

TESTIMONY OF THOMAS J. PUTNAM
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
AND THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
ON
“PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES: THEIR MISSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION”
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Chairman Mica, Chairman Issa, and Members of the Committees – I am Tom Putnam, Director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. I appreciate this opportunity to discuss the vital role of our nation’s thirteen presidential libraries preserving and providing access to the documents and materials that tell the story of our shared history through the lens and life stories of the individuals who have held our country’s highest office. In my testimony, I will describe the strengths of the Presidential Library system, some of the challenges we face, and comment on the future direction of Presidential Libraries and the role of the federal government in supporting these institutions.

For scholars and students, presidential libraries hold the memory of our nation. They are unique repositories of the historical materials that chronicle our past. And for the general public, their interactive museums offer visitors an opportunity to experience first-

hand the events that have shaped us and to understand the lessons of leadership that derive from them.

This is the goal of all of the Presidential Libraries. Whether it is a student enrolled in the Truman Library's innovative White House Decision Center or a museum visitor's watching the recreation, via video, of an encapsulated day in the life of a president at the newly renovated museum at the Carter Library – we seek to create a more active and informed citizenry who understand the pressures with which our country's chief executive grapples.

I believe that the current model under which Presidential Libraries operate works well, provides immeasurable benefits to our people, and serves as a foundation to American democracy. As you know, private funds are used to construct these buildings under guidelines set by Congress. Once the Libraries have been dedicated and officially opened, federal funds are used to operate, maintain, and administer them. As part of the National Archives and Records Administration, each Library is required to meet the same national standards and follow tested archival principles, especially as they relate to classified materials in our collections. We are bound to open materials as quickly as possible and then use them to tell as objective a story as possible concerning the lives of our presidents and their years in the White House.

Another fundamental element of the current system is the support each Library receives from its Library Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) organization whose primary purpose is to assist

Presidential Libraries in joint initiatives and programming which could not be undertaken with federal funding alone. Moreover, Library Foundations help to leverage the federal investment made by Congress by raising private funds from individuals, corporations, and foundations that are essential to our enterprise.

Each Library also has its own stream of revenue – through a variety of sources including paid admission to its museum, and in some cases sales in its store and the rental of portions of its building to outside groups.

Because the current model has been so successful it has become an example for the many of the world's democratic nations. Dozens of leaders of foreign countries have visited or sent representatives to visit the National Archives and various presidential libraries to understand how we operate.

Those of us who work in the presidential library system are appreciative of President Franklin Roosevelt's vision, which led to the creation of the National Archives in 1934 but also conceived of and built the first Presidential Library in 1939 on 16 acres of land in Hyde Park, New York, that he donated to the U.S. government. President Roosevelt understood the benefits of building a unique facility to house the vast quantity of historical papers, books, and memorabilia he had accumulated during a lifetime of public service and private collecting. Prior to his presidency, the final disposition of Presidential papers was left to chance. Although a valued part of our shared heritage, the papers of chief executives were deemed private property which they took with them upon

leaving office. Some material was sold or destroyed and thus either scattered or lost forever. Other material remained with families, but was inaccessible to scholars for long periods of time. The fortunate collections found their way into the Library of Congress and private repositories. In erecting his library, President Roosevelt created an institution which would preserve his papers and historical materials and make them available to researchers and the general public.

At the dedication of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library on June 30, 1941, President Roosevelt proclaimed that in maintaining archival facilities and presidential libraries . . . *a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past so that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.*

The library that bears his name has carried forward President Roosevelt's message and has stimulated productive scholarship on his life and times in the same spirit.

Due to his foresight both within the presidential library system and through the National Archives writ large, over the past seventy five years - billions of maps, photographs, textual documents, artifacts, moving images, and electronic records have been accessioned and preserved. And in turn these documents have been used by researchers, viewed by museum visitors, and have captivated the imaginations of school children. Whether through teaching students about Herbert Hoover's humanitarian efforts to counter famine in Europe at the start of the 20th century or about George W. Bush's

efforts to eradicate AIDS in Africa 100 years later – our presidential Libraries tell America’s story as an emerging world power over the course of the past 100 years.

Since President Roosevelt, all of the other presidents have followed his lead in creating presidential libraries including most recently President George W. Bush and the family of President Richard M. Nixon. While not without its challenges, this successful inclusion of the Nixon Library makes the system whole and is a credit to the National Archives, the Nixon family, and the Nixon Foundation. It underlies one of the central tenets of our work: the importance of transparency as an essential element of democratic government. Citizens must understand how their government works and have access to the documents that define their past.

One of the strengths of the current system is that it strikes the right balance between centralization and decentralization. Each Library is built in a location determined by the President or his family. In visiting them, one is immersed in the locale in which the President lived and matured politically. Walking the streets of Grand Rapids, Michigan one understands the quiet dignity of Gerald Ford. Visitors understand the impetus of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty differently after traveling through Texas and then reading in the Johnson Library the letter LBJ wrote to his mother securing 200 toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste for the Mexican American students he taught as a young man in a segregated South Texas town.

Over the years, there have been calls to centralize the Presidential Library system by housing all of the records in a giant warehouse in or near our nation's capitol. In fact, in a press conference in 1962, President Kennedy was asked if he would consider locating his Library in Washington, DC as a means of centralizing the records of his presidency, allowing scholars easier access to his materials and related federal records. He paused in the press conference indicating that yes he would consider doing so – and then replied, playfully, “I’m going to build my Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts.”

He went on to make two points that are relevant to our hearing today. First he stated that through the use of technology it would eventually not matter where a Library was located. "Through scientific means of reproduction ... and this will certainly be increased as time goes on, we will find it possible to reproduce the key documents so that they will be commonly available," the President responded.

At the Kennedy Library we have recently made President Kennedy's vision a reality by digitizing over 300,000 of the most important documents of his presidency, all of the audio of his speeches and press conferences, hours of video, and thousands of photographs. For young people today an item doesn't exist if it is not accessible via the internet. Today the presidency of John F. Kennedy exists in an exciting, interactive manner, on the Kennedy Library's new website. Such a project would not have been possible were it not for the support of the Kennedy Library's partner, the Kennedy Library Foundation, and our four corporate sponsors – EMC, Raytheon, Iron Mountain, and AT&T – who dedicated an estimated \$10 million in philanthropic support for this

effort. Within days of launching these archives, we experienced close to 3 million page hits.

Similarly on the 40th anniversary of the first moon landing – the Kennedy Library partnered with NASA, AOL, and the Martin Agency to recreate the historic Apollo 11 mission. Through an interactive website, *WeChooseTheMoon.org*, 1.3 million visitors were able to relive minute-by-minute the five-day Apollo mission in real-time. While many of the images, video and audio from the mission are a part of public domain, this was the first time they had been aggregated and organized to give viewers a “mission experience.” Since that time the site has become a self-guided tour of the mission that over 4.5 million people have taken.

Initiatives such as these can only be undertaken with Foundation support. In my experience the Presidential Libraries and the American people benefit greatly from the fundraising efforts and joint programming sponsored by each Library and its Foundation. Each Library and Library Foundation partnership works together to develop a robust set of public programs and museum exhibits for students and teachers, adults, and families. They include history and civic education programs; public forums on historical topics and contemporary issues; performing arts series; professional development opportunities for educators; and docent-led gallery programs for walk-in visitors.

The Libraries rely on Foundation and corporate funding to underwrite our museum exhibit programs – including renovations of our permanent galleries and the creation of

temporary exhibits. The Reagan and Carter Libraries both recently completed major renovations; the Roosevelt Library's renovations are underway; and the Ford Library is in the design phase. At the Kennedy Library, our Foundation provided the base support for us to organize a blockbuster traveling exhibit, *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years*, featuring among other items the gowns of Jacqueline Kennedy. This exhibit was viewed by millions in New York, Paris, and Chicago. Many Libraries also rely on their foundations for their marketing efforts and in the design and development of their websites.

The Reagan Library Foundation has recently sponsored a remarkable national celebration of the centennial of Ronald Reagan's birth and funded a dramatic redesign of the Library's museum exhibits which masterfully complements the glass pavilion the Foundation constructed in 2005 to showcase Air Force One (a structure and artifact that is unique compared to other Presidential Libraries). Allowing museum visitors to experience the President's airplane is a once in a lifetime experience that brings history to life.

At their best, the Library Foundations understand and honor their respective Library's core functions of preserving the historical assets entrusted to their care and making them available to the general public through research rooms, website, museum exhibits, and education programs. The Foundations also fully appreciate the policies concerning the Library's federal responsibilities and the National Archives' standards we must meet in

fulfilling them. In fact, many of our Foundations provide generous financial support for not only programming but in assisting the Libraries in achieving their core functions.

One of the hallmarks of the leadership of the Kennedy Library Foundation is the belief that the best way to promote the legacy of John F. Kennedy is to increase access for scholars and the general public to the historical record. As people learn more about President Kennedy's leadership and decision-making style, they come away with a deeper understanding of the challenges he faced and the manner in which he led our country. Our partnership, therefore, is based on shared interests – both organizations believe strongly in our mission of making historical resources of the Library as widely available as possible in order to teach others about President Kennedy and the role he played in our national history.

The other point that President Kennedy made in his press conference in 1962 when asked about the location of his future Library, was that it is vital to have these institutions located throughout the country as each can serve as a vital center of history exploration and civic education in its respective geographic regions. By placing them in the home state of each president they connect the residents of that region to their national government in a unique and authentic way.

My colleagues and I joke that when we read the National Archives news clips that are sent to us daily that the press that the 12 other presidential libraries get combined is dwarfed by the press clippings from the Eisenhower Library. For that institution gets

widespread local coverage for its educational programs from the papers of Abilene and its surrounding communities. The Eisenhower Library makes a positive contribution to those fortunate to live in its vicinity. Locating the Library in Abilene also allows the residents of that region to take pride in their native son who not only led the military effort to defeat Hitler and the Third Reich, but then led his nation through a decade of peace, prosperity, and the expansion of civil rights and opportunities for all Americans. Placing Libraries in Abilene, Kansas; Independence Missouri; and West Branch, Iowa are a potent reminder to those growing up in those areas that they, too, can make their mark on our nation's history. The current distribution of Libraries connects those living in the heartland, the two coasts, and the Deep South directly to our nation's capital, the White House, and the Oval Office.

Perhaps the greatest example of the positive economic impact of a presidential library has been the construction of the Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas. Since its opening, the Library has attracted more than 2 million visitors which, in turn, has generated revenue and hospitality taxes for the city. The revived River Market district, a dining and retail area near the library, was created as a result of the Library's opening. The Library has spurred an estimated \$2 billion in new projects in the surrounding parts of Little Rock enabling the city to serve as the world headquarters for Heifer International located adjacent to the Library center. In short, the federal investment in these institutions has the potential to spur considerable economic growth in the cities and communities where the Libraries are housed.

President Kennedy envisioned his Library as a vital center of education, exchange and thought. Each Library has a similar commitment to not only make the history we house accessible but to also make it relevant to our times. In doing so, the Presidential Libraries often work together on shared initiatives like the interactive web-based presidential timeline or through a series of Presidential Library conferences. To date, four conferences have been organized including sessions on such timely topics as *Vietnam and the Presidency*; *The Presidency and the Supreme Court*; and *The Presidency in the Nuclear Age*. Many of these conferences are shown either live or in prime time on C-SPAN where they attract a national audience.

The forums offered at Presidential Libraries continuously features speakers from all areas of the political spectrum. Over the course of the past months, the Kennedy Library, for example, has featured former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and David Souter, and next month we will host U.S. Senator Scott Brown. Over the course of the past few years we have also hosted public forums with former Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush and presidential candidates Senator John McCain and Former Gov. Mitt Romney. Similarly both the Reagan Library and the Bush (41) Libraries featured Senator Edward M. Kennedy as part of their public programs. My colleague from the Bush Library recalls the session with Senator Kennedy to be one of the most fascinating exchanges in his years as Director. The Libraries also serve as hosts to visiting dignitaries and heads of state – allowing American citizens access to world leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Corazon Aquino, Prince Hussein, and Vaclav Havel.

Some foundations sponsors programs that are “independent” of the Library such as the Kennedy Library’s Profile in Courage Award or the extraordinary work undertaken by the Carter Center and the Clinton Foundation. While it would not be appropriate for the Library, as a federal institution, to be part of selecting winners of such awards or to assist in the on-going policy work of former Presidents Clinton and Carter – the ceremonies that are held at the Library and affiliations with the work of the former presidents bring attention to our institutions. These programs and affiliations are connected to key moments in the lives and presidencies of the men whose stories we chronicle. They are often crafted in ways that bring positive attention to the Library and drive traffic to our institution and our websites.

The third pillar and source of funding for presidential libraries is the revenue that we receive from operating the Museum Business Enterprises. I am proud of the fact that the Kennedy Library is highly successful in this regard in part because we own and operate our entire building facility (an iconic structure designed by I.M. Pei which features stunning views of the Boston skyline and the Atlantic Ocean). We are fortunate to be located in a major metropolitan center where we are able to showcase the life story and presidency as it continues to capture the public’s imagination. We run three lucrative revenue-generating centers (museum admission, museum store, and facility rentals) which generates an additional \$3 million in revenue annually. In turn, the Library reinvests approximately 90% of this revenue in education, exhibits, and personnel to support its mission.

During his famous speech at the Berlin Wall, JFK proclaimed: “freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in.” I would not be honest with you, Mr. Chairman, if I did not admit that the Presidential Library system is not perfect and briefly share some of the difficulties we face.

The first, as you and members of your committee well know, is the question of the sustainability of the current model. As the presidential library system grows and as some of the older libraries mature – so does the costs of operating and maintaining these institutions. I hope in my testimony today that I have outlined the many benefits to our country and to our democracy that stem from these institutions – but those of us who run them take our fiduciary responsibilities seriously and look forward to discussing with you and your colleagues today how the current model might be adjusted to provide better value to the American taxpayer.

Secondly, the Libraries continue to work with our colleagues in the National Archives, the National Declassification Center, and the various agencies who must approve the declassification and public release of historically valuable permanent records while maintaining national security following the adage of “releasing all we can, protecting what we must.” Still the process of opening documents that are eventually deemed to not pose any risk takes longer than many would wish. I am not an expert on the issues faced

by the newer Libraries but understand that they are inundated with Freedom of Information Act requests that overwhelm the archival staff.

Lastly, I know I speak for my fellow presidential library directors in stating our commitment to finding new ways to run our institutions more efficiently and creatively. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss some of those issues with you today.

I hope in my testimony I have demonstrated the benefits to the community and the American taxpayer that accrue from our nation's thirteen Presidential Libraries; my belief in the current system; and some of the challenges we face. I thank this Committee for the important work you do and for your interest and support for Presidential Libraries. I believe that we should continue to work on improving the current system of Libraries, plan for and prepare for the costs associated with the system as it grows larger, and work to develop adjustments to the current model to ensure the on-going stability of these unique institutions that are so deserving of federal support.

It is an honor for me to work at a Presidential Library and to appear before you today to represent my colleagues. Ours is a young country with fewer historic sites and monuments as our European forebears – which is why, in my mind, Presidential Libraries are such key institutions that bring to life our national history over what has been called “the American century.”

I am often affected in my work at the Kennedy Library to meet young people from all corners of the globe who have come to Boston. They have often already visited the battlefields of Lexington and Concord and then in our galleries listen to the inaugural address in which President Kennedy states that “we are heirs of that first revolution and that the beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe.” Further along in our Oval Office exhibit, they listen to JFK’s address to the nation after calling out the National Guard to integrate the University of Alabama in which for the first time an American president called civil rights a “moral issue...as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.”

I feel honored to play a small part in telling a portion of America’s story to the students who visit our Museum from Binghamton to Beijing, Daytona to Dakar – as they search to understand the history of our nation and our world – and look to make their mark upon it. This, for me is why we undertake the work of preserving and providing access to these priceless historical treasures that touch the mystic chords of memory; unite us as a country and as a people; and serve as the foundation on which to build our future.