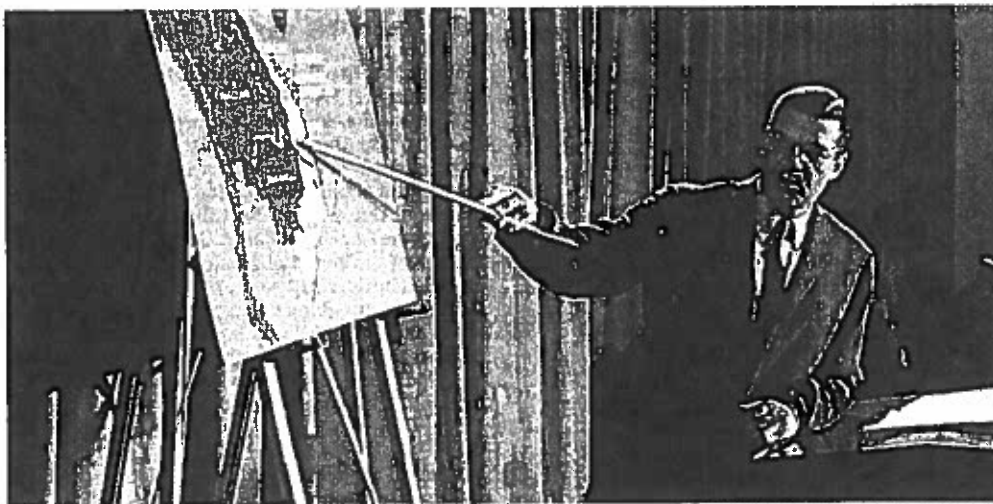


THE FED PAGE



NATIONAL ARCHIVES VIA AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Want to see what Defense Secretary Robert McNamara wrote in 1961? The Pentagon isn't your best bet.

Here's the secret, 24 years after it wasn't one



Al Kamen

IN THE LOOP

Ten years ago, the National Security Archive, looking over an inventory of the papers of Kennedy administration Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, sent a "declassification request" to the Pentagon for a file involving nuclear missile policy in 1961. (This was when the administration found that the Soviets had only a handful of missiles and that there was, contrary to John F. Kennedy's campaign attacks, no "missile gap.")

A few months ago, the Archive got the file, apparently in its entirety. A "declassification request" is similar to a Freedom of Information Act request; it is used when asking for a specific file. Ten years is pretty much warp speed in the world of national security FOIA requests. So this was just wonderful.

Unfortunately, the key 16 pages were all whited out, still marked as classified. The Pentagon, as usual, justified the excisions on some serious-sounding grounds — "state of the art weapons technologies," "weapons of mass destruction information," "war plans, damage to foreign relations and national emergency preparedness."

Then Archive senior analyst William Burr, going through the document, recalled having seen some of this information somewhere. So he went to a huge stack of FOIA releases that the organization had in its Digital National Security Archive, and sure enough, the document, with but a few deletions, had been released 24 years earlier — in 1990.

But Burr, who has a formidable memory, was pretty sure this was not where he first saw the document.

So he ran a quick search of the State Department's Foreign Relations of the United States series, known as the FRUS, and found that the document, with virtually no redactions, had been published in 1996 — in the official State Department history.

Archive director Tom Blanton tells the Loop that he concluded two things from this experience: "The Pentagon can't tell a real secret from a public secret" and President Obama's declassification push can't override Pentagon secrecy claims.

Or maybe more people should check the FRUS.