

Imperial shrines: How presidential libraries distort history

by [Benjamin Hufbauer](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

When I was in college I took a course on Roman architecture and learned that temples were built throughout the Roman Empire to celebrate the emperors as gods. Sometimes these emperor-gods would have engraved on stone or bronze tablets a *Res Gestae*—a self-proclaimed list of “things achieved.” I remember feeling faintly superior to the ancient Romans; after all, we didn’t enshrine every president—the good, the bad and the large number in between—in temples. Or did we?

Years later I studied presidential memorials and libraries. One of the things I noticed about the presidential libraries is that starting with the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, which opened in 1957, many of these libraries have included a replica of the Oval Office as it appeared during that president’s term. The replica tends to be the most popular display at a presidential library. I believe that the appearance of these Oval Office displays coincides with the emergence of what historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. called the imperial presidency. Schlesinger identified President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the one to start the trend toward the imperial presidency. Not coincidentally, FDR was the first to have a federal presidential library.

FDR got the ball rolling, but presidential libraries have grown exponentially since his opened in 1941 in Hyde Park, New York. The Roosevelt Library cost about \$400,000 (about \$8 million in today’s dollars), but the William Jefferson Clinton Library is a spectacular complex in Little Rock, Arkansas, that cost more than \$160 million.

The biggest benefit of the presidential library system is that it provides historians access to presidential records. Rats ate many of George Washington’s papers, and some of Abraham Lincoln’s were sealed from historians until 1947. FDR sold the idea of the presidential library with the promise that historians would get timely access to the historical record. There were some bumps along the way, but what Roosevelt

promised came to pass. By the late 1950s, more than 80 percent of the records in the FDR library were open to scholars, and today that figure is 99 percent. Roosevelt helped create a gold mine for historians.

Since then, the libraries associated with each president have become more and more elaborate. The president and his supporters oversee the creation of the presidential library exhibits, using privately raised funds to create a glorifying shrine. Then the memory of the president is watched over by archivists and museum curators hired by the government. And although the archives of presidential libraries have been impartially run by the National Archives, the museums tend to present self-serving narratives of “things achieved.”

The initial displays at the Lyndon Johnson Library in Austin, Texas, for instance, barely mentioned the Vietnam War when it opened in 1971. The Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, avoided the Iran-contra affair when it opened in 1991. Students learning history from these museums get a dose of political propaganda. The museums tend to become more accurate after the president and his supporters have passed from the scene, but this can take generations.

The George W. Bush Library, to be built on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, is likely to be the most propagandistic presidential library yet. In 2001, President Bush issued an executive order that allowed ex-presidents (and their descendants and representatives) to block the release of presidential records. Since other regulations protect records that might compromise national security, this order is clearly a case of political expediency. It is contrary to both the letter and spirit of the laws that previously governed presidential libraries.

The museum may become one of the main sources of information about this era, but one that fails to provide full access to the historical record. The head of the George W. Bush Presidential Library Foundation says proudly that the Bush Library will “celebrate this president”—evidently without much respect for accurate history. *Res Gestae* indeed. Some historians and political scientists at SMU might be willing to lend their expertise in creating a more balanced history, but it’s unlikely that this will happen to any significant degree.

The Bush Library will also be the first on a university campus to be connected to a policy institute devoted to supporting Bush’s agenda and Republican ideas in general. Past presidential libraries have sometimes been connected to nonpartisan

schools of public policy (like the Johnson School at the University of Texas and the Bush School at Texas A & M) or to nonpartisan philanthropic centers (like the Carter Center in Atlanta). The Bush Institute will be something new and troubling in the history of presidential libraries. Having an institute that hires people on the basis of ideology rather than expertise doesn't fit well with the mission of a university.

The whole presidential library system has been budgeted for about \$68 million for 2008. The amount needed to start up the George W. Bush Library is nearly \$6 million. The size of those figures doesn't bother me. In fact, I think spending on these libraries should be increased—if we can ensure that the public gets a fair return on its investment. Congress needs to pass reform legislation over a likely presidential veto that would overturn Bush's executive order limiting access to presidential records and would ensure—through the genuine participation of historians—that the history in presidential libraries is balanced and factual. More archivists also need to be hired to process presidential records.

Why do we need more archivists? Because the number of records generated by the executive branch since FDR's time has exploded. The Roosevelt Library originally had around 10 million pages of records; the Clinton Library has more than 80 million pages—including millions of electronic records. But the number of archivists has not kept pace. The National Archives estimates that it may take up to 100 years for the records at recently established presidential libraries to be completely processed. A 100-year wait is unacceptable. To enable the nation to learn from our history, a majority of these records need to be processed and available to historians, journalists and the public within 20 years of a president's leaving office.

I've long thought that there is more good than bad in presidential libraries. But lately these presidential temples are looking more and more like an American version of the Roman imperial cult.