

Libraries and Legacies: Presidential Libraries from FDR to Obama

When Franklin Roosevelt created the nation's first presidential library he could not have envisioned how the library system would grow and change with the times. FDR sketched a small Dutch Colonial building adjacent to his Springwood estate in Hyde Park, New York, which would cost of \$376,000 (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 near Dallas, a 226,000 square foot structure on a 15-acre urban park, cost close to \$500 million .

FDR established the precedent whereby private funds are raised to construct a library which is then managed by the United States National Archives. FDR also set the example of presidents who, after the transfer resources to an archive, remain keenly interested in how "their" libraries are run. In 1941, when the FDR 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, FDR 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. FDR 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 Library Director in

the 1990's 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 FDR 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, 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 for the Obama Library in

Chicago), it seems timely to outline advances that have occurred within the system, which have led, in my view, to a more engaging and historically accurate museum experience for visitors.

Before FDR built the first presidential library, previous presidents had donated their papers to universities, state & local institutions, and to the Library of Congress. FDR 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 Eisenhower signed the act into law.. The Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 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. FDR insisted on a tourist-friendly experience which he hoped would attract “an appalling number of sightseers.”¹ He modeled his Library after the Rutherford B. Hayes Memorial Library in Freemont, Ohio which included a museum about the Hayes Presidency.

¹ 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.)

Presidential libraries and their museums now serve as classrooms of democracy for over two-million annual visitors. 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 FDR 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 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 Clinton and Bush (43) – the federal space (including the museum) is just a portion of a much larger presidential center.

Similarly in its mountaintop campus in Simi Valley, 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 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.

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 which 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."

Others 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 or not Mr. 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

seventeen 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 LBJ Library to open their collection of secretly recorded tapes which had previously remained closed to researchers. The “deed” donating the recordings to the National Archives specified that they were to remain sealed for fifty years. Harry Middleton, the 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 Lyndon 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 FDR’s affliction with polio, JFK’s admission of regret for mistakenly approving a telegram which led to a coup in Vietnam; and President 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). Most recently, the Nixon Library 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 1990’s 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 and then are given 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.

Benjamin Huffbauer describes this exhibit as a “critical and thought provoking museum display” which 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.”²

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 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

² Huffbauer, 9

and succeeding in such an effort can and should be seen a legacy worthy of the very presidents whose histories presidential libraries hold.