

New Balance

Interior's ABE HASPEL sorts out the massive Indian trust fund accounting mess.

An economist by training, Abe Haspel knows his way around numbers. Recruited in 2002 by then-Interior Secretary Gale Norton to tackle the agency's dysfunctional Indian trust fund accounting system, Haspel took on what

many would consider a thankless job, one marked largely by migraine-inducing sums of money, paper and boxes. The ongoing class action lawsuit, filed in 1996 against the Interior Department on behalf of 500,000 American Indians, seeks more than \$200 billion in government-held trust fund accounts. From the Government Accountability Office to the U.S. District Court, Interior has been excoriated over the past decade for its continued mismanagement of the system.

In the past four years, however, Haspel has devised a common-sense approach to organizing trust fund records that would make Martha Stewart proud. The Long Island, N.Y., native began collecting the mostly paper records from disparate locations. Then working closely with the National Archives and Records Administration, he rolled out the ongoing process to store the documents in one place—the new American Indian Records Repository in Lenexa, Kan. To date, about 150,000 boxes containing nearly half a billion pieces

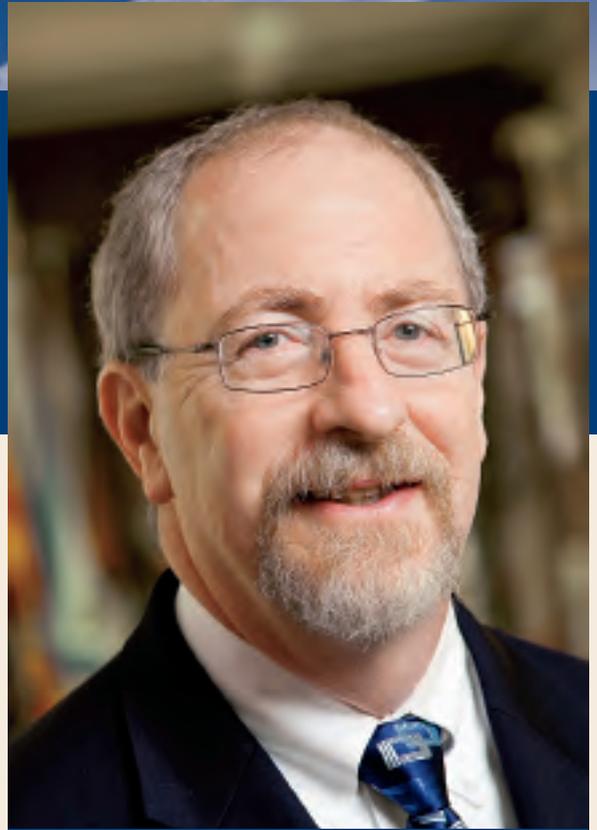
of paper have been indexed at the repository. “A lot of people are intimidated by the size of the problem,” says Haspel, who worked at the Energy Department for 12 years before returning to Interior, where he began his government career. “My view has always been that just because something is large doesn't mean it's intractable.” He also devised a smarter electronic imaging system for the records that saves the government hundred of millions of dollars. The lawsuit is still pending, but thanks to Haspel, Interior is making headway on getting its paperwork in order.

A three-time winner of the Presidential Rank Award for Distinguished Executive (he boasts two meritorious awards), Haspel is turning more of his energy these days to climate change—an issue he was heavily involved in during the Clinton administration. He helped craft the first national energy strategy plan in the early 1990s, and led the international climate technology initiative on behalf of the State Department from

1998 to 2000. Before returning to Interior in 2002, Haspel was chief operating officer at Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy. Now at Interior, he is the department's lead coordinator for its internal energy council.

A former economics professor, Haspel has a deep interest in education. At Interior, he worked with the Office of Indian Education Programs to create a well-received strategic plan to improve performance at Bureau of Indian Affairs-operated schools, and he helped create a records management degree program at Haskell Indian Nations University.

“I manage by the Golden Rule,” says Haspel, 57. “I treat other people the way I'd like to be treated.” As a result, he says, “I'm pretty successful getting people to go the extra mile and work with me, as opposed to against me.”



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