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March 6, 2017

The CIA forgot about a bunch of classified documents stashed in the Rockefellers' barn

The sale of a carriage house forced the Agency to weigh in on the “unique” situation of a SCIF in private hands

Written by [Emma North-Best](#)

Edited by [JPat Brown](#)

In late 1989, the Rockefeller family faced an unusual dilemma: they wanted to give a barn away. For most people with their money and resources, this would be a relatively minor headache, but for the Rockefellers, the problem was a bit more complicated - inside the barn was a vault, which contained locked file cabinets that were filled with classified information, some belonging to the CIA.

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4. Apparently the barn is being given away and the question arises--what to do about the "classified documents." I would appreciate it if you could track back our relationship to these documents, if any, and provide some guidance for handling their custody and/or disposal. I'm sure the family would be agreeable to our having a representative present when the doors are opened, at least to establish whether we have a custodial interest. My own responsibility for protection of sources and methods should provide an additional basis for our participation.

The issue apparently be traced back to 1975, when then-Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, or NAR as he is sometimes referred to in the documents, had asked Staff Security Officer Ralph Martin [to have a vault](#) at the Rockefeller estate in Pocantico Hills surveyed by CIA's security staff. That December, CIA officers surveyed the property and made several recommendations regarding security. After these recommendations were implemented, CIA's Director of Security, Robert Gambino, certified that the vault met "the minimum physical security standards for the storage of classified material, including sensitive compartment information [SCIF]."

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Ralph E. Martin
Staff Security Officer
Office of the Vice President

FROM : Robert W. Gambino
Director of Security

SUBJECT : Accreditation of Vault at Vice President's
Residence, Pocantico Hills, New York

REFERENCE : Telephonic Request by Staff Security
Officer, Office of the Vice President
16 November 1976

Pursuant to the request of the Staff Security Officer, Office of the Vice President, the vault at the Pocantico Hills, New York, residence of the Vice President was surveyed by CIA security officers in December 1975 to determine its adequacy for storage of classified material. Following the survey certain recommended modifications were effected. The vault now meets the minimum physical security standards for the storage of classified material, including sensitive compartmented information. The vault is, therefore, now accredited for the storage of such material.

The vault apparently remained in place, and the documents undisturbed, until 1979. According to a formerly CONFIDENTIAL memo, the vault "fell through the cracks" as a result of a "unique" situation. The situation would have remained lost between the cracks if not for the attempt to give the barn away, and the subsequent notice to CIA from Judge Harold Tyler. The matter had, as it turned out, been completely lost to the

Agency, whose Special Security Center didn't have any records on the Rockefeller SCIF until after Judge Tyler contacted CIA about it.

6. Upon my return, I checked with our Special Security Center to see if they had any records for the Rockefeller SCIF. They did not but will now set one up. They are not aware of any other "unique" situations such as this. They also assured me that there are procedures for closing registered SCIFs and returning the material as appropriate. This would appear to be a "unique" situation which "fell through the cracks" and thanks to Judge Tyler can now be corrected.

Although Judge Tyler's letters weren't released in the declassified file, he apparently called the then-CIA Director, Judge Webster, about the issue. The Director wrote back after he confirmed that CIA had authorized the site, and to inform him that people from CIA's Office of Security were available to review the material and assess the matter.

Thank you for your call regarding the documentation contained within the vaulted area at the Rockefeller family estate in Pocantico, New York.

The Agency's Office of Security did indeed survey and approve the vaulted area for storage of classified material in 1975, with the understanding that documentation relevant to the Rockefeller Commission would be stored there. Representatives from the Office of Security are available at your convenience and should now assist in the opening of the vault and review of material. Government documentation will be returned to the Agency for appropriate disposition. The point of contact within the Office of Security is [redacted] who can be contacted directly on [redacted] if you wish.

I appreciate very much your bringing this matter to my attention. Please don't hesitate to call if there are other ways in which I can assist.

Sincerely,



William H. Webster
Director of Central Intelligence

A CIA memo describes the vault itself. The vault was apparently located "in the basement of carriage house." In addition to personal papers, there were three "four-drawer safes" full of "personal memoranda, generic reports, briefings and documents" that ranged from Limited Official Use Only to TOP SECRET or Codeword classified.

- A large vault is located in the basement of the carriage house. It contains, along with personal items and papers belonging to the family, four four-drawer safes. One is inoperable/empty; the other three are functioning and all 12 drawers are full.

- The material is unclassified and classified. The classified material consists of both personal memoranda generic reports, briefings and documents. The classified material runs the gamut from Limited Official Use Only through Top Secret/Codeword. Multiple agencies are the originators of the classified material.

- The classified materials are interspersed with the unclassified so as to prevent a convenient separation. Sorting the material will require a page-by-page review.

The memo went on to note that while the facility “technically” met the criteria for TS/SCI storage, this was “negatively impacted” by the Rockefeller staff having the combinations to the safes, and that “numerous staff” had access to the vault. While there were alarms that would notify the Rockefeller security, there was apparently no procedure in place for coordinating with the U.S. Government over a possible breach of these classified materials.

- While the facility technically meets TS/SCI certification, this is negatively impacted by the fact that the Rockefeller staff had the combinations to the safes. Numerous staff (who do not have the combination to the safes) have access to the vault. The Rockefeller security force responds to the alarms, and there is no S.O.P. to interface with USG security in the event of an alarm or incident.

- The Rockefeller family wishes to maintain some control over documents which are of a personal nature, regardless of classification, and wishes to maintain the continuity of this collection for future historical purposes.

This was something of a problem, considering that in addition to documents classified SECRET and below, there were 327 TOP SECRET and SCI documents covering a variety of topics.

4. A total of 327 TS and SCI documents were uncovered. File folders containing the TS and SCI documents were flagged with a yellow strip of paper stapled to the folder. The TS and SCI documents were removed from within each file and placed separately in the front of the respective file folder to facilitate the removal of these documents at a later date. Also, a previously prepared index was used and expanded to record the location of these documents to include more detail as follows:

- Tab A—Index of files from Captain Howe's Office.
- Tab B—Index of the Murphy Commission papers showing classification of each book.
- Tab C—Index of Murphy Commission chronological files showing safe number and file drawer.
- Tab D—Index to pertinent Murphy Commission records prior to the VP becoming a member.
- Tab E—A listing of files relating to the Operations Coordinations Board and Psychological Warfare Strategy. (These were accumulated in 1955 while Mr. Rockefeller was Special Assistant to President Eisenhower).
- Tab F—Index of materials in the military office of the Vice President entitled Peter J. Wallison.

Another CIA memo noted there were several issues at play. First, were the CIA records that were classified TOP SECRET or SCIF. However, records that Rockefeller received while Vice President were the property the Rockefeller Estate. A number of other records, including from the Rockefeller Commission and its inquiry into CIA, were the property of the government.

3. Facts Bearing on the Problem:

a. There are CIA-originated records bearing national security classification up to TOP SECRET and SCI in the vault at the Rockefeller Estate at Pocantico, New York.

b. The records created or received by NAR in his capacity as VP are the legal property of the Rockefeller Estate.

c. The records concerning the Rockefeller Commission on CIA Activities in the United States, the Murphy Commission, the Intelligence Reorganization records created or received by NAR when he was Special Assistant to President Eisenhower in 1955, and all other records not created or received by NAR as VP are the property of the US Government.

On top of that, the Rockefeller family had some concerns that since the materials weren't segregated, information might be disclosed "that would embarrass [Nelson Rockefeller] or the Rockefeller family" and that the files might become subject to FOIA.

4. Agency Concerns:

- a. Proper physical protection of the National Security Information stored in the Rockefeller vault;
- b. Current and future access to these records.

5. Rockefeller Family Concerns:

- a. Disclosure of information that would embarrass NAR or the Rockefeller family;
- b. Maintaining the integrity of the records for future historical research;
- c. That if in government custody, the records would be subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).
- d. Controlling future access to the records.

The solution that they settled on was sending the entire collection to the Ford Presidential Library, which had been approved for by the Agency for storage of TOP SECRET and SCI documents. Mrs. Rockefeller would control access to the documents, while CIA and other agencies would retain control of the classified information. The Agency also note that “once deposited with the Ford library, the records would not be subject to FOIA.”

b. After considering all of the alternatives, I have concluded that the only one that meets all of the concerns of the government and the Rockefeller family is for Mrs. Rockefeller to deposit the entire collection in tact with the Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Ford Library has been approved by CIA for the storage of National Security Information up to and including TOP SECRET and SCI. Mrs. Rockefeller would control access and no classified information would be released without the originating agency's approval. (This is the procedure already in effect for all CIA information in all presidential libraries.) Additionally, once deposited with the Ford library, the records would not be subject to FOIA. They would, however, be subject to subpoena as in fact they are now. Under this plan, the Rockefeller family could retain any personal correspondence in the Rockefeller Archives.

To aid in this process, it was recommended that Mrs. Rockefeller be granted a clearance for information classified SECRET.



6. My recommendations for follow-up actions to complete this project are:

- a. Arrange with the legal firm for the immediate removal of the Top Secret and Codeword material--bring to Headquarters for declassification process and/or return to originator. (If any material was to be downgraded to Secret and below, and if of possible interest to Mrs. R, then return to her for a final review and disposition).
- b. Grant Mrs. Rockefeller a Secret clearance. Also, another member of her staff should be granted a Secret clearance for logistical purposes. (This individual could open the safes, deliver the material to Mrs. R. for review, and then return to safes for storage/security until all documents have been reviewed and final dispositions have been determined and agreed upon).

Several other issues, however, remain unaddressed. A draft memo from CIA's Director of Security noted that there was no precedent, and the Agency would be unable to accredit the vault for storage after the Vice President left office.

2. Unfortunately, there is no precedent for the accreditation of a private residence for the retention of classified material. Thus, at the expiration of the Vice President's term of office, any accreditation would, in fact, become invalid. Although former Presidents have had materials removed to presidential libraries, the classified material in such holdings has been administered and retained under U. S. Government control by the National Archives. Presumably, the material desired by the Vice President could be handled similarly.

Nevertheless, the Vice President had apparently planned to do exactly that.

1. In November 1975 the Staff Security Officer, Office of the Vice President, requested the Director of Security, CIA, to conduct a survey of a vault in the Rockefeller residence at Pocantico Hills, New York, to determine its



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that time it was acknowledged by the Vice President's Security Officer that the Vice President planned to store some classified material up to and including Secret in that vault after he leaves office in January 1977.

A memo drafted a week later by the "Acting Director of Security" was rewritten the next day at the request of someone, whose name remains redacted, to omit a similar reference to the restriction.

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Ralph E. Martin
Staff Security Officer
Office of the Vice President

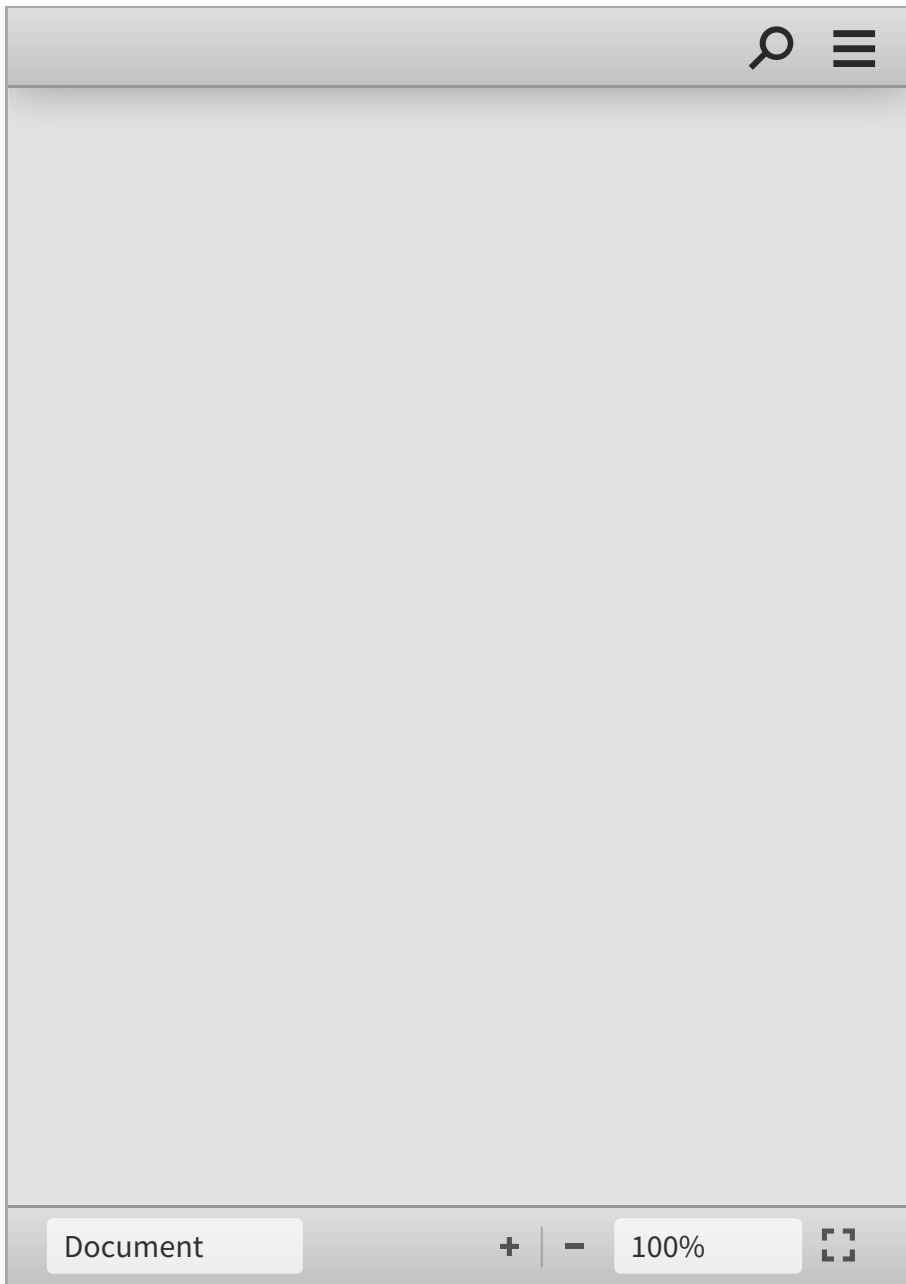
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Acting Director of Security

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A FOIA request [has been filed](#) for additional materials on the Rockefeller SCIF. While that processes, you can read the original CIA memo below.



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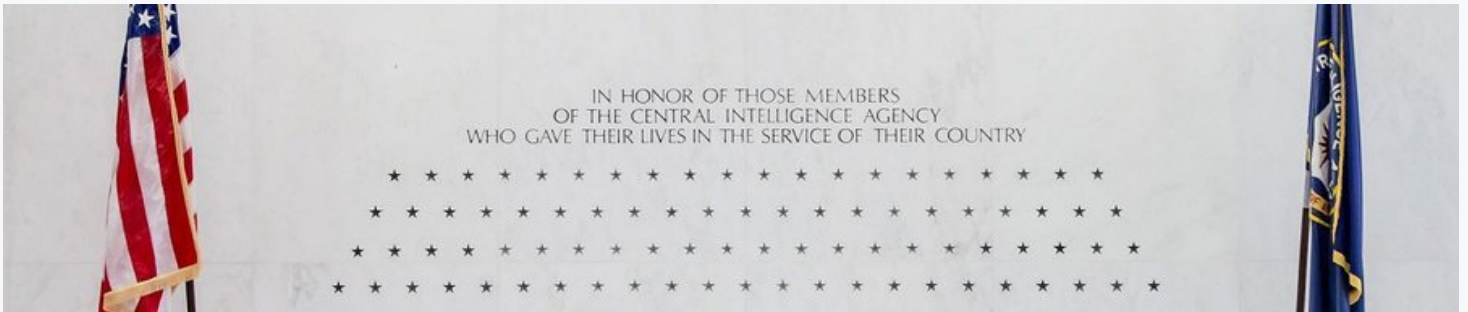
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by J.M. Porup

February 15, 2021



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