Will Success Spoil the Presidential Libraries?

By JAMES E. O'NEILL

ONCE THERE WAS a moment, say a third of the century ago, when the world was a great deal more simple. There were no nuclear weapons and no Vietnam War. There was not even a Pentagon, much less any "Pentagon Papers." And of course the federal government had no presidential libraries to occasion any concern among historians, as has recently been the case.

This is not to suggest that the historians of a generation ago were concerned only with the remote past. They worried about jobs, for 1938 was a depression year. They were exercised by the delay in publishing the *Foreign Relations of the United States,* which had attained the staggering lag of sixteen years. There was even some concern for archives, for the American Historical Association in those days still had, happily and fittingly, a standing committee on "historical source materials"—archives and historical manuscripts. When the AHA held its annual meeting in 1938, its members, 1,017 strong, found time for such contemporary topics as the "passing of Austria" and "New Deal liberalism." Moreover, as the anonymous rapporteur of that meeting wrote, "the spacious lobbys and lounges of Chicago's and the world's largest hotel gave free scope to gregarious and convivial impulses and the flow of professional gossip."[1]

It is not possible to reconstruct the gossip of that shining moment, but it may be safely assumed that along with Munich, the recent congressional elections, and conviviality, the Stevens Hotel Bar flowed with at least some conversation about the decision of the man in the White House to give his papers to the nation and to house them in a specially built library to be carved from his estate in Hyde Park,

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1 "History and Historians at Chicago," *American Historical Review* 44 (April 1939): 482. The chairman of the AHA Committee on Historical Source Materials in 1938 was the late Theodore R. Schellenberg of the National Archives.

New York. Before making his announcement a few weeks earlier, FDR had consulted a number of the leaders of the historical profession, including William Dodd and Charles Beard, Frederick Paxson (who was then the President of the American Historical Association), Samuel Eliot Morison, Julian Boyd, and Helen Taft Manning, who was both an historian and the daughter of a president. By the time the AHA held its 1938 meeting, after Christmas, an even larger number of historians had been named to an advisory committee to assist in planning the library; the roster of that committee reads like a "who's who" of the leading scholars of the day in the field of American history.[2]

Nor was the newly emerged archival profession ignored. Having decided upon a library, Roosevelt quickly drew into its planning two of the leading archivists of the day, Waldo G. Leland and R. D. W. Connor. Leland served as chairman of the small executive committee named by the president to plan the library's construction and organization. Connor, whom Roosevelt had named as the first archivist of the United States, served as the executive committee's vice-chairman and hosted its meetings in the National Archives Building. Leland and Connor played key roles in translating the president's idea into a viable research institution based upon sound archival practices.[3]

FDR's decision and the announcement of it in December 1938 mark the starting point for any discussion of the growth of the presidential library system. In 1939 a joint resolution of the Congress authorized the archivist of the United States to accept the gift of the president's papers, as well as the gift of the land and the building. It charged him to preserve them, to maintain them, and, above all, to make them available for the use of the nation's citizens. In 1941 the Roosevelt Library was formerly dedicated and opened to the public. In 1946, barely a year after FDR's death, the library's research room was opened, and the first of the thousands of scholars began the trek to Hyde Park.

One library, however, does not make a system. FDR provided the impetus and the basic design. But it was subsequent presidents—

2 The Advisory Committee included Robert Binkley, W. E. B. DuBois, Guy Stanton Ford, Douglas Southall Freeman, Edwin F. Gay, Monsignor Peter Guilday, Allan Nevins, Bessie Louise Pierce, and Walter Prescott Webb. (Minutes, First Meeting of the Executive Committee, 17 December 1938, FDR Library File, Box 1, Roosevelt Library).

3 Waldo Gifford Leland, "The Creation of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," *American Archivist* 18, (January 1955): 11–29, tells the story of the Library's establishment.

notably President Truman and President Eisenhower—whose actions expanded the Roosevelt innovation into a system of presidential libraries. In effect, it was the decision of each of these two succeeding presidents to follow the Roosevelt model that produced the present system. As a result of bipartisan effort in 1955, the Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act of that year, the basic charter on which the system now rests. Under its terms the authority to accept the papers, land, and buildings, as well as "other historical materials" (as the law speaks of them) belonging to other presidents was conferred upon the administrator of the General Services Administration, who delegated this authority to the archivist of the United States.

In 1957 the Harry S. Truman Library at Independence was formally dedicated. The Dwight D. Eisenhower Library at Abilene, Kansas, and the Herbert Hoover Library at West Branch, Iowa, followed in 1962. After President Kennedy's death in 1963, the nucleus of a John F. Kennedy Library was created in the National Archives and was subsequently moved in 1969 to the Federal Records Center in Waltham, Massachusetts, where the first papers were opened to researchers in 1970. In May 1971 the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library at Austin, Texas, was dedicated; the first of its papers (those dealing with education) were opened in January 1972.

As these dates suggest, the presidential library system is really very young. Ten years ago there were two libraries; five years ago there were four, but only two were open for research. Today there are six and all are open to scholarly research. The system is young, and it is enduring the difficult growing pains of youth.[4]

Moreover, as the dates also suggest, the different libraries in the system are at different stages of their development. The most fully developed is the Roosevelt Library, of course. Whether measured by the number of researchers; by the number of books, articles, and dissertations which have been based upon its resources; by the proportion of documents (especially the proportion of what might be called "high-level" documents) which are open; or by the relative completeness of its collections of important papers, the Roosevelt Library comes closest to maturity. The Truman Library is rather less fully developed. In the last several years it has received considerable use by scholarly researchers. But the number of important

[4] Two earlier examinations of the presidential libraries by Richard S. Kirkendall, which also reflect the system's "growing pains," remain valuable: "Presidential Libraries—One Researcher's Point of View," *American Archivist* 25 (October 1962): 441–48; and "A Second Look at Presidential Libraries," *American Archivist* 29 (July 1966): 371–86.

collections that are yet to be incorporated is still large and includes high-level material which remained in Truman's own possession until his death. The Hoover Library, which is the smallest in the system, has been handicapped by its late start; it thus had difficulties in obtaining all of the papers of President Hoover (some of which are in the Hoover Institution at Stanford) and of his important associates. It has, however, had intensive research use in the last three years. At the Eisenhower and Kennedy Libraries, researchers are only beginning to appear in any number, and both repositories face the same difficulty of making available many of the "high-level" documents, especially security-classified documents. Research, of course, has just begun at the Johnson Library.

Given these different levels of development, have the presidential libraries been a success? Measured against the goals which the libraries were to achieve, the answer is "yes."

As neatly as anyone has, FDR set down the goals of the presidential libraries in the memorandum which he circulated to that small group of historians whom he invited for lunch at the White House on December 10, 1938. He noted that he had had a long and full career as New York state senator, assistant secretary of the Navy, vice-presidential candidate, businessman, lawyer, politician, governor of the state of New York, and, of course, president of the United States. He did not want his papers broken up and dispersed. Instead, it was his desire that they be, as he put it, "kept as a whole and intact in their original condition, available to scholars of the future in one definite locality."[5]

That was not a unique idea, even among presidents. George Washington had very much the same hope and, following his retirement from the presidency, even toyed with the notion of building a kind of presidential library on his estate at Mount Vernon.[6] The Adams family did, in fact, build a library. But the gap between aspiration and achievement, in the nineteenth century at least, proved to be a rather large one. In plain fact, there was no satisfactory machinery to achieve the goal of preserving presidential papers until the presidential libraries were created. To be sure, the Library of Congress has the papers of twenty-three of the American presidents, beginning with Washington and ending with Calvin Coolidge. But it is often forgotten that there was no Manuscript Division of

[5] FDR Library File, Box 1, Roosevelt Library. An amended version of the memorandum was issued as a press release 10 December 1938.

[6] "Introduction," *Index to the George Washington Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1964), p. ix.

the Library of Congress until almost the end of the nineteenth century. It is often forgotten, too, that most of the collections of presidential papers in the library have been acquired painfully, meticulously, and often at considerable public expense. The government had to locate, and in a number of cases purchase from heirs or private collectors, the papers of the presidents.

Without suitable machinery for preserving presidential papers, many valuable ones disappeared. Some of Jackson's were lost when the Hermitage burned in 1834. An unknown number of Van Buren's were carefully filtered out by the former president and his heirs and were apparently destroyed. A major portion of Tyler's papers was lost in the burning of Richmond in 1865. Pierce, Grant, and the family of Millard Fillmore destroyed a number of theirs.[7] And when destruction did not take effect, dispersal frequently did. It is true, of course, that other techniques might have been employed to preserve, "whole and intact," the papers of the presidents, not only the papers of their presidential years but those of their previous and subsequent careers. It was, however, the presidential library technique which presented itself to FDR, and it is this technique which has provided the solution to the problem of preserving presidential papers. There is no question that the presidential libraries have met this goal and have met it most ably. One can never say that absolutely no documents have been lost. But the presidential library system has now reached a position where the danger of such loss has been minimized almost to the vanishing point. It has tamed what Samuel Eliot Morison called "the winds of housecleaning and neglect" that blew away so many of the papers of earlier presidents.[8] The anticipation of a presidential library now begins the process of bringing a president's papers under archival control even before he has finished his term in office. This was the case with President Johnson: the first director of the Johnson Library was selected and was working with the White House staff in 1968. Similarly, the National Archives and Records Service has had a small team of archivists working with President Nixon's White House staff since

7 A succinct "Résumé of Presidential Papers," indicating their fate, can be found in the *Hearing before a Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives . . . on Bills to Provide for the Acceptance and Maintenance of Presidential Libraries,* 13 June 1955, pp. 39–44. Also useful is Buford Rowland, "The Papers of the Presidents," *American Archivist* 13 (July 1950): 195–211.

8 Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Very Essence of History," *New York Times Magazine* (19 March 1939), reprinted in *Hearing before the Committee on the Library of the House of Representatives . . . on . . . a Joint Resolution to Provide for the Establishment of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library* (1939), p. 25, cited hereafter as *Roosevelt Library Hearing* (1939).

the first weeks of the present administration. The presidential libraries have brought to the papers of presidents—and other public officials—a degree of early and comprehensive archival control which was unthinkable a generation ago.

The second goal of the presidential libraries also was set forth by FDR in his 1938 memorandum, for it was his intent that legal title to all of the material placed in his library, including his own papers, would be turned over to the United States government. This is an area in which the very existence and success of the presidential libraries has served to obscure a fundamental fact. The papers of a president are not public records. By tradition they are legally the private property of the president, to dispose of as he chooses. Whether one regards this as a suitable and constitutionally sound position or as the unfortunate result of neglect and legal *malaise,* it is, nonetheless, the case.[9] Yet presidential papers are vastly more important for the history of public affairs and the shaping of future public policy than are the papers of more ordinary men. The presidential libraries have provided a suitable means by which these all-important private papers on public matters can become the property of the nation. At the same time the libraries have provided adequate safeguards to a former president, or to his immediate family, against reprisals by his political enemies, invasion of his own privacy, or the depredations of muckrakers. The swiftness with which the papers of President Roosevelt and of subsequent presidents have been transferred not only physically but legally to the government of the United States is sufficient witness to the success of the system in accomplishing this goal.

The third goal of the presidential libraries was less explicitly set forth by President Roosevelt in 1938, though it is implicit in his memorandum of that year. Certainly his family and his literary executors believed that it was one of his aims to make the papers of a president available to researchers on equal terms and as soon as possible. In no area have the presidential libraries been so successful as in this; but perhaps in no area has their success been so misunderstood.

In 1938 when FDR proposed the giving of his papers to the nation,

[9] Two presidents—Cleveland and Taft—have defended the private ownership of presidential papers. The former is quoted in R. D. W. Connor, "The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," *American Archivist* 3 (April 1940): 83. Taft's view was expressed in his 1915 Columbia University lectures, originally published as *Our Chief Magistrate and His Powers* and recently reprinted as *The President and His Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 34. A criticism of this view can be found in H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation: Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), chap. 7.

the papers of John and John Quincy Adams, of Lincoln, Garfield, Cleveland, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, were all either completely closed or could be seen only by persons privileged to obtain the permission of the family or estate executors. Presidents and their families rarely provided, and historians did not expect, open and equal access to presidential papers. Long-term restrictions and access for a privileged few were the rules for recent presidential papers, even as they are still the rules for access to papers in many private and university repositories.

The presidential libraries have changed this. In 1950 the great bulk of President Roosevelt's papers, both personal and public, was opened to research—85 percent of them. Not all of the subsequent presidential libraries have been able to match that degree of swiftness. Nor has the special use of presidential papers by former presidents or their families ceased. On the average, however, most of the papers of presidents in the presidential library system have been opened to research on an equal basis, some six to seven years after the end of a president's term in office. An exception to this, of course, is the collection of President Hoover's papers, though even in this case the papers were made available for research within half-a-dozen years after they came into the custody of the National Archives and Records Service. Researchers now expect, indeed they even demand, that such material be opened under terms of equal access and that this be done early. But it is, in part, the very existence of the presidential libraries and the policies of the presidential libraries that have aroused this expectation.

The presidential libraries have, thus, been quite successful in developing a technique for preserving intact the papers of presidents, for placing them under public ownership and control, and for making them available for research on more equal terms and at an early date. But the libraries have a fourth goal, and like the other three it is rooted in the thoughts and vision of that rather remarkable man who invented the presidential library.

FDR was a historical collector, and he pursued his avocation with considerable zeal and knowledge. Like most collectors, he had developed several special areas of interest and expertise. Like many, too, he approached his special interests in what might be called an ecumenical fashion. He collected not only manuscripts dealing with the history of the Hudson Valley and the history of the American Navy but virtually anything that seemed pertinent to those two subjects—books, maps, prints, cartoons, paintings, photographs, ship models, scrimshaw, carriages, sleighs, ice boats. And while he himself had collected to reflect his own special interests, his friends, public

admirers, and foreign dignitaries were collecting for him objects to represent his presidency—brass donkeys, cloth elephants, pre-Columbian pottery, jeweled daggers, cathedrals made of toothpicks, cigarette holders, canes, and sundry other articles that he tactfully called "oddities." To these must be added the product of what a later age was to call the "media"—sound recordings of his "fireside chats" and campaign speeches, newsreels, and a growing number of photographs of that most photogenic man.

Given his background as a collector and the large accumulation of material which had resulted, it is not surprising that when in the spring of 1937 he first set down his thoughts (or something approaching his thoughts) on his "library," he envisioned it as a single and coherent entity capable of providing to scholars the manuscripts that they would need and to the public in general the other objects which he or his admirers had so painstakingly put together. The presidential library as he envisioned it would combine the resources of a manuscript repository with those of a historical museum. He did not see these as two separable functions somewhat casually linked together by being on the same site. Rather, he saw them as being two parts of an integrated library-museum which would, together, represent his career, his presidency, and his age. This ideal was expressed in his memorandum of 1938; it was embodied for the Roosevelt Library in the joint congressional resolution of 1939; and it was extended to all presidential libraries by the act of 1955. Each of the libraries (with the exception of the Kennedy Library, which does not yet have its own building) includes a public historical museum. The success of those museums can be expressed quite simply by noting that last year better than a million-and-a-half persons visited them.

Such a museum is inevitably regarded, at least by some, as a piece of unnecessary self-memorialization. Some critics have certainly found it so:

> Establishing a memorial to a living man . . . is utterly un-American, utterly undemocratic. It goes back to the days of the Pharaohs, who built their own images and their own obelisks. It goes back to the days of the Caesars, who put up monuments of themselves and crowned them with laurel leaves, and posed as gods.[10]

[10] Congressman Hamilton Fish of New York (whose district included Hyde Park), during the debate on the Joint Resolution of 1939; *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 1st sess., 1939, p. 9040. When a Democratic Congressman indicated that he would be happy to vote for a comparable memorial to Herbert Hoover in Iowa, Fish replied that "no Republican President would even think of asking in his lifetime to have the Government maintain a personal library in his home town." (*Ibid.*)

Whether one chooses to call a presidential library a monument to vanity or a memorial to achievement apparently depends on one's taste, including one's taste in politics, in presidents, and possibly even in architectural style. Probably the libraries are something of both, for presidents, like most politicians, are endowed with a degree of self-esteem and pride in accomplishment, if only the accomplishment of having "climbed to the top of the greasy pole."

This writer is less disturbed by monuments than some are, since he works in a city with more monuments to the square mile than any other city in the United States. From his solitary window in the National Archives Building he can in a glance behold General Winfield Scott Hancock eternally parading down Pennsylvania Avenue on his horse; a truncated obelisk honoring the Grand Army of the Republic; and a pathetic, dry fountain glorifying the cause of Temperance—in front of a discount liquor store. It seems likely that, so long as men continue to honor their own and their fellows' achievements or aspirations, monuments of one sort or another will continue to be built.

What is significant is not that a presidential library is a monument but that it is a particular kind, and a particularly suitable kind, of monument. The twentieth century has witnessed an enormous enlargement of both the power and the activities of the president. It is a commonplace to note that a president is many men, that he wears (to use another cliché) many hats. Yet it is true. He is head of state and chief administrator, commander-in-chief and party politician, diplomat, legislator, shaper of consensus, radio and television performer, symbol of national unity at home and of national strength (or weakness) abroad, and much more.[11] The record of his actions and the record of the impact of his actions cannot be found in his papers alone. They are to be found in the whole range of objects from handwritten note to video tape, from presentation dagger to political cartoon—even in those idiosyncratic collections of Ming vases, gavels, Bibles, guns, and ship models that capture the museum visitor's eye. For while the presidency is an institution, presidents are men. Each gives, or tries to give, to the office and to the nation a distinct style of leadership of his own. Each struggles to prevent the powerful institution of the presidency from devouring the president himself.[12] This is what makes the combination of papers and

11 Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency,* rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World: 1960), chap. 1, describes the many roles of the president.

12 This point has been carefully examined in James MacGregor Burns, *Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), especially in chap. 9.

"other historical materials" in a presidential library unique and uniquely valuable. It reflects the man, and, like the presidency itself, it exists not for the few but for the many, not for scholars alone but for the nation as a whole.

I am not suggesting that the presidential libraries are perfect, without flaws, without problems. No one who has tried to operate such a library for several years can be unaware of the weaknesses and the problems. Their resources are limited; their staffs are small and are unlikely to grow in a period of government economy. Yet these small staffs must deal with millions of documents and must attempt to serve the needs of thousands of highly specialized researchers. One might surmise that an age which is so successful in its technology and so proud of its successes would have devised means for archivists and historians to do their jobs more swiftly and efficiently. But with the exception of improved photocopying methods, the tools of the archivist have changed remarkably little in a generation or even in the last fifty years. The records of public life grow at an exponential rate, and archivists and historians alike are in danger of drowning in a sea of paper.

That marvel of modern ingenuity, the computer, may well come to our rescue in time. Certainly it has the technical capacity to handle the kind of controls over manuscripts that we all need; and one can dream of the day when the computer, with its linkages to microfilm and to a bewildering array of terminals, will take much of the drudgery out of the historian's work. The National Archives and Records Service is moving, with deliberate speed, in the direction of computerized control of records and manuscript collections, but the day of push-button research is still a long way off.

The problem of bulk, the problem of enabling a researcher to find amidst millions of documents the several thousand, or conceivably several dozen, that he really needs is the most difficult problem that the libraries face. But bulk is not the only problem. In fact to most historians (and to many archivists as well) it is regarded as less serious than the problem of access. Donors of papers often insist that certain parts of their collection be kept closed, on one ground or another, for a period of time. In addition, most presidential libraries have at least a few collections which are composed of what are legally public records and which are consequently subject to the restrictions on access placed upon them by the appropriate government agency or department. Finally, there are those nasty things called classified documents, the forbidden fruits of information that could presumably endanger national security. The fact is that all the presidential libraries have some material that is at this moment closed to research

because it falls into one of these three categories. It is also a fact, of course, that such restrictions on access are not peculiar to the presidential libraries. They can be found wherever the papers of recent public figures can be found. But the very importance of the collections in the presidential libraries makes such restrictions more noticeable in their case, and less palatable to most historians.

It is not necessary to dwell on how researchers find unpalatable such restrictions on access. The attitude expressed by most scholars on the "Pentagon Papers" dispute, the articles published on the general subject of access, and the sessions on that subject at meetings of learned societies all attest the great concern of the scholarly community. Many archivists, perhaps most, including those in the presidential libraries, share that concern. They share it for two reasons. For one thing, most archivists have come to their profession from the field of history, and many consider themselves both historians and archivists. They think like historians, and they share the historians' value system, which places a premium on the freedom of research. If they are more quiet in their criticism of restrictions on access it is because they operate within a different institutional milieu.

But there is a second and more practical reason why most archivists in the presidential libraries find such restrictions irksome. They must try to juggle dozens of different restrictions on the material in their collections, restrictions which often overlap one another and which at times are even inconsistent with one another. They must often separate portions of their collections, at least temporarily, to sequester the material restricted under the different rules or regulations. The archivist is frequently in the position where he must examine credentials, inspect notes, and tell irate researchers that they cannot see what they want to see and what they believe they have a moral right to see. In these circumstances, archivists are in a position of having to guard other people's secrets and apply other people's rules.

Secrecy in public life is not new; it is as old as government itself. So long as most historians were working in the more or less remote past, as they were in say 1938, and so long as the documents became available after a reasonable period, restriction on access was not a serious problem. But times have changed. Today the historical profession is vastly larger and is much more present-minded. Its members are more sensitive to present-day political and social issues and are much more inclined to question the competency or credibility of public leaders. Moreover, a much larger number of historians now work in the period of the very recent past. The growing insistence of historians to see the documents of the recent past, how-

ever, has not been matched by a willingness of government to permit them to do so. The vogue of secrecy which enveloped public life during World War II has been continued throughout the Cold War era. In a nuclear age the fear of compromising national security by the premature release of documents has extended wartime controls over information into what seems like a perpetual system.

Today, as one reads of the "thaw" in the Cold War, there are signs of fissures in the pack ice of classified information. President Nixon's Executive Order (11652) of March 1971, with its provisions for mandatory review and automatic declassification of classified documents, has altered the system radically. The program of the National Archives and Records Service for the massive declassification of World War II material will, in the next several years, lead to the opening of all but a handful of the pre-1946 classified documents, including those in three of the presidential libraries. The State Department has already opened its files through 1946, and the Department of the Army is rapidly opening its intelligence files to researchers. It is unlikely that the point will ever be reached when files of recent material are completely open, and even the more moderate desires of some historians for declassification of all documents after ten or twenty years may not be satisfied. But the changes that have been made in the last several years encourage the hope that the problem of secrecy will be, if not solved, at least reduced to a level which is tolerable for both scholars and the archivists who assist them. The problem of closed and restricted documents has been emphasized because it is the source of much of the misunderstanding that has developed in the past several years. It is not a problem peculiar to the presidential libraries, but the recentness and the great importance of their collections have made them particularly vulnerable to criticism, and that criticism has helped to obscure the considerable degree of success which the libraries have attained.

Are the libraries in danger of being spoiled? It is not likely. They may change; they probably will. It may be that a future president will place the desires of some historians above the desires of friends, admirers, and hometown constituents and will locate his library in Washington, D.C. It may even be that future legislation will create and finance a single, ever-growing, superlibrary for all future presidents.

None of this is impossible; but it is unlikely, for it is doubtful that presidents or the public would find it desirable. In endorsing the creation of the Roosevelt Library in 1939, Charles Beard noted that "rightfully the people of each locality and region desire to enrich

their cultural traditions by preserving historical records and monuments. By placing his collections at Hyde Park, President Roosevelt will create another historic spot and at the same time make the memorials available to students and travelers from all parts of America and the world."[13] What Beard noted of the Roosevelt Library in 1939 is equally true of all the libraries today.

The Presidential libraries are not perfect. (Few institutions are.) But they are likely to endure and to grow, for they have come to play an important—even a vital—role in meeting the needs of scholars, the general public, and presidents themselves.

[13] Letter to Representative Kent E. Keller, in *Roosevelt Library Hearing* (1939), p. 22.