

George Mason University Libraries Historic Intelligence Speaker Series

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Abstract

The George Mason University Libraries started a new speaker series, the *Historic Intelligence Speaker Series*, that was complementary to one of our significant special collections on this same topic. This series allowed us to generate interest in and awareness about our special collections, identify new prospective donors to library programs, and cultivate and steward our current library donors. The high-profile nature of our speakers, geographic proximity to a large relevant community in the Washington, DC area, and broad appeal have made this series particularly successful.

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George Mason University is in the middle of a one-billion-dollar fundraising campaign, and one of the key challenges faced by the Libraries has been a limited prospect list. Although the Libraries serve all students and therefore have a connection to all alumni, the schools and colleges have a stronger natural connection to alumni, and it can be hard for the Libraries to be visible.

To be more visible to alumni, the Libraries reviewed possibilities for topics that would have broad appeal, and one of the areas identified was historic intelligence studies. The Hayden B. Peake Historical Intelligence Collection at the George Mason University Special Collections Research Center provides researchers with an impressive range of books and journals documenting the historic, intellectual, and academic side of espionage, spy craft, and intelligence operations. The Peake Collection holds more than 10,000 publications documenting both historical and fictional accounts of intelligence operations and espionage work from Elizabeth I to the present. From rare books to unique titles to journals to trade publications, the development and implementation of spy craft the world over is well represented in this collection.

Given the strong local connections to this collecting area due to proximity to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and related agencies and the curricular connection to university programs and therefore alumni, a focus on historic intelligence seemed like it would be especially fruitful in achieving a number of the Libraries' goals, including bringing awareness of the research collections in GMU's Special Collections Research Center to wider audiences, identifying prospective donors to library programs, and cultivating and stewarding current library donors. This coincided with new data systems that allowed the colleges and units to invite a large number of local alumni and track their attendance at events across the institution. The Libraries, therefore, started a new Historic Intelligence Speaker Series, made possible by the Hayden B. Peake Intelligence Collection Endowment for the Libraries. After donating his collection, Mr. Peake then established the Endowment to provide lasting and perpetual support for the Collection.

The Speaker Series is designed to highlight different parts of the Peake Collection with a goal to expand the understanding of the vastness of the collection through speakers with expertise in the intelligence field, hosting the first speaker in October 2024. More than 90 alumni, friends, students, and intelligence community members were in attendance to hear H. Keith Melton (author of many spy books and a founding member of the Board of Directors for the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.), Nigel West (historian and expert on secret services, counter-intelligence, and espionage), and Hayden Peake (donor of the Peake Collection). The high-profile speakers were possible because of their personal connection to Hayden Peake, and these speakers subsequently recommended future speakers as well.

A special part of the first event was the display of valuable and key items from the Peake Collection in a protected space, allowing attendees to experience the special collection materials, such as a 1780 letter signed by General George Washington and *Per Ardua Libertas*, a rare 1942 publication from the British Military Intelligence element (MI9) responsible for escape and evasion operations created specifically for members of a special contingent of US Army Intelligence officers assigned to prepare materials to aid downed pilots and POW escapees during WWII. One of only four known copies in existence, the book illustrates what the British developed for those purposes, including original copies of maps printed on silk (which were quiet when used) and a letter signed by Clayton Hutton, inventor of the silk map.

The second lecture in the series, which took place in March 2025, had an even greater response, and the Libraries had to cap attendance at 200 people and stop promoting the event to avoid an excess of people attending. The speaker, Jonna Mendez, former CIA Head of Disguise, was a tremendous draw, and many attendees said that they had not been on campus in many years but had returned for this event. This time, a VIP reception before the event allowed a small number of attendees to meet the speaker and interact with materials from the collection focused on the role of women in historic intelligence. The display generated interest from a faculty member who was previously unaware of these materials, and this person is now planning to apply to the Libraries' faculty research program to make greater use of these materials, achieving another Libraries goal.

The high RSVP response for these events led to space challenges, as the room most often used for events is lovely but has limited occupancy. Larger library spaces are in high demand, and curricular activities are given priority. Reserving larger campus spaces is also a challenge, as they are in constant use and reserved

sometimes twelve months in advance. Further, larger campus spaces do not allow for the most valuable items from our collections to be accessed by attendees. Planning further ahead will be key to the success of future events in this series.

The key results from this new speaker series include:

- Registered guests have yielded ten major gift prospect leads.
- Hayden Peake, the existing library donor, was stewarded through the event and his speaking role. Another potential donor was featured as a speaker and given tours of the facilities, leading to a better understanding of our work and programs.
- The broader intelligence community in the region, as well as researchers within GMU, were exposed to collections and have learned how to access the materials.