History of the Federal Research Division

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The origins of the Federal Research Division are found in the Aeronautics Division, which had major collections of aeronautical periodicals, technical reports, and captured German and Japanese aviation documents, and the need of the United States to develop a defense posture in the emerging Cold War. The exploitation and analysis of unique Library collections had a significant national security value throughout the Cold War period.¹ To accomplish a comprehensive and routine exploitation of these collections for the U.S. government, Librarian of Congress Luther H. Evans issued General Service Order No. 1358 on March 5, 1948, announcing that a new organization, the Air Research Unit, was being established within the Aeronautics Division to provide “certain research services to the United States Air Force in connection with the collections of the Library and with other materials available to the Library.”²

The Air Research Unit was headed by John F. Stearns, and located on the third floor of the Annex (now the John Adams Building). On July 22, 1948, the unit was redesignated as the Air Research Division (ARD) with Stearns as chief.³ By this time, the division had a staff of sixty organized into Urban Area Report, Special Reports, Technical Analysis, and Research and Abstracting sections.⁴

The first annual report of the Air Studies Division (fiscal year [FY] 1949) noted several reasons for ARD’s establishment and its early successes. These included “the Library’s own philosophy of serving, on an ever-broadening front, all those who can use or profit by its collections and its skills”; “the support given that philosophy by the operating portions of the Library”; and the “cooperative development of a new program designed to improve the services available [from the Library] to government.” The report also noted the start of an enduring theme of service that has continued throughout the division’s history: “Tailor the cloth to the customer’s needs.”⁵

In addition to its service to the executive branch, ARD had a significant internal Library function—it assumed payroll responsibility for between eight and thirteen subject and descriptive catalogers in turn for priority cataloging “in terms of Air Force interests.”⁶ Another important ARD contribution was its work on the Slavic Union Catalog, which had been transferred from the Union Catalog Division. By October 1949, ARD had eliminated an arrearage of 50,000 cards and had begun to fill a gap of an estimated 10,000 entries in coverage.⁷

The division was enlarged and renamed the Air Studies Division (ASD) on January 17, 1949. Annual expenditures for FY1949 were $621,000, and the staff had increased to ninety-eight by September 30, 1949.⁸ A further increase in staffing to more than 130 in the next year led to discussions for the first time of moving ASD to rented quarters.⁹

Further growth and separation of functions led on May 1, 1951, to a split of ASD into two divisions: the Air Research Division and the Air Information Division (later the Aerospace Technology Division). ARD had a staff of seventy, and its chief was William T. Walsh, Jr.¹⁰
In 1963, Air Force research requirements and funding were reassigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and ARD was renamed the Defense Research Division (DRD) on September 10, 1963. The mission of performing science and technology research continued, but the nature of the work being performed broadened as DRD began serving all three armed services [U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Navy] on a nearly global basis. New work also included “quick response” work to assist DIA’s “crisis demands.”

Substantial staff growth and the decreasing amount of available space in the Library’s Capitol Hill buildings led to the relocation of DRD and several other divisions to 214 Massachusetts Avenue NE in September 1967. By the end of FY1968, DRD strength stood at 229 persons and was sustained by a $2,883,000 budget. Soon afterward, however, government-wide budget cuts caused a major reduction in force among the Library’s reimbursable programs. Although DRD survived, its companion division, the Aerospace Technology Division, was abolished. The Library decided to broaden DRD’s mandate and, on April 8, 1970, changed the division’s name to the Federal Research Division (FRD) to reflect the new client base. During this time, the division staff shrank from 279 at the beginning of FY1970 to 113.

FRD established new research programs for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the Naval Scientific and Technological Information Center, and the Environmental Protection Agency. In 1971, William Walsh retired after thirty years of federal service. He was succeeded as chief by William R. Dodge. Following another resurgence in funding and staff for FRD, Dodge retired in May 1980 and was succeeded on December 1, 1980, by Earl Rothermel, a division employee since 1954. In August 1982, the division relocated to the Washington Navy Yard.

New interagency agreements were developed with several Department of Defense organizations during the early and mid-1980s, the major one being the assumption in 1986 of the Area Handbook/Country Studies Series program for the Department of the Army. Following Rothermel’s retirement in June 1986, there were a series of acting chiefs: Carol Migdalovitz (1986–88), Robert L. Worden (1988), and Louis R. Mortimer, formerly director of Personnel and Labor Relations, who became acting chief in August 1988. In May 1991, Mortimer was appointed permanent chief of FRD.

In the late 1980s, FRD was hit by severe budget cuts from DIA. By 1989, the staff had been reduced to thirty-five. In the midst of downsizing, FRD began a vigorous marketing effort and expanded its client base from two or three large defense sponsors to a mix of medium-sized and small accounts that included the Departments of Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Interior, Justice, Transportation, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs; and such agencies as the Social
Security Administration, Postal Service, U.S. Institute of Peace, Inter-American Foundation, Army Corps of Engineers, Defense Manpower Data Center, and National Defense University. Work also was done for the U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals and the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. Another initiative in FY1991 was the establishment of a new computer-searchable database of formerly classified Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency documents concerning American Vietnam War-era missing-in-action personnel. The analytical index was first made available through the Main Reading Room and later on the World Wide Web. FRD also made texts of the documents available through the [Library's] Duplication Services, Microfilm Reading Room, and Loan Division.20

In FY1994, FRD started digitizing the Country Studies Series for inclusion among Library of Congress [web] offerings. In addition, the Southeast Asia POW/MIA Database was joined by a companion effort—known as the U.S. Russia Joint Commission Archival Documents Database—that provided full-text documents from former Soviet archives concerning unaccounted American personnel from World War II onward.21 During this same period, in May 1994, FRD was relocated to a General Services Administration complex at 1900 Half St. SW, known as the Buzzard Point Annex.22 In December 1996, FRD returned to the Capitol Hill complex for the first time since 1967, relocating forty-five staff members to the north study rooms on the fifth floor of the Adams Building. Soon after this move, however, revenue shortfalls in two successive years led to additional downsizing to an all-time low of fourteen permanent staff (greatly augmented by contract and overtime employees from other Library offices). Louis Mortimer was reassigned to the Copyright Office in September 1997, and Robert Worden was promoted to permanent chief in July 1998. At the beginning of FY1999, the Cold Regions Bibliography Project staff and program was reassigned from the Science, Technology, and Business Division to FRD. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, FRD was serving between thirty and forty federal agency clients and federal contractors annually, including agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Army Materiel Command, the International Trade Administration, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Department of Agriculture, various Library of Congress offices, and agencies involved in the war on terrorism.

On October 1, 2001, the Library of Congress Fiscal Operations Improvement Act of 2000 (Public Law No. 106–481) took effect. The act gave FRD, and other Library activities, the authority to establish a revolving fund in the U.S. Treasury and to deposit federal agency funds without fiscal year limitation. This new authority allowed FRD to perform its research functions and to manage its finances on a more reliable basis.
2 Memorandum of John F. Stearns, Chief Air Research Unit, to Mortimer Taube, Chief, Science and Technology Project, December 7, 1948.
4 *LC Annual Report, 1948*, organizational chart, October 31, 1948, following 104.
10 *LC Annual Report, 1951*, organization charts, October 31, 1951, following 5, 94.
11 Cole, *For Congress and the Nation*, 150.
16 Cole, *For Congress and the Nation*, 163.