

Testimony of
David McCullough

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Senate Judiciary Committee
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Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you for the chance to speak before this committee in support of the Founding Fathers Project. What has been achieved thus far with the publication of the papers of the Founders is all of an exceedingly high order. I want to attest to that emphatically, as one of the many -- the countless number of historians, biographers, scholars, and students -- who have drawn again and again on the great wealth of material to be found in these incomparable volumes. Their value is unassailable, immeasurable. They are superbly edited. They are thorough. They are accurate. The footnotes are pure gold -- many are masterpieces of close scholarship.

Over the past twenty years and more I have worked with -- depended on in particular -- the volumes of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson papers. I could not have written my last two books, *John Adams* and *1776*, without them. I know how essential the papers are to our understanding those great Americans and their time.

Just this past week, for my current project, I wanted to find out what all was contained in the 80-some crates that Thomas Jefferson shipped back home to Virginia, in the course of his five years of diplomatic service in France -- all the books, art and artifacts, the scientific instruments, and the like. The range and variety of the inventory would, of course, reflect much about the mind of the man. So I turned to the Jefferson papers hoping there might be something. And, sure enough, there it was, in Volume 18, the whole sum total in a footnote that runs nearly six pages in small type. I know what work had to have gone into that footnote, the care and attention to detail. There have been times when I've spent a whole day on one paragraph just trying to get it right, to be clear and accurate.

The men and women who have devoted themselves to the publication of the papers are not skilled editors only, they are dedicated scholars. Their standards are the highest. Their knowledge of their subjects often surpasses that of anyone. I have worked with them. I know them. I count them as friends. Several in particular have guided and helped me in ways for which I am everlastingly grateful.

They are the best in the business and the high quality of the work they do need not, must not be jeopardized or visciated in order to speed up the rate of production. There really should be no argument about that.

As you know publication of the Papers began with Volume I of the Jefferson Papers in 1950, when Harry Truman was president. With this in mind, and given the opportunities we have, I would like to offer an analogy from that distant time of the Cold War.

The Russians had sealed off Berlin and the urgent question was what to do about it. A massive airlift was proposed. But it was calculated that given the number of planes available, and the volume of cargo each could carry, and the number of landings that could be made per day, given the number of airfields available, supplying the daily needs of food and fuel for a city of two and a half million people would be impossible.

So somebody suggested building another airfield.

We need to build another airfield. We need to double the investment in the project, double each staff, and thereby pick up the pace with no change in quality. We know it will work, and effectively, because it is already working with the post-presidential Jefferson Papers being edited at Monticello and the Adams Papers being edited at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

And what worthy work it is! Imagine, of all Jefferson's post-presidential papers, thus far, less than a third have appeared in print. What discoveries, what insights are still to come!

The value of the Papers of Founding Fathers goes far beyond their scholarly importance, immense as that is. These papers are American scripture. They are our political faith, the free and open exchange of ideas, the often brilliant expressions of some of the most fertile minds, the greatest statesmen, patriots, and seers in our history. No one body of private and public correspondence, official papers and pronouncements, tell us more about that founding time, or more about who we are and what we hold dear.

The Papers of the Founding Fathers are the ultimate national treasure and their importance to the people of America, especially in such times as these, could not be greater.

Mr. Chairman, you can tell a lot about a society by how it spends its money. Here is our chance, and it's long overdue, to show what we care about, what we value, and what we're proud to pay for.