition of grant funding (1964-75); and finally, a bifurcated role with the addition of a records program to its initial mandate. Throughout, there has been an evolving sense of mission, shifts in peripheral concern, and, ultimately, a program of sponsorship and funding based more upon reaction to proposals than upon an initial set of goals.

What Reagor regards as weakness, however, might as fairly be seen as strength. Within the family of long-term sponsored and funded projects, many were founded before the commission had grant funds, and none are totally dependent upon this agency for support; each project represents both a decision by the commission to sponsor or support and a decision by other agencies, institutions, or other sources of funding to provide continuing support. In this dimension, one can argue that each project has passed at least two tests: that of the host institution and that of the commission.

One can sympathize with Reagor's desire to set clear guidelines for commission sponsorship and support without fully agreeing with it. The most sensible and practical guidelines may be violated not by willful editors or bureaucrats but by unruly documents. For example, a recent commission-sponsored publication, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, edited by C. Vann Woodward, violates every standard suggested by Reagor—and perhaps others she might wish to add. The document itself emanates not from the federal government but from a hostile government: the Confederate States of America. The author is no government official recording policy, but a woman reporting what archives would ignore. Editing and publishing the document serves no conceivable federal purpose except the very broadest and most valuable: informing the American people about their heritage. Finally, its appearance provoked—perhaps deliberately—debate over the authenticity of the document itself and its reliability as a historical source.

Let me assure you of my opinion that commission

sponsorship of Mary Chesnut was no mistake. For three quarters of a century a flawed text of this document formed an essential element in the historical understanding of the South, the Confederate government, the history of women, and more. Historians who used the *Diary from Dixie*—the title given two flawed editions—persistently and unavoidably misunderstood the nature and purpose of this document. Woodward revealed that the document existed on three levels: as a diary kept at the time (and now largely lost), as an abortive effort in the 1870s to create a work of art based on the original diary, and as another effort at literary composition in the 1880s. By choosing to publish the final version (incorporating some excised material from the original diary), Woodward faced criticism that he had published a document that was a hoax and that he could have served historians better by publishing only every word of the remnants of the original diary. Whether such criticism is well-founded or not, we need to focus on the main point: every historian henceforward who uses *Mary Chesnut* will know what is being used and what degree of truth is conveyed.

*The Booker T. Washington Papers*, a more traditional commission project now nearing a triumphant conclusion, also illustrates this point. Precisely because Washington (like almost all of his correspondents) was excluded from a major role in the formulation of government policy, his papers have an unusual claim on our attention if we are to arrive at an understanding of the American past. We could not possibly claim that these documents are any less significant in forming current federal policy than those generated by people more politically powerful in their own day. Furthermore, the Washington papers share with the Chesnut diary the quality of surprising as well as enlightening scholars. The Washington edition has presented a more complex man dealing in a more sophisticated way with the issues of his time than heretofore portrayed by his biographers, and has also illuminated his correspondents. This is not to say that the biographers were lax or unperceptive; documentary editing furnishes a perspective unavailable elsewhere. It is not a mechanical substitute for biography but an independent form of historical presentation with values beyond the biographical.

If we lived in an ideal nation, our political leaders would also be our wisest thinkers and ablest writers. Of course this is not the case, and many vanished statesmen are best memorialized by statues and uncommon denominations of postage stamps. In the end, we may find

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that any clear formula for determining what papers should be edited will exclude those very papers which would prove most productive while encouraging with funding opportunities those enterprises which meet the formula but not the needs of scholarship.

In the past, the commission has chosen to sponsor and support editing projects based upon conceptions of what would most benefit a broad community of scholars and, through their use of documents, the American people generally. These judgments have not been beyond criticism, but based, as they are, upon the individual judgments of representatives of leading historical organizations, it is difficult to see how they might be improved by transferring these powers to bureaucratic channels. Could we realistically expect government officials to request documentary compilations which might take fifty years and more to complete? And would they be able to certify that such studies when completed would assist in formulating policy? Of the risks enumerated in the paper, that American history is a "narrow field," that projects may be developed just because money is available, and that the government may exercise too much influence over the editing, not one has been confirmed by the experience of the commission since 1964. Narrowness, boondoggling, and tendentiousness are far more likely dangers in a program conceived to fulfill "in-house" needs.

By calling for redirection of the commission to meet the policy needs of the federal government, Reagor overlooks the existence of a corps of federal historians already fulfilling this need. The departments of State, Defense, and Interior (and there are others) have substantial numbers of historians ready and able to serve them. These historians can perform more ably than historians from academia since they possess special access to internal materials, no small matter when security clearance and declassification are considered. And even historians within the government are forced to look beyond documents in federal custody for documentary compilations. The National Archives employs a microfilm program to disseminate records in its custody; almost any worthwhile editing project based upon such records (like the *Territorial Papers*) would be flawed by exclusive reliance on any single body or class of documents. Sometimes the distinction between editing by federal historians and the editing by commission projects blurs to the point of disappearance. But it should not be forgotten that work sponsored by the commission is invariably less burdensome to taxpayers and that the commission has scored success after success in making accessible documents vital to an understanding of the American past.

During the past decade, as opportunities for historians to find employment or grant funding have declined, the result has been increasing pressure upon the commission to redirect its efforts toward some innovative, expanded,

and ever more secure role within the federal government. Perhaps eventually this pressure may lead either to the destruction of the commission as it now exists or to a drastic change in its mission and mandate. Undesirable as this is, it may be inevitable. The most regrettable conceivable outcome, in my opinion, would be the redirection outlined by Reagor toward unnecessary duplication of historical work already underway in federal agencies.

Reagor's point about duplication of programs between NEH and NHPRC deserves attention. For historical editors, the chance of funding from one or another agency is good news, with any proposal having two chances for success. In recent years, the commission has shifted emphasis from long-term, multivolume, comprehensive editions to short-term selective editions buttressed by microform supplements to provide the entire corpus. In so doing, the commission has moved closer to the standards of the NEH, discouraging undertakings of the sort which have made the commission a government success story. The duplication noted by Reagor might well suggest that the commission would profit by moving in the opposite direction: by reaffirming sponsorship of projects so monumental in size and scope, so difficult to complete, that no other federal agency would care to make the commitment. When President Truman saw the first volume of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, he instinctively answered the question asked by Reagor: "What is appropriate for Federal support?" Perhaps this is the fundamental principle which the commission should adopt.