

# A special message for the SMU community

The following are excerpts from the address by Archivist **Allen Weinstein** at the commencement exercises at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, TX, on May 17. The full text is available at [www.archives.gov/about/speeches/](http://www.archives.gov/about/speeches/). Video can be seen at <http://www.smu.edu/flashvideo/?id=216>.

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As Archivist of the United States, I manage almost four dozen Federal facilities nationwide, including a dozen Presidential libraries. [SMU] President [R. Gerald] Turner has invited me to deliver this commencement talk undoubtedly, in some measure, to explain to graduates, families, and friends what all the fuss has been for the past year or so over the George W. Bush Presidential Library and adjacent public policy institute.

Many of you will remain as alumni and supporters of this great university for the rest of your lives. So, it is worth asking at the outset: Will the planned Presidential library center be of benefit to SMU? My short answer is yes....

The National Archives Presidential Library System is now made up of 12 libraries—soon to be 13—one for each President from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush. . . . Put simply, the libraries themselves are normally constructed with funds provided by supporters of each President, after which they are funded by annual stipends provided by the U.S. Congress and managed by NARA.

Any research center or policy institute is closely linked to the library but privately funded. These centers have at times generated controversy, as here at SMU, often dying down as the particular facility proves to be properly managed and sensitive to the need to provide a genuine diversity of views and voices. Normally, the narrower and less open to broad-based dialogue a center becomes, the greater its problems.

Even most opponents of the proposed independent Bush Policy Institute have acknowledged that a popular, well-run Presidential library center will redound to the benefit of SMU.

The major cost to the university will be the challenges to that community and to the Bush Library community, as both evolve, to maintain the greatest measure of cooperation



and civility at all times, while resisting the temptation to turn normal policy disagreements into burning, divisive public issues.

Be assured that the George W. Bush Presidential

Library, like the 12 other libraries in the National Archives system, will be operated as a *nonpartisan* Federal facility, staffed by civil service employees working under a director who will be appointed by the Archivist of the United States in accordance with the laws governing the Archives and the Presidential libraries.

Inevitably, it will raise SMU's profile as an important research center, given the fact that the archived records of the two-term Bush administration will be held in the library. And in time, like our national headquarters in Washington, DC, and numerous other archival facilities from Massachusetts to Alaska, the Bush 43 library will play its own distinctive role by offering research opportunities and public programs that promote the study of American history, civic participation, and civic literacy in general.

What do I mean by "civic literacy?" It is knowing how our nation began, what the Founding Fathers intended it to be, the rights and responsibilities of its citizens, and how each citizen can contribute to the well-being of this democracy.

One of the ways the Archives promotes civic education is to make it easy to access and use the permanent records of the Federal Government—including the records of the office of the chief executive and commander-in-chief....

"Lessons, lessons"—every proper commencement address should contain a few useful lessons. First, recognize the moral limits beyond which you cannot be pushed; in other words, the boundaries of your conscience, normally not fully discovered at your ages. One interesting exercise in this connection might be to trace back to earlier periods of American history the clearest and most abusive examples of interference with freedoms and conscience.

Begin with the Salem witchcraft trials of the 1690s. Move forward to the "Alien and Sedition Acts" of the early republic, and from there to the suspension of *habeas corpus* during the Civil War.

Turn then to the arbitrary political arrests of the First and Second World Wars, the many abuses of the Cold War "McCarthy era," and from there to the civil liberties climate in our own time. Find your conscience and hold it close. ....

One of the pivotal connective links from earliest repressive efforts to the present time is the "pushback" each received from opponents at the time: a phenomenon that the late scholar and United States Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, called the "self-corrective" forces at work within American society. These forces make difficult any and all efforts to create a thoroughly repressive climate of opinion, even during wars and pre- or postwar red scares.

You will not find similar "self-corrective" societies in great numbers in our time. There are precious few and none as obsessively self-corrective as ours. ....

As President George W. Bush has observed, "Ignorance of American history and civics weakens our sense of citizenship. To be an American is not just a matter of blood or birth. We are bound by ideals, and our children must know those ideals."

Recognize and work at these ideals, graduates, and the world can be yours. But remember that this graduation is only the first step in your lifelong commitment to education and active citizenship.

For you and for all of us, the work continues. ....

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN  
Archivist of the United States

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