America’s Presidential Libraries: History or Propaganda?

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Since the 1940s, the presidential library has been an American institution. Unfortunately, these government-funded memorials often fail to fairly and accurately portray their namesakes’ administrations. This paper explores the history of the presidential library system and examines biased presidential portrayals, including those encountered at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. A number of reforms to the funding and administration of presidential libraries are proposed. It is contended that these changes will eliminate political propaganda and encourage historical accuracy and fairness at presidential libraries.

INTRODUCTION

From the rocky shores of Boston to the desert hills of Southern California, the presidential library has become an American institution. Since the 1940s, eleven presidential libraries have been created to memorialize American presidencies. Many are spectacular buildings located in majestic settings. All lure in interested visitors and researchers from around the country.

But are they worth the price? According to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the federal government spent $67.9 million tax dollars on presidential libraries during fiscal year 2003 (NARA Annual Report 2003, 25). Arguably, federal money should be used to maintain government records produced by a presidential administration. Yet presidential libraries do more than simply facilitate research and preserve archival collections. Federal funds contribute to the upkeep of large, expensive buildings and external grounds including statues, artwork, and various artifacts. Taxpayer dollars also go to museums that commemorate, and often celebrate, the legacies of various presidents.

This essay argues that in the future, the federal government should build and maintain presidential libraries. It also contends that private foundations should not be given influence over, or space within, these libraries. The reforms proposed in this paper would prevent ideologues and propagandists from unduly influencing facilities that should be devoted to impartial study of a particular administration’s impact on the nation and the world.

An examination of how presidential libraries came to be part of American life provides greater perspective on the current challenges and controversies facing these institutions.

HISTORY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

ORIGINS

United States historians rely heavily on the paper trail that the nation’s government leaves behind. The papers a United States president produces and receives while in office tell scholars much about the process of executive governance. Surprisingly, during most of the country’s history no set procedure existed to preserve these historically valuable documents. Instead, each president determined what would be done with his presidential papers.

George Washington, as the nation’s first president, set the precedent for the dissemination of presidential papers. At the end of his second and final term, Washington had his secretaries sort through his papers and collect those materials that might be helpful to his successor, John Adams. Once the Washington Administration had provided those materials to Adams, the remaining papers, both those related to his service as president and his personal records, were packed into trunks and sent to Washington’s home at Mount Vernon (Schick et al. 1989, 42). Future presidents followed Washington’s lead and did as they wished with their presidential papers. As a result, the materials were widely dispersed. During the early 20th century, the Library of Congress brought together the papers of many famous presidents. Unfortunately, numerous other collections of presidential documents had already been lost or destroyed (A Brief History, 2004).

The concept of the presidential library was one of the many legacies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1939, he donated his personal and presidential papers to the United States Federal Government (A Brief History, 2004). He proposed that they be preserved in a repository in his hometown.
of Hyde Park, New York. He directed that private funds cover the construction of the building, which was to be turned over to the federal government (specifically the National Archives) upon its completion. Roosevelt also requested that a museum be included in the facility. He hoped that members of his administration would also donate their papers to his “library” (Schick et al. 1989, 157).

Vanity almost certainly played a role in Roosevelt’s decision to create a government-operated facility dedicated to his memory (Schick et al. 1989, 152). Indeed, some contemporary historians were initially skeptical of the idea. One felt that “the Library of Congress, being good enough for Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson, should be good enough for Franklin D. Roosevelt” (Schick et al. 1989, 155). But the popular President Roosevelt encountered little resistance from the legislative branch. On July 18, 1939, a joint resolution of Congress formally established the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library (Veit 1987, 4).

With the passage of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, the same system used to create and administer the Roosevelt Library became the official government procedure for the storage and maintenance of presidential materials. A private foundation was to purchase land and fund the construction of a building containing adequate space to house the records. Then the National Archives was to bring in the president’s materials and take over administration of the facility. Despite the bill’s title, the text of the legislation refers to the institutions as “presidential archival depositories,” which in actual purpose and use is a more accurate description than “presidential libraries” (Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, 695).

It has become a common practice for presidents to be buried near their presidential libraries, although this tradition was not mandated by the 1955 legislation. It is also customary to build presidential libraries near the hometowns of the respective presidents.

The 1955 legislation placed presidential libraries under the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), the predecessor to NARA, then a branch of the General Services Administration (GSA). The bill also allowed universities to be considered as sites for these libraries; Presidents Johnson, Ford, Carter, and George H.W. Bush have all chosen to locate their respective libraries on college campuses (Schick et al. 1989, 15). In 1964, NARS created the Office of Presidential Libraries, providing a full staff devoted to the operation and administration of the library system.

REFORMS
The Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 assumed that United States presidents would want their records placed in such a facility, although it did not legally require them to do so. All presidents from Hoover (the only president who served before Roosevelt to have a NARA-administered presidential library) to Johnson opted to have their papers placed in presidential libraries. However, in 1974 President Richard Nixon chose to dispose of his presidential papers in a different manner. He signed an agreement with GSA Administrator Arthur Sampson mandating that access to any of his records be obtained only with written permission from Nixon himself. It also stipulated that some of the materials would eventually be destroyed (Veit 1987, 6).

At the time this arrangement was made public, anti-Nixon sentiment was widespread due to the Watergate scandal. An outraged Congress reacted by passing the Presidential Recordings and Materials Act in December 1974. This legislation required the GSA to take possession of the Nixon materials and keep them in government custody (Veit 1987, 6-7).

In 1978, the passage of the Presidential Records Act finalized a new approach to presidential materials. It established public ownership of “presidential records.” It defined presidential records as: “documentary materials...created or received by the President, his immediate staff, or a unit or individual of the Executive Office of the President whose function is to advise and assist the President in the course of conducting activities that relate to or have an effect upon the carrying out of the constitutional, statutory, or other official or ceremonial duties of the President” (Presidential Records Act of 1978, 2523).

The legislation defined official records of other agencies, as well as personal records, as being outside the legal definition of a Presidential Record (Presidential Records Act of 1978, 2523). The Act did not apply to already existing presidential materials, but only those of future administrations (Zeljak 2003, 66). Therefore the Act only covers the Reagan Administration and all presidencies after it (though Nixon’s materials were already in government custody due to the aforementioned 1974 legislation).

In the 1980s, Congress held hearings to address the increasing cost of presidential library maintenance in the federal budget. They resulted in the passage of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1986, which required stricter government oversight of Presidential Libraries. It specifically stated that the government would pay only to maintain a maximum surface area of 70,000 square feet for all future libraries (Schick et al. 1989, 18).

Richard Nixon is the only post-Great Depression president who does not have a NARA-administered presidential library commemorating his administration. NARA seized all the Nixon Presidential Records, and they are currently preserved at a facility in College Park, Maryland. In California a Nixon Presidential Library was created as a private institution, holding only private papers (Bennett 2003, 25). The facility, which is located in Nixon’s childhood hometown of Yorba Linda, contains a museum and Nixon’s burial place. Recently, however, the government has started negotiating to bring the Nixon Library into its presidential library system (“First Steps Taken” 2004); if these negotiations are successful, the existing museum will expand to include an archival storage area staffed by NARA employees.
RECENT CONTROVERSIES
The NARA-administered presidential libraries have not been immune from controversies of their own. In 1993, Don W. Wilson, then the Archivist of the United States, signed an agreement giving former President George H.W. Bush exclusive control over thousands of White House tapes from the Reagan and Bush Administrations (“Archivist resigns” 1993). The deal was reminiscent of the infamous Nixon-Sampson agreement. Wilson then resigned as Archivist and was hired by the private George Bush Presidential Library Foundation, an institution devoted to promoting the legacy of President George H.W. Bush. This controversial move prompted denunciations by media commentators, including the editorial writers of the New York Times (“Losing the Paper Chase” 1993).

The donations that outgoing presidents solicit to build their presidential libraries have also generated controversy. Foreign powers such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the People’s Republic of China made significant contributions to the Bush Library (Thurman 1997). By far the largest controversy involving presidential library donations concerned President Bill Clinton’s pardon of fugitive tax evader Marc Rich. Rich’s associates contributed approximately $1.45 million to the Clinton Presidential Library foundation (Bennett 2003, 23-24). Critics argue Rich may have bought his pardon by securing those contributions (Mazzetti et al. 2001).

As the actions of Don Wilson demonstrate, the Archivist of the United States holds notable power over the fate of presidential records. President Clinton’s 1995 appointment of former Kansas governor John W. Carlin as Archivist was mildly controversial. Unlike most of his predecessors, Carlin lacked professional background in history and archiving. He had been a strong supporter of Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign (Stollberg and Lee, 2004).

Carlin recently announced his impending retirement. This development generated controversy, because the George W. Bush White House was informed of it months before it was made public (Brune 2004). The Bush Administration nominated Allen Weinstein to the Senate as the appointee to replace Carlin. Weinstein is a controversial figure among historians, some of whom claim he is “prone to secrecy” (Stollberg and Lee 2004). Still, the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee confirmed him as Archivist in February 2005 (“Washington Briefs” 2005).

AN EXAMINATION OF BIAS AT PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES
TOURING THE REAGAN LIBRARY
To obtain a greater understanding of these controversial institutions, this author visited the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, on May 11, 2004. Architecturally, the library was built to resemble a Spanish-style ranch house, reflecting Reagan’s image of Western rugged individualism. It contains a museum about the Reagan Administration, an exhibit created and maintained by federal funds. The museum tour begins with the presentation of a brief film, as is the case in many presidential libraries (Bennett 2003, 28). The film’s narration consists of Reagan’s own spoken words, taken from both interviews and speeches, interspersed with sentimental images from American life: brave soldiers marching, factory workers in hardhats, businessmen catching the carpool to work. Reagan’s words present an ideological view of his presidency—he explains about how he helped the economy by cutting taxes and fighting inflation, and he warns that a Soviet nuclear buildup during his administration was moving the world closer to war. The film is clearly biased; it shows Reagan only in a favorable light. However, it cleverly presents the man through his own words, which helps sidestep charges of partisan intervention promoting a political agenda.

The museum exhibits feature various artifacts Reagan acquired during his Presidency, plus video and photographic materials memorializing specific events during his administration. Unfortunately, the picture presented is not a balanced one. One video presentation within the museum exhibit features a narrator asserting that Reagan “remained steadfast in support of freedom fighters everywhere.” Visitors can find only one reference to the Iran-Contra scandal in the museum; an exhibit video mentions the controversy in passing, but gives no specific details. That video ends with Reagan saying, “The judgment of history is up to you.” It is a welcome sentiment, but the presentation of history at the Reagan Library steers the visitor towards a particular judgment.

Other examples of partisanship at the library appear outside of the museum. The tax-dollar maintained grounds around the building feature a hedge cut into the shape of an elephant, but no corresponding donkey hedge is present to provide partisan balance. Next to the building’s entrance is a golden statue of Reagan dressed in cowboy garb. It is hardly surprising that the Reagan Library features a statue of its subject, but this particular statue presents the man in an unmistakably heroic and glamorized fashion.

The private Ronald Reagan Foundation operates the library gift shop. Because it is located right next to the museum entrances and exits, it is a likely destination for many library visitors. This gift shop sells conservative polemics such as Mona Charen’s Useful Idiots: How Liberals Got it Wrong in the Cold War and Still Blame America First. There are also action figures of Donald Rumsfeld and Anne Coulter for sale. It does not sell products that represent the other end of the American ideological spectrum. The gift shop is an epicenter of partisan ideology inside a facility meant to present history in a balanced, non-partisan manner.

Surprisingly, the docents who aid visitors through the museum exhibits are not NARA employees or trained historians. They are volunteers, mostly retirees, who are given a
not, however, sell the book to the next highest bidder. The library must keep the rights.
THE FEDERAL SOLUTION

In 1987, John Berry of Library Journal issued a sharply worded editorial called “Archives or Lightning Rods?” that lamented “the inability of the private founders and funders of the presidential libraries...to separate their obvious pride in ‘their’ president from the nation’s need for a fully accessible repository containing the entire record of an administration, good news and bad.” Berry insisted that “Congress should help to reduce further the controversy...by forcing the federal government to accept its responsibility for the planning, governance, and operation of these national libraries” (1987).

Historian Robert Dallek suggested that “Questions about whether Clinton exchanged donations to his library for pardons can serve at least one useful purpose. Let’s avoid future allegations of this kind by providing federal funds to build and administer all presidential libraries” (2001). Columnist Richard Cohen echoed that “If these libraries are really in the public interest, then why not have the public build them? We’re not talking Pentagon budget here” (2001).

Including the construction of presidential libraries in the federal budget would be expensive, but not as prohibitive as one might think. Having them built using taxpayer funds would create an incentive to place strict limits on their size in order to decrease the annual cost of maintenance. Recently, the dollar amount being used by private foundations to build these facilities has been increasing above and beyond the inflation rate; for example, compare the $57 million price tag of the Reagan Library to the $100 million used to create the Clinton Library. These increasing costs of construction may indicate that former presidents are engaged in a contest of one-upsmanship; Goodwin recalls that Lyndon Johnson “always wanted more people to go into his library than were going to the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts” (Presidential Libraries 1997). Government oversight would discourage such petty rivalries and ensure that the facilities remain modest in size and scope.

Some may argue that presidential libraries will receive fewer private donations if they are made entirely public. However, NARA already operates the archival portions of these libraries, so procedures regarding the administration of documents would remain the same. Private papers are already subject to access restrictions stipulated by the donor, and the legislation concerning access to presidential records would not change simply due to public funding of depository construction.

The outgoing president should be consulted about the location and style of the library that will bear his name, but his influence should be limited. An ideologically balanced panel of distinguished historians should design the museum portion of presidential libraries. They should keep in mind that the goal is not to idolize or demonize the president in question. It may be difficult to get the panel to agree on a specific interpretation of a historical event, but with sufficient administrative oversight these historians can be encouraged to compromise on a balanced portrayal. Tour guides should be trained NARA employees with backgrounds in history, not volunteers who have taken a crash course. The libraries should attempt to focus on the challenges that faced America during a given presidency and on how the administration in question responded to them. Museums in presidential libraries will become great educational resources for the American public if they are done fairly and correctly.

CONCLUSION

Presidential libraries should never be cults of personality or “shrines to presidential-size egos” (Thurman 1997). Unfortunately, many of them currently present a biased and propagandistic viewpoint. Federal funding and administration of presidential libraries would lead to a more fair commemoration of the presidents. Taxpayer funding would keep libraries from being unduly expressive. Banning private foundations from libraries would prevent them an opportunity to exert a propagandistic influence. A museum designed by a non-partisan panel of historians and administered by professional tour guides would ensure a more balanced picture of any given president. Enactment of these changes would cause America’s presidential libraries to advance toward the admirable goal of historical preservation, and move away from the dubious proposition of propagandizing an ideology and glorifying an individual at taxpayer expense.

REFERENCES


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