# Presidential libraries parallel the increase in presidential powers

**By BENJAMIN HUFBAUER**

WHEN PRESIDENT Franklin Roosevelt saw Egypt's pyramids, he said, "man's desire to be remembered is colossal."

What FDR said about the pharaohs was certainly true of himself and his successors. Since FDR invented the idea of a presidential library run by the federal government, the growth of these libraries has reflected the growth of presidential power — and presidential egos.

In many ways, a presidential library goes beyond earlier presidential memorials, because it is not just a monument, but also a popular history museum and archive.

Before Roosevelt, presidents did not create large monuments for themselves, in part because the idea smacked of monarchy. Some presidents were, of course, commemorated with elaborate tombs, temples, obelisks, and preserved homes, but typically this happened after presidents died. And some presidents, such as Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and others, did not have large monuments built for them and have largely been forgotten.

But since Roosevelt opened the first presidential library in 1940, each succeeding president has had a hand in designing his own memorial. Today, there are 11 presidential libraries across the country administered by the National Archives that draw about 2 million tourists and thousands of scholars each year.

How and why did Roosevelt engineer this new deal for presidential commemoration? The answer, in short, is that FDR was an obsessive collector who was preoccupied with his place in history.

Roosevelt collected many things in his life, from books to model ships, but most importantly he had millions of documents relating to his government service.

As a student of history, he knew the danger of leaving the fate of these collections to chance. Rats had eaten some of George Washington's papers, and many of Abraham Lincoln's papers were unavailable to historians until 1947. The Roosevelt Library, built with money donated by supporters and run by the National Archives, became a boon to historians. But one critic called it "a Yankee pyramid," while another said the library revealed that FDR was "an egocentric maniac."

More important than Roosevelt's ego in the establishment of the presidential library was the rising power of the office he occupied. As historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote in a classic book, the modern presidency is *The Imperial Presidency*. Since FDR, the presidency has become an office that has at times disrupted the balance of power among the branches of government by absorbing a greater share for itself. U.S. presidents, starting with Roosevelt, have become some of the most powerful people in history.

This increased presidential power was commemorated with a replicated Oval Office in the Truman Library in Independence, Mo., which opened in 1957. The nearly full-scale replica of the president's office has been the Truman Library's most popular attraction since it opened. A recording of Harry Truman's voice welcomes visitors to the room and describes it in detail for them. President Truman is probably most remembered for his order to drop atomic bombs on Japan, and it was from the Oval Office that Truman announced Japan's surrender. The replica at the Truman Library was so popular that it inspired Oval Office replicas at the Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton libraries. The spread of Oval Office replicas across the country, each one invariably the most popular exhibit in its library, reflects a fascination with presidential power. As Truman Library archivist Ray Geselbracht said to me, "The Oval Office is the main symbol of presidential power for Americans."

Presidential libraries have been built in a variety of architectural styles over the past 70 years, but whatever the style the trend over time has been toward bigger and more impressive buildings. The Roosevelt Library is a Dutch-colonial style building that looks almost like a mansion. When completed in 1940 it was a 40,000 square foot building that cost about $400,000 (about $8 million today).

In comparison, The William J. Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock, Ark., is a 152,000- square-foot complex of buildings that cost more than $165 million. The Clinton Library was built in an abandoned warehouse area, and it sparked a nearly $1 billion surge in private investment in what was formerly a depressed part of town. The trees that have grown out of the seed that FDR planted have become very large indeed.

The rise from the relatively modest Roosevelt Library to the massive presidential libraries built today was gradual, but the tipping point was the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin. The libraries for Truman and Eisenhower were bland modernist buildings designed by little-known architects, and were built in the small towns in which these presidents were born. LBJ decided early in his presidency that he wanted the biggest and best presidential library ever built, and he had an unusually talented and influential partner who helped make his dream a reality — Lady Bird Johnson. Lady Bird took a tour of the presidential libraries that then existed (Harry Truman himself gave her a personal tour of his museum and Oval Office replica), but more importantly she sought out an architect and a venue for the library that would, in her words, "sell it for what it's worth in the eyes of the world."

Architect Gordon Bunshaft, the lead designer of the famed firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill designed a monumental building that became part of the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. UT not only paid for the building (an unusual arrangement, since other presidents have had to conduct extensive fund-raising campaigns to pay for their presidential libraries), but also created a Johnson School of Public Affairs alongside it. The building symbolizes Johnson himself, in Bunshaft's words "an aggressive…big man," who forcefully used the federal government to push his agenda, from civil rights, to the Great Society, to Vietnam. The building's Italian travertine-clad form looms 85 feet in the air—compared to 80 feet for the Lincoln Memorial. Although the building did not please everyone, most critics think that architecturally it is one of the finest in the nation.

On May 22, 1971, when the building complex was dedicated in a nationally televised ceremony, President Johnson said, "It's all here, the story of our time — with the bark off." But a reporter for *The New York Times* felt that "quite a bit of the bark was still in place," because the museum exhibits almost completely ignored the ongoing Vietnam War, focusing instead on the positive achievements of the Johnson Administration. The history presented in the initial museum displays in all presidential libraries lacks balance and critical perspective. This is because a president, his family, and supporters almost always exercise considerable control over a library for the first decades of its existence.

But presidential libraries in addition to their museum displays have massive archival holdings. In the Johnson Library there are more than 40 million documents, hundreds of thousands of photographs, miles of film, and thousands of hours of audiotape and videotape. More information is available about presidents with libraries than any other comparable figures in history. And with the aid of the extremely talented archivists who work at the Johnson Library, and at other presidential libraries, eventually a historically complete account of a president and his administration can be told. Robert A. Caro's Pulitzer-Prize winning biography of Lyndon Johnson has presented a brilliant although not particularly flattering portrait of the 36th president that would not have been possible without the Johnson Library.

The museum displays at presidential libraries, however, continue to be a source of controversy. Although the Office of Presidential Libraries near Washington, D.C., sometimes pays lip service to the idea that the exhibits in presidential libraries need to be historically accurate and balanced, serious problems exist. The lack of coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, Calif., provides an example of the problem. The Iran-Contra scandal involved, among other things, the trading of arms for hostages, in violation of the nation's policy of dealing with terrorists. Even though the Reagan Library's archives contain many of the surviving documents that relate to the scandal, the

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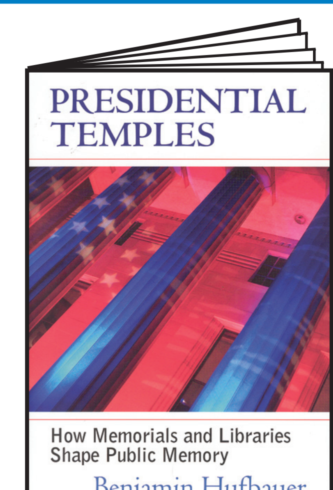


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NEW BOOK BY
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# Excerpts from the book:

**'Presidential libraries are part of what we call the civil religion of the United States . . . temples that promote the best possible place for their subjects within civil religion.'**

**'Less than 1 percent of the 1.5 million people who visit presidential libraries each year use these archives. Ninety-nine percent of visitors . . . are there for the museum displays, which at first present a whitewashed and glamorized portrait of each president.'**

**'The Roosevelt Library avoided the discussion of the internment of Japanese-Americans until 1995 . . . the Eisenhower Library portrays (him) as a supporter of civil rights . . . the Kennedy Library fails to address infidelties and health problems . . .'**

**'The Johnson Library ignores wire tapping of political adversaries . . .the Reagan Library left out the Iran-Contra scandal . . .the Nixon Library says Watergate was only a second-rate burglary . . . the Truman Library in 1995 reinvented itself into the best there is.'**