Presidential Libraries—One Researcher's Point of View

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TO DO RESEARCH in the presidential libraries is to expose oneself frequently to many criticisms of these new institutions. "They compete unfairly." "They promote undesirable decentralization of manuscript collections." "They are nothing but monuments operated by biased archivists who worship the GREAT MAN." These charges, and others, often presented in a very vigorous fashion, challenge everyone connected with the libraries.[1]

From my point of view, however, the libraries have already demonstrated their great value as research centers. The rapidly mounting stack of important publications on Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal, World War II, and various aspects of the Truman Administration provides the evidence. Largely because of the Roosevelt Library, as a student of the research on both Woodrow Wilson and F. D. R. has pointed out, scholars are

> much further ahead in exploring the career of a public figure of such importance than would normally be the case. Roosevelt scholarship, for example, has almost reached the same stage today as that of Wilson scholarship, with the notable exception that more scholarly articles are available on Wilson.[2]

This statement appeared nearly four years ago, and since then several important books and a flood of scholarly articles that draw upon the Roosevelt Library have been produced, the Truman Li-

* Paper read before the Society of American Archivists on Oct. 7, 1961, at the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo., as a part of a session of the Society's 25th annual meeting. Dr. Kirkendall, an associate professor of history in the University of Missouri, has published several articles on intellectuals in politics in the period of the New Deal.

[1] For evidence of some of the criticism see "Acquisition Policies of Presidential Libraries," a reprint of a paper by Herman Kahn, with discussion by Howard H. Peckham, David C. Mearns, *et al.*, from *The Present World of History; a Conference on Certain Problems in Historical Agency Work in the United States* (Madison, Wis., 1959); and Frank Freidel, "Problems and Possibilities in Presidential Libraries," in Richard S. Kirkendall, Ethan P. Allen, and Philip C. Brooks, eds., *Conference of Scholars on Research Needs and Opportunities in the Career and Administration of Harry S. Truman, March 25–26, 1960,* p. 9–11 (Independence, Mo., 1960).

[2] Richard L. Watson, Jr., "Franklin D. Roosevelt in Historical Writing," in *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 57:112 (Winter 1958).

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brary has opened its doors, and even a few of its riches have been made available in published form.

Before going further, let me explain a few matters about my own relations with these libraries. I have been visiting them off and on for six years. I made my first visit to the research center on the Hudson in 1955, in the early fall, a glorious time to be in that part of the world, while my most recent stops for research there and in the Truman Library came during the past summer. Although my project has been redefined occasionally over these years, I have been pursuing the same basic topic: intellectuals in politics. At first the goal was a doctoral dissertation on the "Brain Trust," but soon the project was limited to include those intellectuals who were drawn from academic life to work on New Deal agricultural policies. And for the past three years the goal has been a book that will treat of social scientists who participated in New Deal agricultural planning from 1930 to 1946.[3] The topic has taken me to the presidential libraries a number of times, and other considerations—such as the responsibility of directing graduate students, the chance to participate in and edit the proceedings of a conference of scholars, and the desire to survey the literature that reflects the early work in the Truman Library—have also brought me to Independence.

This simple recital of the bare facts of my own research should suggest that I could list the virtues of a number of research centers. Many of them have served me, and served me extremely well, as I have pursued my topic. In fact, the National Archives in Washington has provided much more evidence on the experiences of the social scientists than the Roosevelt and Truman Libraries have. So my theme is not an extravagant one. I simply regard the presidential library as one of several very valuable types of research institutions.

This evaluation persists in spite of the critics. Looking at research centers from a researcher's point of view, I'm not troubled much about charges of unfair competition with established agencies. I'm not convinced, for one thing, that these new institutions are taking a vast sum of money that would otherwise go to the Library of Congress, the State historical societies, and elsewhere. Rather I suspect that there is no fixed sum available in this country for re-

[3] For some of the results of the research see Richard S. Kirkendall, "The New Deal Professors and the Politics of Agriculture" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1958), "Four Economists in the Political Process," in *Journal of Farm Economics,* 41: 194–210 (May 1959), "A Professor in Farm Politics," in *Mid-America,* 41:210–217 (Oct. 1959), and "A. A. Berle, Jr., Student of the Corporation, 1917–1932," in *Business History Review,* 35:43–58 (Spring 1961).

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search and that these libraries are acquiring money that would otherwise be spent for activities of less value, from my viewpoint, than historical research. In other words, I think that the prestige that these institutions have inevitably acquired through their associations with major historical personalities has led to an increase in the financial support for scholarship. Don't ask me to support this opinion with statistical evidence. Let me simply applaud what I believe is a fact.

I welcome a certain amount of competition in the collecting of manuscripts. At least, I hope for the vigorous pursuit of them by all agencies of historical research, for my chief desire is that all important manuscripts be collected and my main fear is that some important people will destroy their papers before collectors call at their homes. Of course, I expect that Dr. Drewry[4] and Dr. Brooks[5] and their counterparts elsewhere will employ wisdom and restraint in their quest for materials and will not gather ones that should go to other agencies. But wouldn't it be far better for a collection to go to a somewhat illogical place than to an incinerator?

As to monuments and biases, I must say that I expect to find these involved to some extent in most historical activities. Surely some of the people who have helped to support the presidential libraries have done so because they regarded them as monuments to men whom they admired, but perhaps a certain amount of monument building has been present in the development of most historical societies. In my travels I have discovered some admiration of Presidents Roosevelt and Truman among the keepers of the records in Hyde Park and Independence, and in the future I expect to find similar attitudes in Abilene and West Branch. On the other hand, I have also noticed a degree of hero worship in the attitudes of some people who have provided me with manuscripts in other institutions.

More important, however, at the presidential libraries I have always felt that the dominant bias was the archivist's desire to make records available to every serious scholar without regard for his point of view. I should quickly add that such a bias has controlled the operations of almost every other research center I have visited. But at one of them—and I'm distressed to admit that it was one of the Nation's institutions of higher learning—a different view prevailed. There it was feared that the reputations of people of the State would be harmed if the papers were made available to me, an

[4] Elizabeth B. Drewry, Director, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.—Ed.
[5] Philip C. Brooks, Director, Harry S. Truman Library.—Ed.

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"outsider," and so for this and other reasons I was not allowed to see some important materials.

Appearing most frequently is the criticism concerning decentralization. This seems to rest in part upon an assumption that the scholarly talent of the Nation is concentrated along the Atlantic coast and perhaps within walking distance of Washington, D. C. As a faculty member of a Midwestern university who spent his early years in the Far West, completed his formal education in Wisconsin, and lived for only three years on the Atlantic seaboard, I refuse to accept this assumption. If one believes, as I do, that scholars have been scattered throughout the land, then one can find at least one justification for scattering research centers across the country. Most of my trips to Hyde Park were made while I was on the faculty of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. Because the Roosevelt Library was only a hundred miles away rather than in Washington, I was able to use it during the academic year simply by taking a quite pleasant drive whenever I was free of classroom duties. Then when a larger block of time became available for research, as in the summers, I made the longer trips to the National Archives and elsewhere. To some extent I have been operating in a similar fashion since moving to Missouri, and I expect to do much more of this in the future. Furthermore, graduate students in history at my university have been able to use this conveniently located library. One of them was the first researcher to work here, and four of them have benefited from the grants-in-aid program of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute.

Perhaps some critics of geographical decentralization assume that presidential libraries have introduced decentralization into the world of manuscript collections. Our great State historical societies, as well as institutions like the Clements, Newberry, and Huntington Libraries, with their long and distinguished histories, certainly destroy this assumption. In my own research over the past seven years I have worked in Madison, Wis.; St. Paul, Minn.; Bozeman, Mont.; Berkeley and South San Francisco, Calif.; Topeka, Kans.; Independence and Columbia, Mo.; Cambridge, Mass.; Middletown and New Haven, Conn.; Hyde Park, Ithaca, South Salem, and New York City, N. Y.; Washington, D. C.; Chevy Chase and Greenbelt, Md.; and Arlington, Va. And in a number of these communities, the quest for information took me to more than one place. In Washington, for example, I visited the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Department of Agriculture, and the offices and homes of a number of individuals. So, even if the Roosevelt

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and Truman papers had been deposited in the Library of Congress, this one research project would have forced me to work in 18, rather than 20, cities. One needs to look only at the wonderful new volume edited by Philip Hamer[6] to find massive evidence that presidential libraries are only in a minor way responsible for the diffusion of manuscripts in the United States. Fortunately, vigorous collectors are at work in many places.

Although decentralization does produce some problems, including financial ones, for the researcher, I have found that the presidential libraries help to solve at least one of these: the problem of discovering the location of relevant collections. By bringing together in one small place a number of scholars working in the same field, such a library enables them to exchange information about the distribution of papers. More important, the staff members, immersed as they are in the history of a period, have informed themselves about related materials in other places. On one of my visits in Hyde Park, Robert Jacoby of the staff of the Roosevelt Library showed me a card file that he had developed containing information of this kind. An extremely helpful project of this type is also underway in the Truman Library.

One could go on discussing the criticisms of the presidential libraries, but from my viewpoint the books and articles that have come out of them provide the most important answers. Think of the slow pace at which research on Lincoln progressed! Think of what a pathetically small amount of research is available now on Herbert Hoover! Contrast these examples with what we can discover about Roosevelt and his administration in studies that draw upon Hyde Park materials. Consult, for example, recent publications by James MacGregor Burns, Sidney Fine, John Blum, Edgar Nixon, Gertrude Almy Slichter, Wayne Cole, and Dorothy Borg.[7]

A number of extremely significant aspects of these and other works depend very heavily upon evidence from the Roosevelt Li-

[6] *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, 1961).

[7] Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, 1956); Fine, "President Roosevelt and the Automobile Code," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 45:23–50 (June 1958); "The Ford Motor Company and the N.R.A.," in *Business History Review*, 32:353–385 (Winter 1958); Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries*; *Years of Crisis, 1928–1938* (Boston, 1959); Nixon, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Conservation, 1911–1945* (Hyde Park, 1957); Slichter, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Farm Problem, 1929–1932," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 43:238–258 (Sept. 1956); "Franklin D. Roosevelt's Farm Policy as Governor of New York State, 1928–1932," in *Agricultural History*, 33:167–176 (Oct. 1959); Cole, "Senator Pittman and American Neutrality Policies," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 46:644–662 (Mar. 1960); Borg, "Notes on Roosevelt's 'Quarantine' Speech," in *Political Science Quarterly*, 72:405–433 (Sept. 1957).

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brary. For example, the thesis promoted by Richard Hofstadter and a host of others that Roosevelt was completely pragmatic and lacked any clearly defined philosophy or basic principles has been attacked recently and, as I read evidence, attacked most successfully. (On this see the excellent historiographic essay by Clarke Chambers in a recent issue of the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*.[8]) Contributing much on this question are two books by Daniel Fusfeld and Bernard Bellush. In *The Economic Thought of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Origins of the New Deal*, Fusfeld indicates that by 1932 Roosevelt had developed an economic philosophy that became the basis for his national political program, and in *Franklin D. Roosevelt as Governor of New York,* Bellush shows that, as Governor, the future President outlined major parts of his New Deal. Without access to a rich manuscript collection these authors could not have demonstrated that Roosevelt had a much more clearly defined position than others have suggested.

At this moment, the greatest monument to the presidential libraries is the unfinished biography of F. D. R. by Frank Freidel.[9] Some may object and nominate the three volumes by Professor Schlesinger, a distinguished work.[10] The latter, however, is broader in scope and depends less upon the Roosevelt Library, while Professor Freidel's book could not have been written if the Roosevelt papers had not been available. His outstanding book reveals how Roosevelt became a progressive and how he moved from progressivism to the New Deal. With painstaking care, the biographer defines the forces that shaped his subject's development and shows the New Dealer emerging slowly, step by step. Such a clear and full treatment of F. D. R.'s growth could not have been provided if an unusually complete manuscript collection had not been available and had not been open to researchers.

The Truman Library has, as yet, produced no such work. After all, the searchroom here has been open for less than 3 years while researchers have been working at Hyde Park for more than 15. A few publications have already drawn upon the younger institution. They suggest that some valuable sources are available here but that only a small beginning has been made in their exploration. Only a few aspects of the Truman Administration have been touched upon in the published works—civil liberties, press conferences, the St.

[8] "FDR, Pragmatist-Idealist; an Essay in Historiography," in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly,* 52:50–55 (Apr. 1961).

[9] *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Boston, 1952–56).

[10] *The Age Of Roosevelt* (Boston, 1957–60).

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Lawrence Seaway, and the transition to the Eisenhower Administration[11]—but many other topics are being explored at the moment and should soon appear in print.

Obviously the basic reason for the success of these libraries as promoters of research is that they provide access to extremely valuable series of papers at unusually early dates. "This is the largest collection of materials relating to one man to be found in the United States, and all but a small portion is open to examination," one user of the Roosevelt Library has written. "The size and range of the collection, and its availability to scholars so soon after the donor's death, are without precedent in American historiography."[12] Similar claims can be and have been made for the Truman Library.[13] Though the availability of the materials is the fundamental explanation of the accomplishments of the presidential libraries, other features of these places, it seems to me, contribute to their success. Among these features are their efficiency and their stimulating atmosphere.

The efficiency of the directors and staffs enables the researcher to make excellent use of his time and avoid long periods of fruitless combing of materials. Having been able to spend an unusual amount of time with the presidential papers, these people have become well acquainted with their contents and have developed and are developing effective finding aids. Thus, the researcher with a well defined set of problems can easily be directed to the relevant parts of the collections. Budgetary considerations, of course, prevent most research centers from operating in quite the same way, and perhaps some of the excitement would be removed from the research process if the investigator were never forced to go on a "fishing expedition." But if the Presidency is as important as Walter Lippmann says it is, then one can surely justify the kind of treatment that the presidential papers are receiving.

By making valuable materials available and handling them in a highly efficient fashion, the presidential libraries encourage scholars to explore problems of the recent period. But more is involved in the stimulating atmosphere. The personalities of the directors and the staff members, who are interested in and informed about the

[11] Richard P. Longacker, *The Presidency and Civil Liberties,* p. 29, 42, 55, 58–62, 94, 118, 137 (Ithaca, 1961); Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., "The Presidential Press Conference; a Study in Institutionalization," in *Midwest Journal of Political Science,* 4:376–381 (Nov. 1960); Carleton Mabee, *The Seaway Story,* p. 156–159, 163–164 (New York, 1961); Laurin L. Henry, *Presidential Transitions,* p. 483, 486, 506, 514, 515 (Washington, 1960).

[12] Thomas Greer, *What Roosevelt Thought; the Social and Political Ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt,* p. 229 (East Lansing, Mich., 1958).

[13] "Truman Library Research Opportunities," July 24, 1959.

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problems that face the researchers, contribute to the excitement of the environment. (For some evidence on this point see the comments on Herman Kahn[14] in the prefatory pages of the major books on the New Deal. These are not routine expressions of thanks.) Also, the companionship of a small group of scholars with closely related interests, something which the historian often finds when he visits Hyde Park or Independence, helps to keep the work moving.

Not enough has been done so far to exploit fully this aspect of life in these libraries. Bringing the users together frequently for discussions of their work could make the institutions even more important than they are at present as centers of research in recent American history. I do not have a formal organization in mind. I am thinking rather of an informal group composed of the most active users of the materials. Meetings could be held each year, or perhaps somewhat less often, with Hyde Park as the location for one meeting, Independence the next, Abilene the third, and so on around what is sure to be an expanding circuit. Dr. Brooks has already been the host for one conference and has planned what promises to be an even more exciting one. As the first conference was so stimulating for me, I'm convinced that wonderful results would flow from the growth of such a program. It would provide for specialists in the recent period something that they cannot find in their large professional organizations and that specialists in other fields find in occasional conferences at places like the Folger Library.

With or without these conferences, presidential libraries will become increasingly important in the next few years. The vigorous acquisition program of the present will then be paying very rich dividends; many of the restrictions that now exist will be removed from the holdings; and the scholarly journals and book publishers will be supplying ample evidence of the great value of the libraries. I do not plan to protest when a fifth presidential library springs up somewhere around Boston.

[14] Herman Kahn, former Director of the Roosevelt Library, is now Assistant Archivist for Civil Archives, National Archives.—ED.

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