

## Libraries and Legacies: Presidential Libraries from FDR to Obama

When Franklin D. Roosevelt created the nation's first Presidential library he could not have envisioned how the library system would grow and change with the times.

Roosevelt sketched a small Dutch Colonial building adjacent to his Springwood estate in Hyde Park, New York, which would cost of \$376,000 in ??? (approximately \$6 million in today's dollars) and measured 56,000 square feet. By contrast, it is estimated that the George W. Bush Presidential Center in Dallas, a 226,000 square foot structure on a 15-acre urban park, cost close to \$500 million.

But it's not just the staggering costs of a Presidential library that have changed since that first Presidential library. So has the way historical content is presented in the libraries. It's now more balanced and more complete so visitors can better understand the options the President had when making historic decisions and choosing policy directions as well as the results, positive and negative, of those decisions and policies.

The libraries have always provided a stage for Presidents to defend their actions after they have left office.

Roosevelt established the precedent whereby private funds are raised to construct a library, which is then managed by the United States National Archives. He also set the example of Presidents who, after the transfer of their resources to an archive, remain keenly interested in how "their" libraries are run. In 1941, when the Roosevelt Library opened, the then-Archivist of the United States wrote in his diary: "The President still thinks of the library as his personal property." Two years later, Roosevelt wrote a memo to the first library director revealing his desire to

control the institution after his death by selecting future leaders of his own choosing.

Similar concerns remain an issue with more recent libraries. Former Presidents and their families, unsurprisingly, have a vested interest in these institutions and in the stories told in their museums. Roosevelt understood that most tourists would not be interested in using the archives and that libraries would require creative displays to attract visitors. And that suspicion endures. Verne Newton, the Roosevelt Library director in the 1990s, described “a demographic crisis” and declining admissions. To attract new audiences, he wrote that the library had to consider becoming “a mini-Disneyland ... to entertain, educate, and create a marketable product.”

The model Roosevelt created for Presidential libraries includes inherent tensions for curators and archivists. Should libraries, for example, play a role in “burnishing” a president’s legacy? How do they avoid becoming part of what historian Michael Kammen has described as “the heritage industry” and its “impulse to remember what is attractive or flattering and to ignore all the rest?” This tension is compounded by the fact that while Presidential libraries are federal institutions, they rely on key financial support from private Presidential foundations that are operated by the former President, his family, and associates. As Benjamin Huffbauer writes, this can cause libraries to be pulled in conflicting directions “between authenticity and reproduction, between education and entertainment, and between history and heritage.”

As a former library director and a current special assistant for Presidential libraries at the National Archives, I grapple with these tensions every day. From my perspective, the stories told through the museums at Presidential libraries—like all histories—have to be seen in the context in which they are crafted. Yet I believe in recent years, Presidential libraries have moved away from hagiography to present more nuanced and balanced views of the men and the Presidencies they chronicle. There are some recent changes in how Presidential libraries function, and in the twilight of Barack Obama’s Presidency (and as planning proceeds for the Obama Library in Chicago), it seems timely to outline advances that have occurred within the system, which have led to a more engaging and historically accurate museum experience for visitors.

Before Roosevelt built the first Presidential library, previous Presidents had donated their papers to universities, state and local institutions, and the Library of Congress. Roosevelt believed his materials belonged to the American people and would be best managed by the National Archives. When he officially dedicated the library 75 years ago, the system of modern Presidential libraries was born.

President Harry S. Truman adopted a similar model for his library in Independence, Missouri, and subsequently proposed legislation which became the *Presidential Libraries Act of 1955*. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the legislation into law and used it to establish his Presidential library in Abilene, Kansas. The 1955 act codified the inclusion of museums into law authorizing the government to “charge

and collect reasonable fees for the privilege of visiting and viewing exhibit rooms or museum space in a Presidential archival depository.” From the beginning, it was understood that Presidential libraries would include museums. Roosevelt insisted on a tourist-friendly experience which he hoped would attract “an appalling number of sightseers.”<sup>1</sup> He modeled his library after the Rutherford B. Hayes Memorial Library in Fremont, Ohio, which included a museum about the Hayes Presidency.

Presidential libraries and their museums now serve as classrooms of democracy for more than two million visitors annually. No other national consortium has a wider reach, receives more press attention, or more deeply engages the public’s imagination with the lives and leadership qualities of those who have held our nation’s highest office—and the lessons their stories offer for our times.

Since Roosevelt built his library there have been a number of changes to the system. Some of the most dramatic have been propelled by Congress through alterations in the authorizing legislation.

In 1978 and 1986 respectively, Congress updated the original 1955 law, first by passing *The Presidential Records Act* declaring that Presidential records do not belong to the former President but to the American people. Then Congress sought

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<sup>1</sup> Huff, 23 (We’re using Chicago for the citations, if you want to do the footnotes yourself. If not, just send me on the details and I can do it on your behalf.)

to reduce the size and cost of running the library system—setting restrictions concerning the square footage for libraries and mandating that Presidential foundations create endowments to be managed by the Federal government and used to offset future operational costs. While Congress is empowered to constrict the size of the Federally operated libraries—they cannot prevent Presidential foundations from building larger “centers” adjacent to a library itself.

For the newer libraries—especially those of William J. Clinton in Little Rock, Arkansas, and George W. Bush—the Federal space (including the museum) is just a portion of a much larger Presidential center. Similarly, in its mountaintop campus in Simi Valley, California, the Reagan Foundation built a 90,000 square foot glass pavilion (at no cost to the taxpayer) to house the actual Air Force One plane that President Ronald Reagan used during his Presidency. The Reagan Foundation now owns and operates that portion of the building, which has become a key component to the museum experience at the Reagan Library.

It is correct to assume that this development of these sites has led Presidential foundations to play a greater role in the visitor’s experience. Many of the foundations at the newer libraries maintain and operate robust traveling exhibit programs that help to attract larger number of tourists to their sites. There is an on-going debate concerning the role that Presidential foundations play in all of this.

On one hand, as Sharon Fawcett, the former assistant archivist for Presidential libraries, once testified before Congress, “The contributions of these support

organizations to the libraries spell the difference between static repositories and lively, vital centers of scholarship and service to the public.”

On the other hand, some see the influence of Presidential foundations as more pernicious. In his book, *The Last Campaign: How Presidents Rewrite History, Run for Posterity, and Enshrine their Legacies*, Anthony Clark writes “Since the foundation is likely to be funded and operated by loyal supporters (and even family members) of the President, [what goes into exhibits (and what does not)] is a carefully scripted history that more often than not emphasizes only the positive, omits inconvenient facts and events, and makes the case to ‘sell’ the president one final time.”

Whether Clark’s charges are valid is up to visitors to decide. I am perhaps too close to the system to be objective on this point, but during my 17 years working with the National Archives I believe there has been a movement for Presidential libraries to be more transparent and their histories more accurate and inclusive.

This can perhaps best be seen in the decision by the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, to open its collection of secretly recorded tapes that had previously remained closed to researchers. The “deed” donating the recordings to the National Archives specified that they were to remain sealed for 50 years. Harry Middleton, director of the Johnson Library at the time, determined he had the legal authority to break the seal and that it was “historically very important” to begin processing the collection for public release. The opening of the tapes was

hugely popular and brought a new understanding of Johnson, the man and national leader, and the challenges he faced during his Presidency.

Over time, other Presidential libraries (and their respective foundations) have come to understand that the more transparent they are—showing history and their respective Presidents in triumph and despair—encourages a more sympathetic response from the public. Examples of library attempts to present well-rounded portrayals include exhibits portraying Roosevelt’s affliction with polio; John F. Kennedy’s admission of regret for mistakenly approving a telegram that led to a coup in Vietnam at the Kennedy Library in Boston; and President Gerald R. Ford’s personal decision to display the staircase used by escaping Vietnamese refugees during the fall of Saigon (overruling his former advisors who feared it was evidence of American defeat) at the Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan (The Ford Library is in Ann Arbor, Michigan).

Most recently, the Richard Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California, re-designed its permanent galleries with what veteran political journalist Todd Purdum described as “radically reimagined interactive exhibits ... [that] move beyond the blatant hagiography that characterized the old Nixon library (and that infuses most Presidential libraries to one degree or another) to tell history whole. That means a forthright look at Watergate, the bombing of Cambodia and other negative aspects of the Nixon legacy, amounting to an important victory for professional historians who have long battled the band of Nixon loyalists.”

In confronting controversial issues like the bombings in Cambodia, the Nixon Library has incorporated interactive displays that allow visitors to learn about these issues, put themselves in the President's shoes, and make their own decision on how specific historical situations should have been handled.

The Truman Library was the first to use this strategy in the late 1990s as part of an exhibit on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Visitors are confronted with the current and potential American and Japanese causality reports facing Truman. Then, they have the opportunity to "vote" on whether they agree with his decision to use atomic weapons to hasten the end of the war and share their feelings about the morality of his choice.

Huffbauer describes this exhibit as a "critical and thought provoking museum display" that turned the Truman Library from a temple to a former President into "a forum where history is challenged by curators and historians, as well as by students and tourists, demonstrating how a mature library can evolve to become a place where cautionary and inquisitive approaches to history are practiced."<sup>2</sup>

Seeing the success of the Truman displays, more recent libraries have followed suit. The Clinton Library recreates the White House Cabinet Room with interactive displays that involve visitors in the decisions made by President Clinton. And the George W. Bush Library dedicates considerable space to a "Decision Points

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<sup>2</sup> Huffbauer, 9

Theater” in which visitors are faced with three different “threats” under considerable time pressure and must vote on how best to respond to the situation at hand.

While these changes have not eliminated the tensions that exist within Presidential libraries, they have, in my view, helped libraries to better engage museum visitors in historical inquiry—reminding us, as Presidential historian Arthur M. Schlesinger once proclaimed, “History is to a nation as memory is to the individual. As persons deprived of memory become disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been or where they are going, so a nation denied a conception of the past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future.”

Operating the museums within Presidential libraries is a responsibility that the National Archives takes seriously and, when successful, strengthens the public’s ability to understand its past and confront the challenges of our time. Undertaking and succeeding in such an effort can and should be seen a legacy worthy of the very Presidents whose histories Presidential libraries hold.