

Classrooms of Democracy:
Libraries and Museums as Sites of Citizenship

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Preface



0.1. Nixon Library Shutdown, c.Oct. 2013 (Originally printed by *Denver Post*)

On October 1, 2013, Congress failed to pass either a continuing resolution or legislation appropriating funds for the 2014 fiscal year. Partisan divisions led to a sixteen day government shutdown, the third longest in national history. The shutdown furloughed nearly 800,000 government workers, destabilized economic growth, further exasperated

citizens already fed up with Congressional bickering, and closed many of the nation's greatest cultural assets, such as the National Parks and the federal memorials and monuments in Washington D.C. Many citizens and tourists defied the signage telling them to stay away: veterans, for example, gained Internet reputation with their occupation of the WWII Memorial. If not for frustrated researchers, many would not have realized that the National Archives and Records Administration also shuttered during the first weeks of October. Nevertheless, on the morning of October 2, NARA released a statement with this notice: "All NARA archival facilities and Presidential Libraries will be closed and secured for the duration of a funding lapse. This prohibition includes, without limitation, all public research rooms [and] museum exhibition areas."¹ The government shutdown put my fall break research trip to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum and George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum at risk. I breathed a huge sigh of relief on October 16 with the rest of the country when the House and Senate agreed to extend the debt limit until February 7, 2014 and the shutdown concluded.

¹ *National Archives and Records Administration. Contingency Plan for Government Shutdown.* Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 2013. Web.

America's Presidential Libraries and Museums might remain out of sight for many Americans, but as cultural arms of the federal government, they deserve further exploration.

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I must express my gratitude to the entire American Studies department for treating your students with seriousness and as active contributors to the creation of disciplinary knowledge. Nowhere else in my undergraduate studies have I encountered so many professors genuinely interested in their students' research and its potential for success beyond Notre Dame's campus. Through classes, you teach us to critique politics, culture, and society. Through example, you inspire us to translate these ideas into action. I can think of no finer department on campus for preparing students to encounter the challenges of today and tomorrow with confidence, poise, seriousness, exuberance, skepticism, optimism, and responsibility. Thank you for shaping us into keen intellectuals and informed, passionate citizens.

Finally, many thanks to all of my friends and family who have listened with great patience to all of my thesis rambles. Dad, our long US history study sessions in grade school prepared me for the hours of reading and annotating that went into the research process. Mom,

your reassurance during the early stages of this project, when I could not discover the perfect topic, helped me to move forward with confidence. Madison, thank you for all of the encouraging words during my winter break research trip to Little Rock. I knew I would make it home safely. Lastly, to all of my closest friends, thank you for always indulging my research passions, calming my nerves during the government shutdown, and listening to my barrage of facts about Presidential Libraries and Museums. I hope our conversations have been entertaining along the way.

A New Form of Commemoration

“Future historians will curse as well as praise me.”

-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt¹

¹ Roosevelt, Franklin Delano quoted in Ward, Geoffrey C. “‘Future Historians will curse as well as praise m.’ (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).” *Smithsonian* Dec. 1989: 58+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 18 March 2014.

A New Form of Commemoration

America's Presidential Libraries and Museums hold a prominent position in the national cultural landscape today, but this form of presidential commemoration did not come into existence until 1941.¹ Prior to the 1940s, every president retained full possession of his papers, including both personal correspondence and documents produced during the administration, after leaving office. A wartime atmosphere and his personal ego inspired FDR to create this new method of preservation for both textual and material history.² Following FDR's example, all subsequent presidents have built Presidential Libraries and Museums, and most have paid tribute to the four-term president by replicating his original model, including the sources of funding. The president must raise all funds through private donations for the construction of his institution, a task accomplished through the work of his private foundation, typically appointed while still in office. With the passage of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1986, the president's foundation must also create an endowment to help pay for maintenance, equal to 20 percent of their cost.³ The president and his foundation then place the library and museum under the control of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Besides the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, all the institutions have followed this private-public partnership model since opening their doors to visitors. FDR's successors, however, have not followed his architectural precedent. While he employed an architect friend to build a modest two-story Dutch

¹ Besides the United States, no other nation has a system of Presidential Libraries and Museums. Nigeria established its first presidential library in 2010, built on a 76 acre site with exhibitions designed by Ralph Appelbaum, the same designer in charge of the Clinton museum's ("Library and Museum").

² Benjamin Hufbauer chronicles the early criticism leveled against FDR by editorialists and congressmen. In the newspapers, columnists portrayed FDR as Santa Claus, gifting a large presidential library to himself, and as an Egyptian pharaoh. One congressman called him an "egocentric maniac" (Hufbauer 31-32).

³ Benjamin Hufbauer. *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. 181-182. Print.

colonial building on his Hyde Park estate, the likes of Kennedy and LBJ have hired celebrity architects such as I.M Pei (Kennedy) and Gordon Bunshaft (LBJ) to design grandiose monuments. Today, NARA administers 13 Presidential Libraries and Museums, each of which attracts thousands of domestic and foreign visitors, seasoned scholars and young schoolchildren, and according to figures from 2008, these thirteen separate institutions cost the federal government around \$64,000,000 annually.⁴ FDR's desire to increase access to presidential history for the average American and his touristic imperatives inform contemporary critiques of the federal system.

The desire to reach the American populace informed FDR's decision to title his commemorative space a *library* and museum rather than an *archive* and museum. When searching for the proper name, his Executive Committee, the team appointed to plan the scope of the museum, looked to other institutions built around the collections of former presidents, such as the Rutherford B. Hayes Memorial Library and the Harding Memorial Library.⁵ While FDR resisted titling the institution after himself, he supported the committee's suggestion of library rather than archive for at the time, library connoted a gentleman's place of study while archive evoked a more alien space of academic scholarship.⁶ This distinction between collections-based institutions no longer holds, calling into question the decision to continue the traditional titling. While FDR's successors may similarly look to precedent when naming their institutions, the new

⁴ National Records and Archives Administration. Office of Presidential Libraries. *Report on Alternative Models for Presidential Libraries Issued in Response to the Requirements of PL 110-404*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009. 14-15. Web.

⁵ These libraries formed prior to the FDR Presidential Library and Museum, and they do not include a museum component alongside their archives. Therefore, they continue to operate as private institutions rather than becoming part of the federal system of Presidential Libraries and Museums codified by the 1955 Presidential Libraries Act.

⁶ Cynthia M. Koch and Lynn A. Bassanese. "Roosevelt and His Library." *Prologue* 33.2 (Summer 2001). Web.; Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 32.

model of the presidential center as well as the late twentieth and early twenty-first century notion of experiencing history might engender the resistance to an archival association. Whether administered by a university or operating as an independent institution, archives connote dusty shelves and collections secluded away from general access. Changing to Presidential Archives and Museums, according to the implicit logic of thirteen presidents and their foundations, would endanger the public image of these spaces as popularly accessible and shift the focus from visitors to scholars. More than a sign of tribute, therefore, maintaining the conventional title represents the joint desire to educate the public and attract tourist dollars.

After the 1941 FDR Presidential Library and Museum dedication, presidential commemoration changed from a few Greek temples or Egyptian obelisks in Washington D.C., classical forms visually attesting the heroism of the president, to federal repositories housing the objects of presidential labor under joint private and federal control.⁷ Benjamin Hufbauer argues that this method of commemoration reflects the imperial presidency, Arthur Schlesinger's definition for the expansion of executive authority used and often abused from World War II through the Cold War. Continuing the practice of presidential honor, "presidential libraries reify an ideology that claims all presidents as exceptional human beings and leaders worthy of reverential commemoration."⁸ The presence of Presidential Libraries and Museums, ever increasing in physical size and political concern, in the post-Cold War landscape evidences the continued expansion of presidential power. Nixon became the only president to resign from office, and Clinton suffered impeachment by the House. Both have aimed to rehabilitate and reshape their public image with their libraries. Without checks to executive authority, presidents endangering the American democratic system will continue to have this opportunity. The power

⁷ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 35.

⁸ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 40.

of the executive joins with material history, exhibition narratives, and aesthetics to persuade visitors of presidential greatness.

America's Presidential Libraries and Museums proclaim the necessity of remembering all presidents, creating a historical consciousness often at odds with the dispassionate critique of the historical record. Various museum scholars have considered how emotional, commemorative museums invite or discourage conversation within the exhibition galleries.⁹ While not at odds with reason, emotion often calms the critical eye of visitors, creating a means for engaging with a collective body of sentiments rather than supporting individual critiques. Within the Presidential Libraries and Museums, specifically, charged emotional encounters with history often prompt visitors towards unquestioned acceptance of presidential heroism. In a 1974 article, Duncan Cameron examined how rhetoric, architecture, and exhibition design, including layout and text, combine to control visitors' sense of agency within gallery spaces. Identifying the museum as temple, he argues, gives authority figures sole power over representation and results in uncritical reverence for the subject at hand while identifying the museum as forum disperses power throughout the visiting body and allows for debate.¹⁰ The Presidential Libraries and Museums following the principles of the temple reaffirm the power of the modern executive while those following the principles of the forum uphold the promise of all presidents to build democratic spaces for the people. Institutional identification as a temple or forum plus the valorization of

⁹ James Donald Ragsdale. "'Souviens-Toi:' Museums of Commemoration and Remembrance." *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 133-149. Print.; Sheila Watson. "Myth, Memory and the Senses in the Churchill Museum." *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. Ed. Sandra H. Dudley. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. 204-223. Print.

¹⁰ Duncan F. Cameron. "The Museum: Temple or Forum?" *Curator* 14 (1974): 11-24. Web.

presidential labor through exhibitions displaying his heroics thus limit particular visitor actions and condition them to accept the presented representations and narratives.

Concerned with commemoration and heroism, America's Presidential Libraries and Museums also encounter the modern preoccupation with authority and authenticity. Scholars within the fields of history, cultural studies, art, landscape studies, tourism, and public memory have all engaged with the contentious debate concerning the relation between history and memory in contemporary America, often resulting in the dichotomization of the two with history representing a repressive authoritarian treatment of the past and memory allowing for a subjective, private, and experiential encounter. Erika Doss situates these discourses within, "a cultural shift toward public feeling as a source of knowledge," arguing that as the American public has become more attuned to the sociopolitical conditions of visual images, the economy of affect has diversified to include alternative forms of sensorial knowledge alongside sight.¹¹ Disrupting the division between ideas and feelings in encountering and receiving national history influences how individuals perceive themselves either within or outside of the normative narratives. Memory and history, ideas and emotions reunite at the Presidential Libraries and Museums to authorize the objects, images, and narratives on display.

America's Presidential Libraries and Museums operate as archives of presidential history, as exhibitionary, educative spaces for teaching a diverse public audience about vaunted national ideals, as tightly controlled venues in which former presidents direct their rehabilitation, and as public spaces employing the techniques of history and memory to consolidate national identity. In preserving all objects of presidential labor, displaying select objects and documents as signs of active leadership, and recreating presidential spaces through replicas, these institutions link

¹¹ Erika Doss. *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 48-52. Print.

material history, memory, and affect to authenticity. When encountering campaign buttons or the pen used to sign important legislation into law, visitors receive an image or idea of American society as democratic, active, and committed to the system of checks and balances; the concrete, material reality of the object, supported by the accompanying exhibition text, authenticates these imagined perceptions. Replicas work to re-present an “authentic copy of a total situation” meant to generate a set of ideas and emotions, but when housed within an institution concerned with narrating a singular history of a president and his administration, these feelings do not have free room to play.¹² Rather, the rhetoric of the replica and the exhibitions delimit the possible individual reactions, affirming only those sanctioned throughout the rest of the museum. America’s Presidential Libraries and Museums display how the president wants citizens to remember the history of his administration as well as his personal and political character. Their architecture, exhibitions, and replicas rely upon a range of sensorial techniques to guide visitors through a memorialized representation of individual and national history.

Claiming Space, Asserting Citizenship

Examining FDR’s Presidential Library and Museum, Benjamin Hufbauer argued that three stages mark the life cycle of these institutions. When first opening, the museums tend toward reverential representations of the president, often excluding scandals and examples when the president’s decisions created either brief or lasting problems for the nation. Thus, the Nixon museum presented a whitewashed version of Watergate for seventeen years, and the Clinton museum only presents the Monica Lewinsky scandal within the context of partisan politics. As

¹² Dean MacCannell. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976. 14-15; 79. Print.

the president and members of his administration either pass away or fade out of public awareness and as attendance numbers dwindle, these museums enter a middle period where curators and foundation members often reassess the content and purpose of the exhibitions. This stage may coincide with the publication of histories and biographies written through access to documents recently declassified, and these publications provide a fresh lens for curators to re-present the exhibition content. Benefitting from a revived interest in the president's life, the museums typically install new displays in the public exhibition galleries, which adopt a more objective voice, a contextualized narrative, and the effects of the president's decisions.¹³ While each Presidential Library and Museum does not transform its exhibitions and institutional identity at the same rate, Hufbauer explains that these stages reveal the politics of commemoration, the relationship between the archive and historical memory, and the constructedness of historical narratives.

Through individual case studies of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, and the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, this thesis examines how these uniquely American institutions teach citizens about normative civic attitudes and behaviors as well as the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. I have chosen these particular libraries and museums for their institutional histories, their geographic diversity, and the lack of scholarship currently attending to their exhibitions, architecture, and institutional politics. Through the Bush, Nixon, and Clinton institutions, I explore three concerns that inform interactions between individuals and the state – freedom, privacy, and transparency. Opened in 2013, the George W. Bush occupies the origin stage within Hufbauer's formulation and of the three institutions, most depends upon interactive media

¹³ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 37-39.

technologies to create the encounter between visitors and history. By examining the museum's interior architecture, one example of interactive technology, and the memorialization of tragedy within the exhibition galleries, I ask how discourses of freedom – and the converse, discourses of tyranny or control – teach visitors about the nature of American democracy in the twenty-first century. The Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, open since 1990, has a unique institutional history, one demonstrating flaws in the private-public ownership model. By comparing and contrasting the representation of Watergate during the years of private control by the Nixon Foundation and since 2007, the years of federal control, I examine how Presidential Libraries and Museums construct the relationship between the president and visitors. I then frame these analyses within a larger discussion about privacy and security, relating the manipulation of history to hallowed spaces in the American imagination, specifically the home. Finally, through an expansive study of architecture, landscape, interior design, and replicas at the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, I ask how a president remembered for spinning the truth employs the principle of transparency to convince citizens of the merits of responsible, selfless public service. Throughout each chapter, I call attention to presidential power as displayed by the existence of the libraries and museums themselves and the selective representation of the president's history. While each case study does not consider the same types of spaces and events, a concern for the lessons about citizenship that visitors receive informs the entire analysis. By placing memory, citizenship, and democracy at the center of this thesis, I ultimately ask whether this twentieth century form of presidential commemoration contributes to the formation of a rational, participatory civic public.

The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum: A Monument to the Presidency

“Leaders are defined by the convictions they hold, and my deepest conviction, the guiding principle of the administration is that the United States of America must strive to expand the reach of freedom...One of the benefits of freedom is that people can disagree...But when future generations come to this library and study this administration, they’re going to find out that we stayed true to our convictions.”

-President Bush, Bush Center dedication (April 25, 2013)¹

¹ Bush, George W. George W. Bush Presidential Center dedication. Dallas, Texas. 25 April 2013. *Fox News Insider*. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.



1.1. George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 2013. (Photo by the author)

Dedicated on April 25, 2013 as the thirteenth of its kind, the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum resides on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The institution features the Bush archives run by NARA, the museum constructed by the Bush Foundation, and the George W. Bush Institute, an independent public policy center. Built of brick and Texas Cordova Cream limestone, the building

complements the American Georgian architectural character of the surrounding campus buildings and blends into the native Texas landscaping in the 14-acre nature park designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates.¹ Some have described the building's architecture as "spare, direct and tight-lipped...a building meant to honor a particularly blunt and plain-spoken kind of political power." In an interview with *Architect* magazine, Robert Stern, the project's chief architect, said, "I'm interested in making a monument to the president and to the presidency."² In comparison to Stern's other cultural projects, such as the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts and the International Quilt Study Center and Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Bush Center's architecture displays the building's implicit purpose – to display executive power.³

¹ "George W. Bush Presidential Center." Robert A.M. Stern Architects, 2013. Web. 29 December 2013.

² Christopher Hawthorne. "Architecture Review: Bush Presidential Library is Fittingly Blunt." *Los Angeles Times* 20 April 2013. Web.; Katie Gerfen. "Project: George W. Bush Presidential Center." *Architect* 17 May 2013. Web.

³ Monumentality also informs the design of the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which raises questions about the relation between freedom and grandeur in America ("Projects.").

Stern's architectural rendering of the Bush presidency supports the representation of the president as mediated by the museum exhibitions and the 65,950 square feet of archival space.⁴ While the George W. Bush Presidential Center assumed a form resembling the other Presidential Libraries and Museums in the federal system, the institution does not accord equal attention to its archives and museum in its architectural design. Alan Lowe, the Director of the Library and Museum, described the Center as "a state-of-the-art research center for historians, scholars, students and the public" and promised to "provide in-depth access to presidential materials and the presidential decision-making process."⁵ While the institution acknowledges its library function through a small NARA bronze seal placed on the wall by the gift shop, visitors cannot see into the archival facilities. Lowe's research center instead operates as a tourist-driven enterprise with exhibition windows lining the walls of the entrance lobby, a live-action panoramic video of Texas landscapes drawing visitors towards the permanent galleries, and 43,620 square feet of brightly colored, image-driven exhibitions covering Bush's early life when he discovered his "charge to keep," his eight-year administration from 2001-2009, and his post-presidential global service initiatives.⁶ To date, the Bush library has received about 300 archival requests; around 380,000 tourists including over 1000 tour groups and 20,000 students (K-12) have visited the Dallas museum.⁷ If architecture renders presidential characteristics into material form, then researchers at the Bush library may expect its archives to function as a tight-lipped operation, especially in regard to classified documents. The institution's name, the close

⁴ "About the Facility." George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 2013. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.

⁵ "SMU Welcomes the George W. Bush Presidential Center." *Southernmethodistuniversity*. SMU, n.d. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.

⁶ "About the Facility."

⁷ Under the conditions of the Presidential Records Act, Bush's records did not become subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests until January 20, 2014.; John Orrell. Telephone Interview. 19 March 2014.

juxtaposition of the archives with the gift shop, and recent NARA efforts to improve access to presidential records though suggest that the Bush Center considers the call to research and education as important as that to entertain.

America's Presidential Libraries and Museums attempt to balance individual and national history, operating both as museums dedicated to educating the public about past presidents and honoring NARA's goal to place ownership over presidential legacy in the people's hands. The exhibition content and its mode of presentation trouble this balance at the Bush Presidential Library and Museum. Visitors encounter their first citizenship lesson in Freedom Hall and its "We the People" video. These titles raise questions about inclusion versus exclusion, specifically what actions must be taken and what responsibilities must be fulfilled to maintain a proper civic identity. Decision Points Theater, an interactive experience meant to reveal the decision-making process, crafts an isolated civic body within the museum, and the results of the exercise represent the constant tension between active participation and removed representation within American democracy. Finally, the September 11th exhibition foregrounds the encounter between national and individual history at the Presidential Libraries and Museums, asking what type of patriotism an ideal citizen should display in the wake of a national crisis.

Opened in May 2013, the Bush Center should tend toward a reverential representation of President Bush according to precedent and Benjamin Hufbauer's three-stage formulation.⁸ However, the former president often disappears from public perception, specifically within Freedom Hall and the Ground Zero alcove. This absence not only shapes the relation between visitors and the president but also contrasts with heroic modes of representation often seen at other Presidential Libraries and Museums, where all museum spaces must display images of or

⁸ Benjamin Hufbauer. *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005. 39. Print.

quotes from the president to assert their significance.⁹ The joint discourses of participation and freedom inform the representation of Bush and determine the museum's identity as temple or forum.

Let Tyrants Fear

During his presidency, George W. Bush viewed himself as the great liberator, a title befitting an individual destined to redeem tyrannical, extremist nations through peace and democracy.¹⁰ Bush's Freedom Agenda, according to a White House fact sheet, "promoted the spread of freedom as the great alternative to the terrorists' ideology of hatred because expanding liberty and democracy will help defeat extremism and protect the American people." While he initiated peace talks between Israel and Palestine and met with human rights activists from more than 35 countries, bringing democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq dominated the Freedom Agenda.¹¹ The liberation of the Afghani and Iraqi people resulted largely from the September 11th attacks; Bush had proclaimed a greater interest in his domestic agenda than in developing a foreign policy based upon his doctrine of compassionate conservatism. Creating the Office of Homeland Security, thus increasing the protections at home against future terrorism, combined Bush's domestic focus with his new actions as a wartime president. In *A Charge to Keep*, Bush's 1999 memoir about his life and political philosophy, he wrote, "We have...a collective responsibility as citizens of the greatest and freest nation in the world. America must not retreat

⁹ Vice President Dick Cheney does not appear within the exhibition narrative beyond the section devoted to Bush's 2000 presidential campaign, further emphasizing the president's heroism.

¹⁰ Dan P. McAdams "An American Story." *George W Bush and the Redemptive Dream: A Psychological Portrait*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 195-230. Print.

¹¹ "Freedom Agenda." *whitehouse*. The White House, President George W. Bush, n.d. Web. 29 Dec. 2013.

within its borders. Our greatest export is freedom, and we have a moral obligation to champion it throughout the world.”¹² 9/11 gave President Bush the opportunity to champion his Freedom Agenda to the American people, convincing them that national security depended on the success of wars against tyranny and the eventual implementation of democracy in the Middle East.

Architecture and modern security devices draw attention to George W. Bush’s Freedom Agenda at his Presidential Library and Museum.¹³ Before entering the formal museum lobby, visitors must pass through a body scanner, and security officers screen all baggage. Many cultural institutions built in the post-9/11 years feature these procedures. Placed within a museum concerned with the legacy of the president who created the Department of Homeland Security, they show how the decisions of the executive branch regulate individual actions on a daily basis. After passing the security checks, visitors enter the ticketing lobby, which also serves as an exhibition space. Set within large wall display boxes, a multitude of state gifts received throughout Bush’s presidency convey the goodwill fostered between the United States and numerous nations throughout the world. These gifts signify the complexity of foreign diplomacy, which precariously balances between benevolence and obedience, and when placed within Freedom Hall, the museum’s central orientation point, they prepare visitors to accept Bush’s call to liberate.

Standing 67-feet tall and 50-by-50 feet wide, Freedom Hall brings natural light into the heart of the building during the day and at night, functions as a softly glowing beacon.¹⁴

Architect Robert Stern designed the room as a fixed space meant to stop visitor movement in

¹² George W. Bush. *A Charge to Keep*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999. 240. Print.

¹³ All exhibition and architecture descriptions come from a visit to the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum on October 23, 2013.

¹⁴ “George W. Bush Presidential Center.” Robert A.M. Stern Architects, 2013. Web. 29 Dec. 2013.

preparation for the information and themes presented in the formal galleries.¹⁵ The space's name, coupled with its grandiose height and uplifting openness, further instills the values of Bush's Freedom Agenda within visitors. While the museum's entrance lobby attempts to generate awe-struck reverence, these feelings relate to freedom and democracy – as abstract ideals – rather than Bush's policy implementations that defended these national characteristics.



1.2. Freedom Hall and
“We the People”
Video Mural, 2013.
(Photo by Peter
Aaron)

The artifacts and architecture of Freedom Hall create an appropriate space for the museum to exhibit “We the People,” a seven-minute video that originally appears as a 21-foot tall painted mural surrounding the Hall before transforming into a live video journey. Visitors first witness a diversity of Texas landscapes, a prelude that transitions into depictions of the nation's heterogeneity; “We the People” depicts 100 Americans performing everyday tasks from welding, getting married, harvesting this year's corn crop, and stepping out of a surgery. The backdrop then fades into a view over the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and visitors experience a simulated

flyover the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument before descending towards the Capitol Building. For the finale, a montage of faces – ordinary Americans and then all of the nation's presidents – fly onto the screen, and in the final seconds, a 360-degree, digital replica of the Constitution evokes national ideals through three simple words: We the People. In an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, David Niles, co-creator of the video, said, “The concept is to make the visitor feel really part of the American experience. I wanted visitors to

¹⁵ Katie. Gerfen “Project: George W. Bush Presidential Center.” *Architect* 17 May 2013. Web.

feel...part of the entire museum experience.”¹⁶ The video seems more preoccupied with its technical sophistication than its subject matter, and flyover connotes both disregard for Middle America and display of military prowess. As a technological artifact of the Bush post-presidency, “We the People” appears an ungrounded display of wealth, resources, and American exceptionalism. As a narrative, however, the video argues that every American contributes to national history, and by foregrounding the average citizen rather than the nation’s chief executive, the video attempts to craft the museum into the people’s space. While welcoming visitors with a depiction of diversity does not necessarily transform the space into a forum meant for discussion of national principles, the video’s cast of American characters does define national history as an interwoven text. Respect for diverse contributions moves towards the forum’s characteristics of openness, debate, and populism.

Freedom Hall, “We the People,” and the imagined visitor subject operate as a “triangular correlation” effecting how visitors will relate and respond to the written content and artifacts in the public exhibition galleries.¹⁷ The name of the space denotes liberation, yet depending on the visitor, this ideal might either reference freedom from restriction or freedom to act. As a transition space, Freedom Hall can encourage visitors to move from the past, which connotes gratitude towards the liberator, and into the present, which connotes a desire to demonstrate one’s thankfulness through action. If the architecture generates both attitudes, visitors would possess a dual perspective, which influences how they understand both their identity as museum visitors and their relation to President Bush.

¹⁶ Tom Benning. “Technology Ties Together the George W. Bush Center’s Many Parts.” *The Dallas Morning News* 23 April 2013. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.

¹⁷ Frederick Kiesler, qtd. in Vince Dizekan. “Spatial Practice.” *Virtuality and the Art of Exhibition: Curatorial Design for the Multimedial Museum*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012. 39. Print.

The title and content of “We the People” as well as Bush’s reasoning behind the museum’s media elements suggest that he and museum officials want visitors to view Freedom Hall as a contemplative space, where they posture regard for freedom as an American ideal similar to Bush’s adoption of the liberator title when convenient. In relation to the aesthetics and architecture of the 9/11 gallery, the combined design of “We the People” and Freedom Hall shies away from minimalism and its correspondent potential to enable the projection of polysemous visitor narratives. By evoking the immediate post-9/11 conceptions of liberation and patriotism, the narrative of freedom on display in the entrance spaces transforms the terrorist attacks into a national event and ignores skeptical responses to Bush’s war actions.¹⁸ The video and architecture operate similarly to the exhibition narrative within the Bush museum. Rather than including dissenting voices or multiple perspectives on events from Bush’s administration, “We the People” and Freedom Hall reproduce a monolithic version of presidential history, a problem characterizing the entire Presidential Library and Museum system.

At the Bush museum, this unified, singular presentation opposes Bush’s promise of critical history. In an interview with C-Span, Bush explained the two primary roles for the museum, saying, “The museum is meant to...explain the decision-making process that I went through as president, and we hope the museum inspires people to serve...their community or their country.”¹⁹ While Bush does not express a desire for visitors to question the exhibition narratives, he does imply that lessons learned within the museum should inspire individual action outside of the institution. As a contemporary artifact and one of the first in the museum, “We the People” informs visitors that citizens should support the national pledge to uphold global

¹⁸ See Doss, *Memorial Mania*, 120-131 for an extensive analysis of terrorism and minimalist memorials.

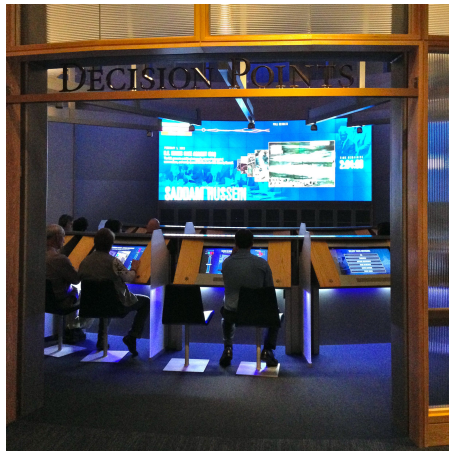
¹⁹ “Interview with Former President George W. Bush and Laura Bush.” Online video clip. *C-Span*. C-Span, 2 April 2013. Web. 4 Jan. 2014.

freedom and democracy through the fruits of their diverse labor and allegiance to the contractual terms of the Constitution.

Visitors enter the public exhibition galleries with an understanding of Bush as liberator, but this representation of the former president results from a celebration of his sanctioned ideals rather than a detailed exposition of his Freedom Agenda.²⁰ The grandiose architecture of Freedom Hall, with its natural light inviting visitors' eyes to turn upwards and their minds to imagine the boundless possibilities of an ideologically unified nation, may generate awe for Bush, the museum's subject, and transitively for the accomplishments of his Freedom Agenda. The size and progressive technology of "We the People" reminds visitors of the wealth and resources that support the presidents' power, extending from their time in office to their post-presidency. The people and not Bush, however, remain central to the video, relating to visitors that they possess power in the museum microenvironment. Positioning visitors alongside the president, thereby honoring NARA's desire to create museums for the benefit of the American public, tempers awe with a call to respond as informed citizens. Does the museum intend for visitors to contribute to the decision-making process and to the creation of knowledge within the public exhibition galleries? As a space of contemplation, Freedom Hall does not push visitors towards deliberation. "We the People," while leveling the relation between the president and citizens, inspires performances of American values rather than critical engagement with civic responsibilities. The Decision Points Theater invites visitors to participate in a virtual recreation of crisis moments from Bush's presidency, but its form and content continue the inspired silence begun in Freedom Hall, the center and orientation point of the entire museum.

²⁰ The museum does detail the aims of the Freedom Agenda, as outlined in President Bush's second inaugural address, within the public exhibition galleries, alongside the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Deliberation or Manipulation?



1.3. Decision Points Theater, 2013. (Photo by the author)

After learning about Bush's global humanitarian efforts and before seeing how he led the nation through Katrina and the financial crisis, visitors have the opportunity to step inside the Decision Points Theater. Like most of the media elements in the public exhibition galleries, this interactive experience presents visitors with an onslaught of information in order to reveal the demands placed upon a president and to involve them in the decision-making process. Decision Points begins with an address from Andy Card and Josh Bolten, both Chiefs of Staff during Bush's administration, during which they impress upon visitors how many difficult scenarios the president encountered while in office. The introduction attempts to draw visitors back in time to the exact moments when Bush began to receive news of the latest disaster; Card and Bolten imply that visitors must abandon opinions based on post-facto information. Visitors then vote as a group whether to examine the Iraq invasion, the Iraq troop surge, Hurricane Katrina, or the financial crisis. After the selection, they have approximately four minutes to gain a variety of perspectives on the issue before deciding.

While they may enter with knowledge of Bush's decision, the video exercise does not reveal the final decision or the reasoning behind it until visitors themselves vote on the best action. Bush appears on screen at the conclusion of the video to explain why he sent troops to New Orleans without police power or why he went to war in Iraq. Because Bush has the last word, visitors walk away from the experience either in support of or disagreement with the president, not in conversation with Americans that adopted similar or divergent opinions during

the crisis. By imagining each group to the experience as a civic body, representative of the national public, we can assert that the experience teaches about the limitations of citizen action and the character of early twenty-first century executive authority.

The digital technology of the twenty-first century has allowed museums to increase access to information housed in archival materials, but in their reactions to Decision Points Theater, many journalists have accused the Bush museum of presenting visitors with a shallow version of events. Rachel Maddow took aim at the presentation of the Iraq War, calling the interactive experience a “national scandal” portraying the invasion as a beneficial and inevitable national security measure.²¹ By referencing the outcomes of the Iraq War in her argument, she conceptualizes Decision Points as an artifact of Bush’s post-presidency, another attempt to shape his legacy as compassionate liberator. While Maddow believes the experience should incorporate post-facto intelligence and the results of Bush’s decision, Bush and museum officials have defined Decision Points as an experience immersing visitors in the periods of scandal *during* the Bush presidency. Bradford Pearson, writing for *Esquire*, first describes the Bush museum as an amusement park and likens the Decision Points Theater to a choose-your-own-adventure game. He criticizes the decisiveness of the experience, specifically Bush’s concluding, uncontestable verdict, but paradoxically, he also applauds its potential to give visitors a voice in the decision-making process, albeit at least five years removed from any of the crises.²² The various media reactions reveal the difficulty in classifying Decision Points Theater and uncertainty about its exact purpose. Maddow defines it as a tool for teaching about the mistakes of history, and Pearson conceptualizes it as a space for public conversation and debate. By discouraging

²¹ PoliticalArticles. “Bush’s Pathetic Spin of ‘Criminal’ Iraq Decision in Library Exhibit.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 May 2013. Web. 5 Jan. 2014.

²² Bradford Pearson. “The Bush Library’s Most Frustrating Exhibit.” *Esquire* 25 April 2013. Web.

deliberation between participants at the end of the simulation, it achieves neither Maddow nor Pearson's ideal.

While Pearson overall adopted a critical stance toward the Decision Points Theater, his comments reveal its potential to create a space for discussion and debate within a history museum. In an article with the *New York Times*, Mark Langdale, the president of the George W. Bush Foundation, acknowledged the perils of Decision Points, saying, "We fully anticipate that some people will try to poke holes or some people will debate. That's fine. That's part of history."²³ Langdale's comment represents a significant shift away from the attitudes of other private, presidential foundations; the Reagan Foundation did not include Iran-Contra in its original exhibitions on the president's foreign policy, and the Nixon Foundation allowed its chief curator to craft a whitewashed version of the Watergate scandal. While Langdale expresses a desire for critical inquiry within the museum and Bush repeatedly has defined the museum's purpose as a gateway into the decision-making process, the structure of Decision Points hinders its ability to fulfill both of these goals.

The Bush museum employed a diverse cast of actors to portray executive advisors, Cabinet officials, and ordinary Americans and relayed the decisions on Iraq, the financial crisis, and Hurricane Katrina from Bush's retrospective stance on the events. As part of the four-minute simulation, visitors receive advice on the crisis from a variety of perspectives in order to make the most informed decision. While this component shows how the president must unite a plurality of opinions into a single decision, it does not present visitors with an accurate representation of arguments made and sentiments expressed during the crisis. Visitors may assume that the actors make statements similar to their portrayed counterparts, but because

²³ Peter Baker. "Rewinding History, Bush Museum Lets You Decide." *New York Times* 20 April 2013. Web.

Decision Points does not incorporate interviews or transcripts from the archives, they cannot ascertain whether the actors read from museum-authored scripts or give voice to arguments of military officials and Cabinet members from Bush's administration.²⁴ As an exercise meant to convince visitors that President Bush made the right decisions, Decision Points could appear a space for emotional manipulation by trained professionals, both the hired actors and museum staff.

The experience partially rectifies this misstep by using archival news coverage in its "Breaking News" interludes and displaying archival images over the four-minute process, but the appearance of Bush onscreen at the end of each scenario brings visitors back to the present moment. When explaining his decision to invade Iraq, Bush stated, "Before 9/11, Saddam Hussein was a problem America might have been able to manage, but after 9/11, the stakes were too high to trust a dictator's word against the weight of evidence and the consensus of the world. Saddam posed too big a risk to ignore."²⁵ While this explanation echoes that presented in the president's 2010 memoir, *Decision Points*, the theater is an interactive experience where as the book represents a one-way exchange of information.²⁶ Both media shape Bush's relationship with Americans during his post-presidency, but the close encounter between visitors and the president during Decision Points renders the power dynamics more visible. Rather than giving visitors the final say in the decision-making process, the experience reinvests Bush with the rhetorical power to define the terms of the crisis, reminding visitors of the president's power to shape the outcome and representation of world events even after his administration ends.

²⁴ Using actors to portray policy experts instead of drawing from archival interviews and transcripts evokes the Bush's administration's frequent disregard for technical, expert knowledge as David Greenberg argues in an article about expertise in the twenty-first century (199-226).

²⁵ "Decision Points Theater." George W. Bush Presidential Center. Dallas, Texas. 23 Oct. 2013.

²⁶ George W. Bush. "Iraq." *Decision Points*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010. 222-271. Print.

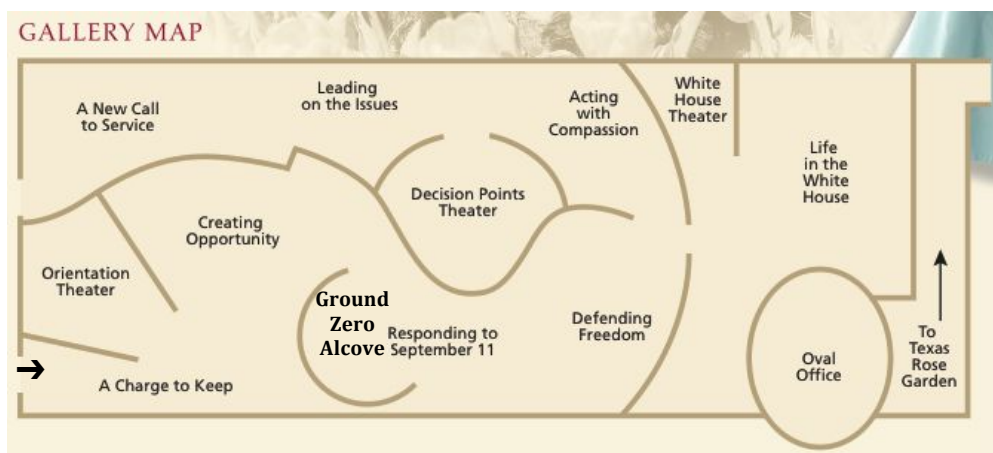
Museums cannot generate completely neutral representations of past events, but the structure of the Decision Points Theater experience and its lack of contemporary perspectives transform it into an artifact of Bush's post-presidency rather than an artifact of his administration.²⁷ Iraq, Katrina, and the financial crisis all occurred during his eight years in office, but an exhibition concerned with their representation relies upon post-facto information to shape the simulated experience of decision-making situated in the past; a time disjunction creates divergent expectations for the actions of visitors and the president. While the museum wants visitors to decide based only upon the information at hand, it allows Bush to argue from an expanded knowledge base unavailable at the time of his actual choice. These discrepancies can recreate actual political operations. The president possesses much more information than ordinary Americans during the decision-making process, especially when the crisis concerns international politics. However, as an exercise meant to include visitors in the debate, allowing for disagreement, Decision Points presents visitors with an implicit lesson about the tradeoff between power and control in a representative democracy, resulting in full affirmation of an expansive executive branch. Because President Bush appears onscreen at the end of each experience, the theater tends toward the qualities of a temple rather than a democratic forum. Disagreement may ensue in the present, but the repetition of a past verdict enshrines the decision within collective memory. By ending the experience with a comparison between Bush's decision and that of the assembled civic body, devoid of an executive explanation, the museum could have imparted a lesson on the potential of history education to hold politicians accountable.

²⁷ The Decision Points Theater can only exist as an artifact created during Bush's post-presidency, but this technical limitation does not require the experience to recapitulate the same arguments from Bush's administration.

Striving for empowerment and inclusion, the museum instead displays the expansion of executive authority and constructs a paternalistic hierarchy between the president and citizens.

Within the Decision Points Theater, visitors encounter several crises from the Bush presidency, but the museum does not include the September 11th attacks. Seeking to create an affective response, this crisis occupies its own, prominent space in the public exhibition galleries.

The Attack on Freedom



1.4. Floor Plan of the Public Exhibition Galleries, museum brochure, 2013.

The floor plan of the public exhibition galleries renders the quick transition between Bush's intended and unexpected presidency into space. In his first inaugural address, he drew attention to the nation's current prosperity, saying, "Our national courage has been clear in times of depression and war when defending common dangers defined our common good... We must show courage in a time of blessing by confronting problems instead of passing them on to future

generations.”²⁸ According to the museum exhibitions, creating tax relief, supporting faith-based and community initiatives, and passing education reform represented the most pressing domestic concerns. Bush wanted to create opportunities for responsible, entrepreneurial citizens in the present and to instill empowerment and accountability as the twin pillars of a conservative national ethos. The September 11th attacks, however, forced the president to adopt an internationalist administrative agenda, and his response to the terrorist threat would come to define his legacy.²⁹ In introducing the 9/11 exhibition, the museum uses Bush’s rhetoric to frame his response as an inevitable outcome. When coupled with a sudden aesthetic change from bright primary colors to muted shades of grey, the new title of “War President” appears predestined, a dangerous result within an institution dedicated to exposing and examining Bush’s decision-making process. As a title, “Defending Freedom,” the exhibition immediately following “Responding to September 11,” further portrays war as the only sufficient response to the terrorist attacks as well as the necessary one for a president dedicated to protecting American ideals – at home and abroad.³⁰ The museum’s floor plan, aesthetics, and narrative thus construct 9/11 as a surprise and a transformative moment for both national history and Bush’s presidency and represents Bush’s war response as a quick, inevitable, spontaneous action.

Al Qaeda’s attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon unarguably surprised American citizens, but the president, Congress, and the military knew that the militant terrorist

²⁸ George W. Bush qtd. in Timothy Naftali. “George W. Bush and the ‘War on Terror.’” *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*. Ed. Julian E. Zelizer. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010. 59. Print.

²⁹ Citizens do not blame President Bush for failing to prevent the 9/11 attacks just as Americans did not blame FDR for Pearl Harbor. As Timothy Naftali argues, the president must preempt any further attacks through a quick and comprehensive response in order to maintain present support and to secure future forgiveness (63-64).

³⁰ Many scholars have examined the implications of framing 9/11 as an act of war rather than a criminal offense. See “The Characterization of 9/11 and America’s Response to Terrorism” for an analysis of the initial discursive moves that constructed Bush’s war on terror.

organization posed a serious threat to national security long prior to September 11, 2001. When creating the 9/11 exhibition, therefore, curators had the opportunity to include the terrorist group and its ideology within the narrative prior to their appearance in Bush's national addresses following the attacks, an opportunity they did not capitalize on. While the "Responding to September 11" exhibition creates a timeline of events, beginning with the morning of 9/11 and extending through the president's address to a joint session of Congress on September 20th, the space denoting the transition from peace to turmoil encapsulates the national shock and the immediacy of international threats in the twenty-first century. The design and objects of this space, therefore, attempt to recreate the collective emotions evoked on the morning of September 11th, the time during which the president discursively constructed the identity of the terrorist attacks as well as the nation's military response.

Objects of learning, part of the exhibition concerned with President Bush's No Child Left Behind policy, give way to remnants of destruction within the museum's tribute space to Ground Zero.³¹ After leaving a small, colorful children's library, visitors encounter two twisted steel beams rising toward the ceiling and surrounded by gray columns of varying heights inscribed with the names of civilians and civil servants who perished in the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks as well as the Flight 93 crash. Small video monitors, placed on several



1.5. Ground Zero Alcove, 2013. (Photo by the author)

columns, feature news footage, but rather than play simultaneously, the screens stagger the

³¹ The semi-circular alcove that delineates the pre- and post-9/11 period of Bush's presidency uses objects and design to address the history of Ground Zero. While the twisted steel beams signal the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the tall gray columns link the space with the contemporary National September 11 Memorial.

footage, beginning with the attack on the North tower, moving on to the second tower, the Pentagon, and concluding with Shanksville. Unlike the majority of the public exhibition galleries, the Ground Zero alcove features no interpretive content, President Bush does not appear in word or image, and a glass display box does not separate the steel beams, taken from the 82nd and 83rd floors of the South Tower, from the visiting body. The museum thus invites visitors to create their own responses to the attacks through both aural and tactile encounters with the event. 9/11 becomes an American event, the originary trauma for the 21st century that all subsequent generations will refer to when defending the nation's actions in the international political arena or when defining democratic ideals at home. Placing responsibility upon visitors to guide their own civic education also removes the explanatory burden from museum officials; an action of avoidance registers as an action of empathetic beneficence. While this transition space does not empower visitors through interactive media like the Decision Points Theater, it does foreground civilians within the 9/11 narrative. The Ground Zero alcove thus becomes a unique, yet still interrelated, space within the Bush Museum, one specifically concerned with visitor response and how it shapes Americans' understanding of civic identity.

The Ground Zero alcove resolves the tension between individual and national history at the Bush museum by equating the two, teaching visitors that times of distress necessitate commitment to a sanctioned set of national principles. In an interview with Diane Sawyer about 9/11 and its exhibition, former First Lady Laura Bush said, "There's something sort of encouraging about it [9/11], because of the way our country came together and the way we can come together. And we forget that now, in so much partisan rancor, and I think it's too bad

because our responsibility as citizens really is to come together.”³² While reflecting upon the national attitude immediately following the attacks, the former First Lady speaks in the present tense, signaling a steadfast belief in unity as the foundational, formative American ideal. During the immediate post-9/11 period, a form of new patriotism did emerge, one founded on a civic consciousness of volunteerism and a renewed faith in government. However, this popular reaction quickly subsided as civilians configured the patriotism into unreflective identification with American values rather than civic attachment through small acts of sacrifice.³³ The Ground Zero alcove does not address the form or character of civilian response to 9/11, but Laura Bush’s comment and the absence of museum authority define the space as a visitor-directed, education lesson about responsible, expected behavior in the wake of national disaster. Conditioned into an attack mindset, visitors experience shock, fear, and grief, sensations shared on the morning of September 11th. By generating a shared sensation of emotional trauma, the space thus equates individual with national interests and defines unity as the best possibility for national healing.

The Bush museum engages the sensations of historical memory in contemporary citizenship education. In his Oval Office address to the nation on the evening of September 11th, President Bush began with visual images of wreckage and sacrifice, transitioned into assurances of the nation’s economic and political strength, and concluded with a call to unity in the defense of international freedom.³⁴ The whole 9/11 exhibition reproduces this structure, and the Ground Zero Alcove operates as the people’s space, due to the absence of Bush and other government

³² ABC News. “Laura Bush: The 9/11 Exhibit at new Bush Museum brings her, George W Bush to Tears.” *Yahoo! News* 25 April 2013. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.

³³ Scott L. Mclean. “The War on Terrorism and the New Patriotism.” *The Politics of Terror: The U.S. Response to 9/11*. Ed. William Crotty. 65, 68. Print.

³⁴ George W. Bush. “Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks.” White House. Oval Office, Washington D.C. 11 Sept. 2001. National Address. *Selected Speeches of George W. Bush, 2001-2008*. n.p.

officials, thereby defining civilian emotion and action as the foundation of national unity. The alcove does not argue against public dissent or consider how responses varied across the nation. Rather, it assumes a temporary national civic hysteria, arguing for executive decision-making by privileging the sensations of attack and public responses of fear and uncertainty. Within the museum, affective memories of September 11th in the Ground Zero alcove might transform the subsequent exhibition spaces into the immediate post-9/11 landscape, tempering rational skepticism of executive action. While not a temple space proclaiming Bush's triumphs, the Ground Zero Alcove supports a singular representation of civilian response to crisis, protecting the dominance of patriotism and freedom as ideals in America.

Citizen-in-Chief

As visitors exit the public exhibition galleries, they pass a final wall placard bearing words from Bush's farewell address to the nation. In the quote, the former president acknowledges the triumphs and trials of his administration before concluding with, "I have been blessed to represent this nation we love. And I will always be honored to carry a title that means more to me than any other: citizen of the United States of America." Beyond the formal exhibition narrative, the museum continues to presume a unified civic body. If casting their eyes toward the floor, visitors will see a final marking of the president's pride, an inscription that frames January 20, 2009 – Bush's last day in office – within his dual identity as president and citizen. Based on these instances alone, it is difficult to determine Bush's understanding of the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. However, balancing his identity as singular, national leader with one shared by millions of Americans deconstructs the hierarchical

relationship between the two parties. Furthermore, placing an emphasis upon this similarity reveals how President Bush understands the purpose of his ideal museum.

Since the end of his administration, Bush has remained outside of the national political arena, a personal decision demonstrating disinterestedness in legacy building and perhaps a perceived need to atone for his war policy. This relative disappearance manifests throughout the museum, specifically in Freedom Hall and the Ground Zero Alcove. “We the People” promises that the museum will incorporate aspects of the forum into the public exhibition galleries, but the size of the hall troubles this promise by evoking reverential sentiments connoting a temple environment. The tumult and pain encapsulated within the Ground Zero Alcove tends visitors toward uncritical emotion, and the memorial design mandates acceptance of the war on terror narrative. Furthermore, the Alcove elevates emotional over rational citizenship, a form staking already high ideological tensions. Finally, while the Decision Points Theater attempts to create a democratic forum within the museum, the ending onscreen image of President Bush leaves visitors with a sense of disempowerment and perhaps with questions about the possibility of protesting executive decrees. As a unit, Freedom Hall, the Decision Points Theater, and the Ground Zero Alcove do not define the new George W. Bush museum as a temple to Bush’s accomplishments or a forum for open discussions about the national consequences of his administration’s policies. As a citizen concerned with exposing the decision-making process, however, Bush appears committed to the eventual realization of a forum where citizens learn from the successes and mistakes of history to become more responsible actors in the present. Until the museum undergoes its first significant revision, visitors will exit the Bush museum with an impression of the ideal American citizen as a compassionate patriot, eager to support freedom initiatives at home and abroad, despite the sacrifices this devotion might require.

A relative newcomer to the field of Presidential Libraries and Museums, the Bush Center may yet display a greater tendency towards reverence and uncritical examination of its namesake's legacy than an older Presidential Library and Museum. Institutional age, however, does not necessarily determine how the museum represents history or constructs the relationship between visitors and the president. Extensive political turmoil and a divisive personality haunted the efforts of loyalists to build the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. While visitors learned about the responsibilities and responses of ideal American citizens through architecture, interactive technology, and a museum memorial at the Bush museum, they encounter similar lessons through narratives of domesticity and national scandal at the Nixon museum.

The Nixon Presidential Library and Museum: A Fractured Institution

“Over the past years, Pat and I have had the opportunity to visit some wonderful places. We have been to Versailles. We’ve been to Westminster, the Kremlin, to the Great Wall of China, to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. I must say that many of them were memorable experiences, all of them were in fact, but nothing that we have ever seen matches this moment – to be welcomed home.”

-President Nixon, Nixon Library dedication (July 19, 1990)¹

¹ “Richard M Nixon Library Dedication.” Online video clip. *C-Span*. C-Span, 19 July 1990. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.



2.1. Nixon Birthplace as Viewed from the Museum Lobby, 2013 (Photo by the author)

Richard Nixon began his 1136 page memoir by saying, “I was born in the house my father built.”¹ He attributed the shape of his personal and political identity to lessons gained during his humble upbringing. Nestled among manicured flowerbeds and near century old trees on the property of the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, the little white clapboard house of Nixon’s childhood belongs to an era in American history when isolated communities dotted the landscape and home represented a settled

and stable place. While the house might seem inconsequential in comparison to the sprawling library and museum complex that surrounds it, the museum draws visitors’ sight to the birthplace just like former president Richard Nixon brought his Yorba Linda homestead to the imaginations of those reading *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. Nixon’s desire to return home forever – both he and his wife are buried on site – has further enhanced the birthplace’s prominence in public memory.²

The Nixon Presidential Library and Museum has an unconventional institutional history. After avoiding impeachment by resigning, Nixon deposited his papers with the General Services Administration (GSA), ensuring that he could regain control over all documents after three years. Debates concerning executive privacy and public responsibility continued to swirl in the post-Watergate milieu, leading to NARA’s decision to seize custody of Nixon’s papers and recordings from the GSA and mandating their storage in the DC area. In 1978, Congress secured ownership

¹ Richard Nixon. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990. 1. Print.

² California does not allow burial on private property, so the Quaker church owns the small gravesite, a further sign of Nixon and his foundation’s investment in his origin story (Docent interview, 21 Oct. 2013).

over the documents by passing the Presidential Records Act, making all presidential records public property.³ These issues about executive versus public ownership, plus lingering public anger in the decade after Watergate, led the Nixon Foundation, a private organization, to establish the first Nixon library and museum in 1990 on the grounds of his childhood home in Yorba Linda, California. Because of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act (PRMPA), this institution did not house Nixon's papers. Congressional amendments to PRMPA in 2004 paved the way for the Nixon materials to move from DC to Yorba Linda. With the museum and archives now housed within one facility, the original Nixon library and museum became incorporated into the federal system in 2007.⁴

Two significant changes occurred as a result of this turnover. From 1990-2007, the Nixon Foundation named the institution, the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace; in 2007, NARA re-titled the institution, the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Revisions to the Watergate gallery accompanied the name change. While the museum did not mount the new Watergate exhibition until 2011, NARA officials immediately removed the current content and objects from the gallery. Tensions between the private Nixon Foundation and NARA have fueled debates over the proper representation of Nixon and the Watergate scandal ever since. Similar to the issues surrounding Nixon's papers, much of this tension stems from differing beliefs concerning ownership over representation, specifically whether the president's loyalists or representatives of the public should maintain control over his legacy. For seventeen years, the Nixon Foundation used notions of privacy to maintain control over Nixon's image and to justify a whitewashed

³ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. "Presidential Libraries and the Politics of Legacy." *Citizen-in-Chief: The Second Lives of the American Presidents*. New York: William Morrow, 2009. 78-79. Print.

⁴ "Library History: History of the Nixon Presidential Materials." *nixonlibrary*. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, n.d. Web. 17 March 2014.

representation of the Watergate scandal. Like the man, the museum now presents visitors with a multi-faceted identity of Nixon.

During his presidential campaigns, Nixon harnessed the power of popular appeal through his messages to the Silent Majority, but his political paranoia and secret schemes contradicted the transparency of the campaigns, ultimately contributing both to his resignation and the destruction of Americans' reverence for their presidents. After Nixon, Americans began to question the actions of the executive branch.⁵ The Nixon museum inherited not only Nixon's history but also the legacy of public cynicism toward the president. While the white kit house anchors Nixon's origin story in the physical landscape, the Watergate exhibition, especially after undergoing its revisions, asks visitors to consider how we should relate to our presidents.⁶ Now, the two spaces, one evoking thoughts of humbleness and privacy and the other recalling presidential ego and public responsibility, work in opposition with the potential to reinterpret Nixon, his administration, and his legacy.

Origin stories fascinate Americans because of the nation's combined rootlessness and investment in the American dream. Can these national characteristics fully account for the attachment of the president, the Nixon foundation, and visitors to the white clapboard house? Why has the birthplace remained so popular – more popular than the museum, which displays the history of Nixon's birth, his political formation, his presidency (1969-1974), and his death? How does the humble origin story specifically work alongside the Watergate narrative, a story about power, corruption, and the relationship between the president and citizens? Whether the

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973. Print.; Irwin L. Morris. "Theories of Presidential Power." *The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 88-132. Print.

⁶ Elizabeth Kryder-Reid. "Sites of Power and The Power of Sight: Vision in the California Mission Landscapes." *Sites Unseen: Landscape and Vision*. Ed. Dianne Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. 186. Print.

institution has resolved or failed to resolve the tensions arising from the public-private divide throughout its seventeen-year history determines the lessons visitors receive about citizenship.

Born in a House His Father Built

Each year, thousands of Americans flock to presidential birthplaces and homesteads such as Mount Vernon, Monticello, and the Kentucky birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. Their confirmed popularity reflects the American fascination with origin stories, privacy, and idealized aspects of the American character such as hard work and upward mobility. For the modern tourist, Washington and Jefferson's home-spaces signify the retreat from demanding public life; they become private shelters where the presidents could pursue passions set aside during their time in public office. Unlike Washington and Jefferson, Lincoln and Nixon belonged to the lower class. While Lincoln's log cabin and Nixon's birthplace also represent security and privacy, their geographical locations and modest architecture appeal to tourists by evoking the mythos of upward mobility.⁷ Presidential home-spaces create and reinforce belief in the right to privacy and the possibility for individual progress, but most significantly, they function as national spaces, where all citizens may come to assert their belonging in the national family and thus obtain the right to security and autonomy.⁸

⁷ Dwight T. Pitcaithley. "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace Cabin: The Making of an American Icon." *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*. Ed. Paul A. Shackel. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. 252. Print.

⁸ Lee Rainwater characterizes the home as a sacred space where the self intertwines with the interests of the family. While Rainwater analyzes the actual home-spaces, his ideas translate into the symbolic realm, where the state becomes the homeland and its citizens become family members (56, qtd. in D. Morley, *Home Territories*).

During his political career, Nixon employed the rags-to-riches narrative to represent himself as an ordinary, hard-working American, and conversely, he clung to the notion of individual privacy to protect himself from the interrogating eyes of the public, the media, and elected officials. While Nixon wanted the nation to accept him as one of their own, his insecurity and paranoia caused him to disavow particular responsibilities and conditions of public office such as accountability to one's constituents and the inevitability of public scrutiny. The Nixon Foundation established the original museum without federal support due to Congressional legislation and the improbability of receiving public affirmation of a museum commemorating a disgraced president. Similar to Nixon's use of the ideal of upward mobility to portray himself as an appealing candidate, the foundation drew from his personal concern with privacy when constructing the original museum and its narrative.

The original name of Nixon's museum and the efforts to preserve the home in its original state imply belief in the persuasive potential of American domestic tropes. For seventeen years, the Nixon library operated as the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace. While visitors might not consider the implications of site naming, the choice guides and constrains how outsiders imagine the place "by delimiting a field of workable possibilities."⁹ Drawing attention to the birthplace allowed the Nixon Foundation to construct a privatized landscape based on principles of security and autonomy. Within this private environment, the Nixon Foundation could justify biased representations of the president and his legacy. Just as the birthplace provided Nixon with a safe

⁹ Writing about Apache place-names, Keith Basso describes how some names allude to "historical events that illuminate the causes and consequences of wrongful social conduct," and thus, "invest the Apache landscape with a sobering moral dimension"(5; 24). The name of the site and the birthplace itself mutually support the construction of a moral or sentimental landscape.

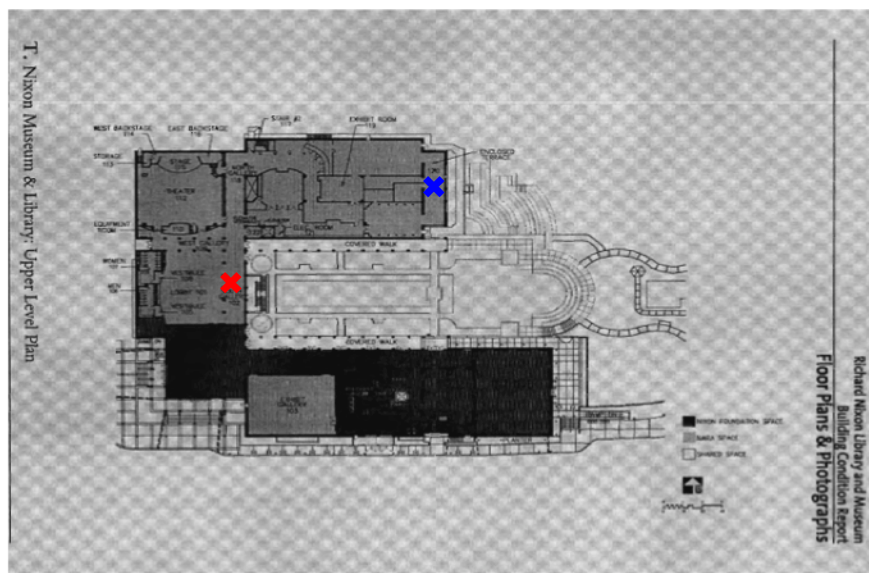
space for personal development, the library and museum complex sheltered him from state surveillance.¹⁰

As a rhetorical national symbol, the birthplace also contends for control of Nixon's representation in the collective imagination of tourists. The narrative of the docent tours and the contents of the house contribute to the place-making strategy, delimiting the possible representations of Nixon. The docents responsible for leading tours of the Nixon birthplace use the concept of authenticity and the American "rags to riches" myth to represent Nixon as an average American who seized on the idea of upward mobility.¹¹ Hannah Nixon gave birth to Richard in the front bedroom, and Richard's sister-in-law saved all of the original furnishings during his political ascendancy. This authenticity shapes the space into a historic site, and the domestic furnishings both remind visitors of Nixon's boyhood years and their own homes. Through this personal connection, visitors emotionally relate to Nixon, lessening their concern with questioning how the museum constructs this particular representation of the president as an ordinary American. The rags to riches story, which the original museum supported with its own narrative of perseverance and triumph, makes visitors want to relate to Nixon. Creating this desire helped the Nixon Foundation whitewash the representation of Watergate. They characterized Nixon as one of us.

¹⁰ Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell. "Spaces of Public and Private: Locating Politics." *Spaces of Democracy: Geographical Perspectives on Citizenship, Participation and Representation*. Ed. Clive Barnett and Murray Low. London: Sage Publications, 2004. 147-160. Print.

¹¹ The docents go through a formal training program in which they learn the library-sanctioned narrative of Nixon and his presidency. I went on the tour of the Nixon birthplace during both visits to the library, and the docents gave the same tour. All information on the birthplace tour and visitor responses comes from a visit on October 21, 2013.

The birthplace does not operate in isolation but rather in relation to the museum, and the museum has the potential to support or disrupt its narrative of Nixon. The Watergate exhibition narrative can verbally attest or contest Nixon's identity as an ordinary American. The museum's floor plan and interior architecture can support or oppose the sentimental experience of the birthplace.



2.2 Nixon Museum and Library, Upper Level Floor Plan. The red “x” marks the location of the entry foyer, and the blue x marks the location of the Watergate gallery. (Scan from NARA, c.2007)

After passing through the gift shop, visitors enter the entry foyer, a large open room with the names of donors etched on one wall and floor to ceiling windows taking up the opposite wall. Unlike the permanent exhibition spaces, natural light filters into the large, open entryway. These windows visually and verbally connect the private birthplace with the public museum space. Visitors gain a brilliant view of the birthplace at the top of a small hill, and the exhibition text related to Nixon's pre-political years sits at the base of the windows. The labels describe Nixon's ancestors as “hard working people of humble origins,” and use the now iconic utterance, “I was born in a house my father built,” to support the narrative of the birthplace tour and argue for the

objective truth of Nixon's origin story. While the Nixon family's domestic space uses material artifacts to appeal to visitors' emotions, the exhibition text appeals to the rational side of visitors. Joined together, the text and symbolic birthplace appeal to visitors through common experiences of home and family. These images frame the subsequent representations of Nixon's political career. I could not interview tourists that visited from 1990-2007, but the American obsession with domesticity suggests that these initial experiences might persuade visitors to adopt a less critical eye in the permanent exhibition spaces.

Journalists have critiqued the Nixon birthplace since the institution opened in 1990. An article in *The Economist* adopted an ambivalent tone when assessing the glorification of Nixon, saying, "this is his own privately funded museum, built with contributions from acquaintances, and he can surely do as he pleases." Writing about the library's dedication in *Time*, Lance Morrow describes the birthplace as consecrating the museum as hallowed ground and the dedication as asserting Nixon's greatness and denying his disgrace.¹² Both articles discuss the birthplace in a skeptical tone. As a historic site, the house should not elicit this reaction. Why then do the writers fixate on this building rather than describing the lush grounds or the individual exhibitions? The rest of America's Presidential Libraries and Museums operate as public institutions, separate from the president's childhood home, so their tone seems to acknowledge the conditions leading to the Nixon museum's uniqueness. The birthplace, as a building, did not defy museum conventions, but as an idea, it distinguished the Nixon from the federal system.

¹² "Enshrined at Yorba Linda." *The Economist* 4 Aug. 1990: 74. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 17 Nov 2013.; Lance Morrow. "A Conjunction of the Past." *Time* 1990: 21. *Military & Government Collection*. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

The presence of the birthplace does not necessarily diminish the possibility of the Nixon museum to operate as a classroom of democracy or to use the past to instruct present visitors in the “opportunities of citizenship.”¹³ However, the emphasis placed upon the birthplace by the Nixon Foundation leads to questions about emotion, objective presidential history, and the concept of citizenship delimited by Nixon museum practices. The American dream as a part of national mythology captures the public imagination and persuades individuals to value the domestic virtues of independence, privacy, and security. The Nixon birthplace functions as an interrelated and generative space; walking through the space connects visitors to their own domestic residences, and, for the many who identify with the Nixon family story, generates feelings of happiness, comfort, and nostalgia.¹⁴ Visitors emerge from the birthplace tour with a representation of Nixon as an ordinary American. By accepting this representation, however, visitors also assent to a belief that exempts private actions from public scrutiny. The representation sanctioned by the birthplace situates Nixon within a privatized space and thus relegates criticism of Nixon to an external, public space. For the first seventeen years, this public space did not exist within the exhibition galleries. This exclusion challenged visitors’ ability to participate in and interrogate Nixon’s political transgressions. Instead, the Nixon Foundation implicated visitors in the construction of a passive civic identity. This identity fixed visitors in a reverential position and affected how they would interpret Nixon, his actions during Watergate, and the office of the presidency. Bob Bostock, the curator of the original Watergate exhibition, attempted to capitalize on these joint attitudes of familiarity and reverence to persuade visitors of his narrative’s objectivity.

¹³ President Gerald Ford quoted in *The Presidents Are Expecting You*, 17.

¹⁴ Thomas Tweed. “Space.” *Material Religion*, 7.1 (2011): 117-123. Web.

“I Am Not a Crook”

The media has expressed great interest in the Watergate gallery since the Nixon Presidential Library and Birthplace opened its doors on July 19, 1990, and most newspaper coverage detailed the museum’s attempt to diminish the event’s significance. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the library edited the famous smoking gun tape to lessen the damage to Nixon. When asked about two missing Watergate tapes, John Taylor, the museum’s first director, said, “The tapes will be there eventually; there are a lot of things I want to do eventually. But I have got to enforce some discipline in what we spend on what, when. I have got to ask myself what is more important.”¹⁵ Taylor did not present the Watergate exhibition as a museum priority. For Americans who could not visit, it appeared that the museum interpreted Watergate as inconsequential to the representation of Nixon and his presidency. Despite these controversies, the museum did include Watergate in its formal exhibition space during the seventeen years of private operation, and the curator has insisted that the original exhibition contained no factual errors. The media coverage indicated that the public and the Nixon Foundation held distinct ideas on how to tell the story of Watergate.

Bob Bostock, the curator of the original Watergate exhibition, exchanged complexity for simplicity in his narrative. Watergate was equated to the break-in at Democratic headquarters, and Nixon only reacted to political and media accusations.¹⁶ Bostock used a line from Nixon’s *Six Crises* to explain his understanding of the exhibition’s purpose to the president: “It is not my purpose to relate the complete story. What I shall try to do in these pages is to tell it as I

¹⁵ Sidney Blumenthal. “Yorba Linda Diarist.” *New Republic* 1990: 43. *Military & Government Collection*. Web. 18 Nov. 2013.; Seth Mydans. “Nixon Center Delays Access to Tapes.” *New York Times* 9 Nov. 1990: A14. *Westlaw Campus Research*. Web. 18 Nov. 2013

¹⁶ By emphasizing Nixon’s responses to outside pressure, Bostock further supports his representation of Watergate as a sensationalized non-event as well as his attacks against Carl Woodward and Bob Bernstein.

experienced it.”¹⁷ The media thought the museum’s Watergate exhibition should present the whole story, while Bostock believed the president’s memories should shape the story. Later in the same note to Nixon, Bostock wrote, “Your [Nixon’s] advice has been my approach – tell the story the way it should be told, without any quarter given to those who will find fault with it.”¹⁸ Using the former president’s memories to “tell the story the way it should be told” brought obvious bias to an exhibition constructed by a Nixon loyalist.

Bostock designed the exhibition in discrete columns of headlines, photos, quotes, and explanatory text to simplify the events of Watergate for visitors unfamiliar with all the details. This strategy also supported Bostock’s conceptualization of the scandal as a political war. Bostock argued that, “Watergate was a struggle for power between the duly elected leader of the nation and those who would frustrate the will of the people.” After leaving the burglars unnamed, Bostock separated the remaining figures into oppositional factions – the accused Nixon versus an unnamed group of individuals determined to disrupt the democratic process. Bostock’s goal for the exhibition was “That people will walk away from it, shaking their heads, wondering how the nation ever let such a great President be taken away from them.”¹⁹ While historical representations in museums might enlighten the public about previously misunderstood events, Bostock’s words betrayed his goals of redeeming Nixon and exonerating the president’s guilt. The exhibit might contain no factual errors, but the interpretive text validated Nixon’s actions and reduced Watergate to a story about a break-in by amateur burglars gone awry. Using Nixon’s words to tell the story made him the invisible author of the exhibition and restored him

¹⁷ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, qtd. in Bob Bostock, “Watergate Exhibit Memorandum,” 1 June 1990. Nixon Foundation. 30 March 2011. Web.

¹⁸ All quoted exhibition text within this section taken from: Bob Bostock. “Watergate Exhibit Memorandum,” 1 June 1990. Nixon Foundation. 30 March 2011. Web.

¹⁹ Bostock, “Watergate Exhibit Memorandum.”

to the authoritative position. Bostock ushered visitors into the exhibition narrative through Nixon's perspective, implicating them in a collective absolution of Nixon's political sins.

This was clearly Bostock's choice: by the time he wrote the exhibition, plenty of scholarship on Watergate existed to help him interpret the events of the scandal. In a memorandum between Bostock and Nixon, the president referenced Stanley Kutler's *The Wars of Watergate* (1990).²⁰ Kutler addresses how Watergate revealed constitutional imbalances and displayed the worst of American political behavior. He argues, "Watergate revitalized and nourished the tradition of constitutional responsibility...a national consciousness of the need of checks on powerholders was sparked by Watergate."²¹ For Kutler, Watergate embodied all the misjudgments, miscalculations, and crimes of the Nixon administration that resulted both from the twentieth century expansion of executive authority and Nixon's political personality. Kutler also argues that Nixon and his loyalists deployed a multi-pronged rhetorical attack in the post-scandal years to control the representation of Watergate. Nixon became victim, Watergate became a single break-in to Democratic headquarters, and the "end-justifies-the-means mentality of the 1960s" exempted Nixon from accountability.²²

Bostock's headlines and explanatory text supported Kutler's argument about the redemption strategy of Nixon and his loyalists. The opening panel read, "Four Watergate Defendants Plead Guilty in Washington: Book Almost Closed on Bizarre Break-in." From the exhibition's beginning, Bostock attempted to conceal the other crimes of Watergate. The accompanying explanatory text summarized the Watergate investigation, arguing in the end that

²⁰ Bostock, "Watergate Exhibit Memorandum," 31.

²¹ Stanley Kutler. "In the Shadow of Watergate." *The Wars of Watergate*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990. 610. Print.

²² Stanley Kutler. "Nixon, Watergate, and History." *The Wars of Watergate*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990. 617. Print.

“millions of dollars, thousands of leads, hundreds of interviews, and countless hours” produced no evidence linking Nixon to the break-in.²³ The headline implied that the Watergate investigation, lasting over 26 months, grew out of control, and the quick summary concealed the national outrage that consumed the public.

Bostock contextualized the scandal within the political turmoil of the early 1970s. When representing the early days of the Watergate cover-up, Bostock wrote, “Nixon, a politician in a political year, acted in a political way.” His comment may refer to Nixon’s recent re-election; the president did not want a “bizarre break-in” to diminish his wave of popularity. The note also drew attention to Nixon’s domestic and foreign policy responsibilities. He held several summit meetings with Leonid Brezhnev (1972 and 1973) and faced pressure from every direction to end the Vietnam War. The contextualizing events could redefine Watergate as a great mishap, the result of turmoil and miscommunication within a bureaucratic executive branch. Bostock’s comment, however, sounds like a phrase uttered during a deposition by an attorney determined to defend his client from conviction. The note’s brevity allows for multiple interpretations, but Bostock’s goals for the exhibition plus his characterization of journalists as a belligerent, disruptive faction certainly support the last possibility. A Nixon loyalist, he sought to show Americans that political and media opponents had taken a great man from the country. Acting in a political way represents Bostock’s attempt to portray a man in a difficult position and as a result, deserving of forgiveness.

Because America’s presidential libraries and museums commemorate individual presidents and the events of their presidency, these spaces also proclaim success and national cultural ideals. They aim to persuade visitors through text and artifacts that these presidents

²³ Bostock, “Watergate Exhibit Memorandum,” 2-3.

deserve remembrance.²⁴ The commemoration of Nixon and the representation of Watergate produced by Bostock and the Nixon Foundation justified constitutional imbalances to visitors. During their origin stage, Presidential Libraries and Museums idolize their subjects, but this tendency especially conflicted with Watergate because the scandal destroyed the unquestioned public admiration for the president. Watergate changed the relation between Americans, the president, and the office of the presidency. How the museum presented the event to its visitors revealed how significant the Nixon Foundation believed this relationship was to the understanding of citizenship.

Space and place at the Nixon Presidential Library and Birthplace determined what lessons visitors received about the conditions and obligations of American citizenship.²⁵ Visitors encountered the Nixon birthplace in a bright room immediately upon entry, while they read about the events of Watergate in a dark, back gallery. This spacing aligned with the linear narrative of Nixon's pre-political, political, and post-political years, but the lighting dynamics drew visitors to the birthplace rather than Watergate. This visual and emotional appeal supported the Foundation's emphasis on the birthplace. Belief in the national myths of idyllic domesticity and "rags to riches" represented the museum's first citizenship lesson.

Bostock's text did not address Watergate beyond Nixon's resignation, implying that visitors should conceptualize the scandal as the political and media attack that forced Nixon out

²⁴ James Donald Ragsdale. "'Souviens-Toi': Museums of Commemoration and Remembrance." *American Museums and the Persuasive Impulse*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 134-135. Print.

²⁵ In *No Citizen Left Behind*, Meira Levinson argues that educators must attend to the control of students' bodies, the modeling of relationships, and the incorporation of students' voices and knowledge into the classroom to teach for transfer, "enabling students to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that they learn in one context to a new or different situation" (187). Levinson's definition of schools as civic institutions applies to America's Presidential Libraries and Museums, spaces that model relations of the public, political sphere within a controlled museum environment.

of office, not as an aggregation of political transgressions that transformed Americans' relation to the president and the office of the presidency. Through this simplified narrative, Bostock attempted to argue for Nixon's innocence, restore his presidential identity, and situate the office of the presidency in the pre-scandal years. Within the Watergate gallery, he used the personal connection from the birthplace experience to conceal the hierarchical relationship between the president and his people. This hierarchy transformed the gallery into a temple space, where visitors had no power to question and contest the representation. Through this exhibition strategy, Bostock attempted to place visitors in the position of reverential citizen. Within the Watergate gallery, visitors learned that respect for the president rather than criticism of his actions represents a responsibility of citizenship.

In 2007, the National Archives and Records Administration took control over the permanent exhibition galleries as a result of amendments to the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act.²⁶ Museum officials immediately dismantled the Watergate exhibition. The revised gallery not only expanded the Watergate narrative but also altered the citizenship lessons imparted by the exhibition.

"A Different Institution"

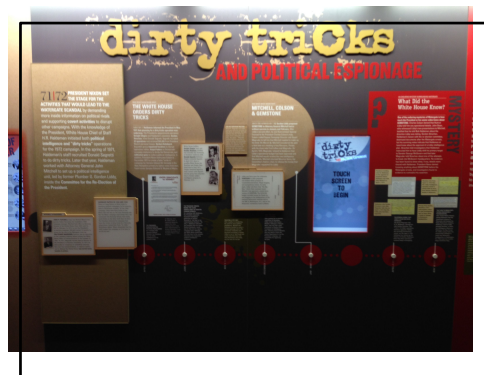
The library's 2007 incorporation into the federal system and the hiring of Dr. Timothy Naftali as the new director began the rebranding process, with a new name, a new Watergate exhibition, and a new archival approach as the three main components. Now titled the Richard

²⁶ When the Nixon museum became incorporated into the federal system, NARA assumed control over the exhibit design and content with the Nixon Foundation still able to offer suggestions.

Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Naftali views the federal facility as “a different institution,” and he stated in a 2007 article with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “The goal is to make this as transparent a presidential library as there is. I want it to be noted for its accessibility.”²⁷ Naftali’s vision signals a shift in the library and museum’s ideological landscape. During the April 20, 2011 dedication of the new Watergate exhibition, Naftali entreated archivists and museum officials to present the public with “non-partisan, objective presidential libraries and museums for their money.” As opposed to a “polemical exhibit on a national constitutional crisis,” Naftali conceptualized the revised Watergate exhibition as “iPad history, a totally interactive, comprehensive collection of information about the Watergate scandal including incidents of governmental abuses of power.”²⁸ Naftali’s comments reveal several problems with the original exhibition’s content and goals from the perspective of a presidential historian. Rather than present the public with a dispassionate critique of Watergate, Bostock’s exhibition adopted a moralizing stance.



2.3 Original Exhibition Gallery Dedicated to Nixon’s Domestic Policy, 2013 (Photo by the author)



2.4 Exhibition Panel from Revised Watergate Gallery, 2013 (Photo by the author)

²⁷ Jennifer Howard. “A Scholarly Salesman Takes Over the Nixon Library.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 9 March 2007: 53.27. Web.

²⁸ RichardNixonLibrary. “Ceremony Celebrating the Opening of the Watergate Gallery 3/31/11.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 April 2011. Web. 10 Oct. 2013.

The display aesthetics of the new Watergate exhibition distinguish the gallery from the extant permanent exhibition spaces. The original, unrevised areas of the permanent gallery cover Nixon's Congressional and Vice Presidential career as well as his foreign and domestic policy. These spaces use a neutral color scheme and text heavy exhibition panels to impress visitors with sensations of Nixon's seriousness and the museum's historical transparency. The revised Watergate gallery employs bold primary colors and incorporates both images and material artifacts to support the exhibition text. Walls do not divide one gallery section from another, so when visitors pass from the unrevised space devoted to Nixon's domestic agenda to the revised Watergate space, they see and feel a change in the museum landscape. This change aligns with the museum's institutional history; the Nixon Foundation created the exhibitions in the permanent galleries, and Naftali led NARA's revisions to the Watergate exhibition. Many visitors do not know about the partnership between NARA and the Nixon Foundation. The dramatic aesthetic and text presentation contrasts, however, indicate divergent interests in the representation of Nixon and his presidency.

Nixon governed from a basis of paranoia and intense concern for the maintenance of his personal privacy. The obligation to appeal to the public conflicted with his personal tendencies and created a fragmented persona.²⁹ The museum inherited Nixon's personality in addition to his political history; naming the museum after the president indicates the main subject of the exhibitions but more significantly, implies that the museum embodies Nixon. The gallery spaces generate an image of Nixon for visitors through the content as well as architecture and aesthetics.³⁰ Just as the contrasts between the permanent galleries and the revised Watergate

²⁹ Irwin L. Morris. "Theories of Presidential Power." *The American Presidency: An Analytical Approach*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 97. Print.

³⁰ Thomas Tweed. "Space." *Material Religion*, 7.1 (2011): 122. Web.

gallery signal a change in the institutional landscape, so too do they mark different characterizations of Nixon. Within the permanent galleries, the amount of text might represent an appeal to the public through complete transparency or conversely, the textual overcompensation might align with Nixon's fear of losing control of his public image. The bright colors of the revised gallery draw visitors in and invite critical interrogation. NARA's design methods contemporize the characterization of Nixon, giving visitors the power to shape the former president's legacy and identity.

The revised Watergate exhibition's opening panel conceptualizes Watergate as an accumulation of political transgressions, not a single break-in at Democratic headquarters. Crimson wall paneling first draws attention to a photo of the Watergate complex, and second, to a statement of the exhibition's purpose. The opening panel begins with "This gallery is designed to help today's visitor make sense of the web of personalities, actions and intentions at the heart of that story." A desire for full transparency and visitor-generated history informs the exhibition. The image reminds visitors of the break-in, but the text includes "illegal wiretapping...payoffs, political dirty tricks, and other governmental abuses of power" within the definition of Watergate, actions that culminated in a "constitutional crisis." Developed by the National Archives, the exhibition aims to help visitors decide, "how well our system of government worked back then and what, if any, lessons there are for us today."³¹ The introduction to the new Watergate exhibition situates the president within the twentieth century trend of expanded executive authority and invites visitors to consider how Nixon's transgressions made the public aware of constitutional imbalances. The movement away from individual history and the incorporation of visitors' ideas represents the first step in transforming the museum's identity to

³¹ All quoted material in the current and following paragraphs drawn from: "Watergate." The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Yorba Linda, California. 21 Oct. 2013.

democratic forum, a space where the public can converse and contest the values enshrined in the permanent galleries.³²

This transformation depended upon re-presenting Watergate, re-characterizing Nixon, and re-designing the exhibition aesthetics and structure. Unlike Bostock's biased narrative, NARA expanded the Watergate timeline "from the formation of the Plumbers' unit in 1971 through the pardoning of former President Nixon by President Gerald R. Ford in 1974." Within this new narrative, Nixon could no longer cite political and media attacks as the main force generating national interest in the scandal and leading to his resignation. Naftali instead presents both personal and national factors, such as a "climate of deep suspicion" within the White House, the tumult of the 1960s, and Nixon's insatiable desire for intelligence to blackmail political rivals, as fuel for the political and media firestorm that shaped the outcome of the scandal. The exhibition asserts that no investigations produced evidence demonstrating that Nixon had prior knowledge of the Watergate break-in. Rather, the text characterizes Nixon as a deceitful enabler and the presidency as an office suffering from delusions of entitlement. The president participated in the cover-up and made his men commit perjury in order to conceal the outsized operations of his political bureaucracy. Naftali thus presents visitors with a dispassionate critique of Nixon and Watergate, in which Nixon becomes a product of the imperial presidency and Watergate becomes a consequence of his political persona and 1960s anti-establishmentarianism. The president cannot escape the judgment of history; Naftali does accuse him of obstructing justice by participating in the Watergate cover-up. Rather than existing in the historical record as a victim or dirty crook, however, he lives on in the revised Watergate

³² Duncan F. Cameron. "The Museum: Temple or Forum?" *Curator* 14 (1974): 11-24. Web.

exhibition as a figure for examining governmental abuses of power from the 1970s to the present.

Changes in exhibition practices assisted Naftali's revisions and correspondingly, the transformation in the museum's institutional identity. In addition to the Watergate Learning Center, each section of the gallery includes an interactive video screen featuring audio recordings from the Watergate period. Both media components provide visitors with further information, but more significantly, they allow visitors to direct their own exhibition experience, assembling a unique body of knowledge to construct an individual interpretation of Nixon and Watergate. By using new technology, the exhibition does what Bostock avoided at all costs: it encourages visitors to ask questions.

A small digital logbook at the end of the revised Watergate gallery demonstrates how technology and a dispassionate critique of history can combine to make visitors participants in the representation of history. Situated underneath a video monitor displaying commentary on Watergate and Nixon's presidency, the logbook lets visitors record their thoughts on both the revised gallery and the entire museum. Entries from August through October 2013 commented on the themes of the new Watergate exhibition, Nixon's historical legacy, and current politics. Responses included:

- "What more can you say about Nixon? He is what history is."
- "History is as it unfolds, to remind us how fragile and dynamic our lives are."

The first response suggests that each post-Watergate generation has represented Nixon according to contemporary attitudes towards government and elected leaders. The second gestures towards the present and future, consequentially defining history museums as spaces where visitors can participate in the construction of a better future through the lessons of the past. Certain visitors

enact this opportunity for civic participation when writing about Obama's current policies. "NOBAMA!" one writes followed by the more thoughtful, "How different is this from what current president is doing? Will he be impeached?"³³ While the first coincides with the partisan temperament fueling national politics, the second shows how informed questioning can begin debate leading to bi-partisan action. The logbook, stationed right after visitors learn about Watergate and its legislative legacy, stations Naftali's vision for iPad history and points towards the desired future for the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

The Watergate gallery and the birthplace have not moved from their original locations, but revising the exhibition has started to shift the institutional landscape from a private to public domain. The former museum used the birthplace to create a reverential temple to Nixon and his perseverance against political naysayers; the NARA operated institution has begun the transition away from reverence and toward criticism, wresting full control over the presentation of the president's historical legacy from loyalists. The media elements now enable "confrontation, experimentation, and debate" between fellow visitors and the exhibition representation. Thus, the revised Watergate exhibition, "counters the hegemonic influence of the temple through the provision of an open, alternative cultural site, a site where the values of the temple might be questioned and even contested."³⁴ Participation, interrogation, and analysis represent the values of the forum and the desired characteristics of an individual and national civic identity. In a museum still concerned with the history of Nixon's administration, this singular instance of an open, forum-like space represents an admirable step in the direction towards presenting critical

³³ I visited the museum four days after the government shutdown ended. This proximity might have influenced the frequency of entries related to politics in Washington.

³⁴ Les Harrison. *The Temple and the Forum: The American Museum and Cultural Authority in Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Whitman*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007. xiv. Print.

history. The birthplace, now a material remnant of the pre-NARA landscape, counters the aims of the new exhibition, but it has lost control over a benevolent representation of Nixon. Bostock used a personal connection between visitors and the president to generate uncritical reverence, while Naftali and NARA have premised their Watergate gallery on contemporary expectations of the president – to embody American ideals in all personal and political actions.³⁵ The birthplace might capture visitors' imaginations upon arrival, but the demands of the Watergate exhibition impress upon them the responsibilities of citizenship in the twenty-first century.

Bringing "Us" Together

During a 1968 campaign stop in Deshler, Ohio, president-elect Richard Nixon looked out over the crowds and saw young Vicki Cole bearing a sign emblazoned with the phrase "Bring Us Together." Nixon immediately adopted it as his campaign slogan but failed to realize his promise, largely due to his personal paranoia and relative disinterestedness in appealing to the American public. Whether Nixon's personal qualities or political circumstances hindered national unification, the Watergate scandal thrust the tensions of the 1960s and 1970s onto the office of the presidency, thereby destroying the admiration of citizens for their president and the unchecked expansion of the executive branch. The Nixon Presidential Library and Birthplace inherited both Nixon's personal and political history as well as the task of representing Watergate within its historical context. When designing the Watergate exhibition, Bostock chose

³⁵ Peirce F. Lewis. "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene." *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. Ed. D.W. Meinig. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. 23. Print.; Dennis M. Simon. "Public Expectations of the President." *The Oxford Handbook of The American Presidency*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 135-159. Print.

to privilege the redemption of Nixon over the education of visitors, not surprising considering the former president reviewed Bostock's exhibition text. His decision, supported financially by the Nixon Foundation and ideologically by the birthplace, constructed the museum as a private space with the primary aims of furthering Nixon's work and strengthening his legacy. Rather than bring visitors together through debate, the museum unified visitors through a shared sense of reverence for the president.

Once incorporated into the federal system of Presidential Libraries and Museums, Naftali and NARA officials seriously engaged with questions concerning audience, purpose, and historical memory.³⁶ As the most problematic exemplar of private control, the Watergate exhibition became the focus for transforming the entire museum into a space facilitating "historical understanding of our national experience to the widest possible audience."³⁷ While a complete revision of the museum has yet to occur, the current changes prioritize a national narrative of constitutional imbalances over an individual narrative of victimization. Visitors learn that a stable democracy depends upon critical, engaged, and informed citizens as well as a curious and objective media. A NARA issued report on alternative models for presidential libraries claims, "In our open democracy we are free to judge our Presidents. That freedom to judge extends to the Presidential Libraries as they are now or in whatever form they may take in the future."³⁸ Historical judgment within the museum might support conversations in the public, political sphere, and the first step towards achieving consensus on a range of national issues. The revised Watergate exhibition allows visitors to judge how Nixon and Watergate continue to

³⁶ Nixon passed away in 1994, thus as Naftali began his revisions approximately thirteen years later, he also benefitted from the more tempered attitude of Nixon loyalists.

³⁷ National Records and Archives Administration. *Report on Alternative Models for Presidential Libraries Issued in Response to the Requirements of PL 110-404*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009. 55. Print.

³⁸ NARA. *Report on Alternative Models*. 55.

influence contemporary American politics. Rather than a temple to Nixon's achievements, the museum now has the potential to become a forum for the discussion of presidential power, freedom of the press, and the particularities of American citizenship. At the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, visitors are encouraged to consider how the president and average citizens undertake responsible lives of public service.

The William J. Clinton Presidential Center:
A Third Way Institution?

"The whole story is here in 80 million documents, 21 million e-mails – two of them mine – 2 million photographs and 80,000 artifacts. In the interest of public access, we are asking more than 100,000 of these documents to be opened early before the law requires."

-President Clinton, Clinton Center dedication (November 18, 2004)¹

¹ Clinton, William J. William J. Clinton Presidential Center dedication. Little Rock, Arkansas. 18 Nov. 2004. Keynote Address. *Washington Post*. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.



3.1. View of the Clinton Museum and Grounds from Downtown Little Rock, c.2004 (Photo by Ennead Architects)

On November 18, 2004, former presidents Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Jimmy Carter, current president George W. Bush, and approximately 30,000 people gathered in Little Rock, Arkansas to dedicate the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, the eleventh such institution in America's Presidential Library and Museum system. Built on 30 acres situated along the Arkansas River, Clinton's institution includes one building for the museum, archives, and Clinton Foundation offices, a rehabilitated train station housing the University of Arkansas affiliated Clinton School of Public Service, a museum gift shop situated close to the downtown River Market district, and the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge, a pedestrian and cycling bridge.¹ Despite the rain, Clinton had a captive audience and an opportunity to share his specific vision for the museum, just as the president sets forth his administrative agenda during an inaugural

¹ Throughout this chapter, I will call the institution the William J. Clinton Presidential Center when referring to the entire Little Rock complex or when discussing any spaces outside of the museum proper. When examining the cantilever architecture, the interior architecture of the public exhibition galleries, and the museum's two replicas, I will call the space the Clinton museum. Although part of the federal Presidential Library and Museum system, I will not call the institution a library and museum in an attempt to follow the Center's own rhetoric.

address. Characteristic of his rhetorical style, the former president sprinkled humor throughout the speech, including a reference to a description of the museum building as, “an expensive mobile home.”² Clinton also recalled the ideology of his “third way” politics, a subtle admonishment of heightened partisan divisions in the wake of the recent presidential election.

The speech’s conclusion, however, contained the goals of his post-presidential agenda as realized through the library and museum. Invoking his three tenets of American civic life – community, opportunity, and responsibility – he said, “I want young people to see not only what I did with my life, but to see what they could do with their lives. Because this is mostly the story of what we the people can do when we work together.” Clinton’s passionate commitment to a life of public service permeates his belief in collective action, which the nation can only realize by resolving the conflict between “red American line drawing” and “blue American barrier breaking.”³ A willingness to discuss, deliberate, and compromise thus emerged as the prime characteristic of an ideal civic body, but the looming physical presence of Clinton’s \$165,000,000 cantilever museum complicated the former president’s claim that the museum’s narrative relates a story of responsible citizen action. How does a Presidential Library and Museum, a symbol of expansive executive authority, teach a diverse group of visitors about responsible civic action in America? What lessons does the Clinton museum, a legacy center dedicated to only the second president impeached in US history, teach about the power and responsibilities of the modern presidency?

Before the Clinton Presidential Center’s official dedication, a small group of Little Rock residents gathered in front of City Hall to undertake one form of civic dissent. Ashamed by the city’s willingness to embrace a president that had disgraced the nation with his sexual profligacy

² “Bill Clinton’s Library: Trailer-home Chic.” *The Economist* 11 Nov. 2004. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

³ William J. Clinton. William J. Clinton Presidential Center dedication.

and impeachment in the House, the group protested the city's decision to name the street in front of the Center "President Clinton Avenue." They partially achieved their goal when only half the street was renamed. Prior to this 2004 demonstration, local citizens had contested the city's use of eminent domain in claiming the land for the Clinton Center, and preservationists had fought to save a late nineteenth century train depot discovered on site.⁴ The small-scale protests received limited press coverage but left a lasting impression on the Clinton museum community. During a January 2014 tour of the museum, a longtime docent told me about the protesters, whom she believed took to the streets not out of anger toward city politics but rather shame for Little Rock's willingness to claim Clinton as their own after the scandals that plagued his presidency.⁵ Public action in the form of protest does not fall within Clinton's conception of public service, but its potential to cause discussion and deliberation amongst officials and citizens effects the best characteristics of responsible democracy.

The sentiments expressed at the dedication ceremony and through citizen unrest define the Clinton Presidential Center as a fraught space of citizenship education, where much of the tension stems from the idealization of community. Unlike the Nixon museum during the pre-NARA years, when Bostock created a hierarchical relationship between the former president and visitors, the Clinton museum employs a bidirectional communication strategy to make the former president and citizens equal actors.⁶ As Jodi Kanter argues, its museum exhibitions characterize Clinton as a student and present "the American story as one of human industry in service of

⁴ Suzi Parker. "A Library – and Legacy – for Billiophiles." *The Christian Science Monitor* 17 Nov. 2004. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

⁵ Jinkie Redden. Personal interview. 8 Jan. 2014.

⁶ In an article about virtual democracy in the White House, Kenneth Hacker explores how the Clinton administration attempted to increase citizens' access to information as well as felt proximity to the president. He argues this also involves incorporating, "bidirectional technologies into the political process" (54).

historical progress,” locating “the citizen as the next critical laborer on the timeline.”⁷ Clinton labored in service to the country for eight years in office (1993-2001), and now, citizens must apply the lessons of his successes and failures to the country’s current and future needs. By vaunting the merits of community without defining its principles and ideals, however, the museum can only impart the basics of community building; it cannot provide an agenda for reconciling divergent positions or delineating the conditions of conservative limit-setting and progressive barrier-breaking. Two museum replicas, however, display Clinton’s idea of executive authority in twenty-first century America and suggest how the former president would settle disputes arising from the idealization of a unified community.

Unlike most of America’s Presidential Libraries and Museums, the Clinton museum has received critical attention from historians, specifically the messages conveyed about citizenship character.⁸ Most of these critiques, however, fail to incorporate a secondary analysis of presidential power; the authors might cite Schlesinger’s concept of the imperial presidency but without asking how expansive executive authority informs promises of citizen access and empowerment.⁹ The museum’s architecture, eco-friendly construction, interior design, and floor plan prioritize average Americans, ideas, and responsible service. The museum’s two replicas, one of the Cabinet Room and the other of the Oval Office, however, trouble the promise of deliberative democracy founded upon open citizen-government communication. While the

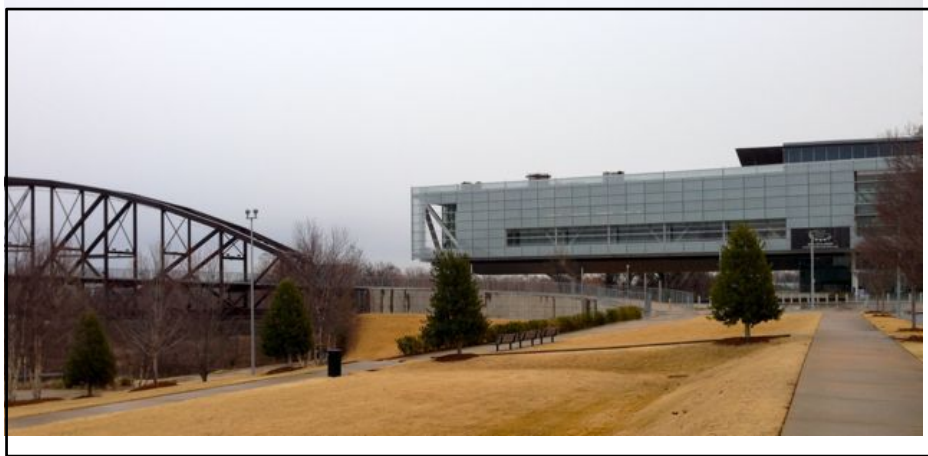
⁷ Jodi Kanter. “Character-in-Chief: Performing the American Citizen at Two Presidential Libraries.” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 32.4 (2012): 351. Web.

⁸ Jodi Kanter compares the exhibitions and floor plans of the Clinton and Reagan museums to argue about the performance of American citizenship. Leonard Benardo, Jennifer Weiss, and Benjamin Hufbauer all give due attention to the museum’s architecture.

⁹ In any study of the Clinton museum, affording little notice to questions of presidential power appears extremely negligent because the former president oversaw every aspect of the architectural and exhibition design process, earning the title of curator-in-chief from other museum officials.

Cabinet Room may generate an ideal of collaboration, the Oval Office produces an image of unilateral decision-making. In an institution concerned with the politics of form, organization, and space, this battle not only reframes Clinton's understanding of public service but also represents the perhaps impossible task facing America's Presidential Library and Museum system: to make each institution wholly a people's space.

A Life Enriched by Libraries



3.2. Clinton Museum Building and Clinton Presidential Park Bridge, 2014. (Photo by the author)

Clinton's museum building impresses thousands of visitors every year with its modern design and relation to the natural landscape.

From the beginning of

the design process, Clinton knew he wanted the architecture to physically embody his oft-repeated 1996 campaign promise of "building a bridge to the 21st century." First articulated during his acceptance speech, on August 29, 1996 at the Democratic National Convention, Clinton invoked the bridge metaphor as a call to meet the challenges of partisan politics, the national budget imbalance, and numerous other domestic issues; to protect American democratic values; and to expand opportunities for all citizens in the globalized 21st century. Throughout the campaign, the bridge would come to signify Clinton's entire policy agenda as well as his vision

for a healthy, active civic body.¹⁰ Similar to “the road,” the bridge also operates as a national symbol of progress, thus by adopting this image, Clinton could portray himself as the best candidate to move America from current troubles to future prosperity. By employing a cantilever design to situate the museum building over the river, the former president and his architecture team from Polshek Partners discovered the most fitting form for the museum’s educative purpose and the needs of the surrounding environment, both the river and the city of Little Rock.¹¹ Swung over the Arkansas River, the museum could invoke a call to overcome partisan divisions. Aligned with the nearby Rock Island Railroad Bridge, the structure creates a tangible link between the nation and Little Rock’s past, present, and future. The architecture thus realizes the purpose of history museums in general, and the museum renders this purpose explicit by incorporating construction stills into the public exhibition galleries. Finally, placing the museum perpendicular to the river creates a sight line between North Little Rock and Downtown Little Rock, another unification rather than separation between formerly divided spaces.

Visitors first encounter the museum’s representation of Clinton through the interaction of building and landscape. In a review of the Center, Clifford A. Pearson wrote, “This is architecture as politics, played skillfully to please a large constituency and accommodate a range of perspectives. Both Clinton the man and Clinton the library embrace politics and draw strength from it.”¹² Pearson’s claim of widespread accommodation seems unfounded in light of local protests and a smattering of unfavorable opinions directed toward the modern design. The

¹⁰ “President Bill Clinton – Acceptance Speech.” *pbs*. PBS NewsHour. 29 Aug. 1996. Web. 18 March 2014.

¹¹ *The William J. Clinton Presidential Center: Building a Bridge to the 21st Century*. New York: RAA Editions, 2006. 27-28. Print.

¹² Clifford A. Pearson. “Polshek Partnership's Clinton Library Connects With Little Rock And The Body Politic.” *Architectural Record* 193.1 (2005): 111-119. *Art Source*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

review, however, does draw attention to Clinton's intimate involvement in the conceptualization and construction of the institution as well as the need to look for the principles underlying architectural form. In a *New York Times* interview, James Polshek, one of two leading architects of the Clinton Center, spoke about the former president's repeated requests for light and openness, and in response to a question about the multiple, often competing, functions of a Presidential Library and Museum, he stated, "We must create a populist venue which will attract hundreds of thousands of people."¹³ While a well-lit environment accords with the museum's modern architecture, it also invokes sensations of openness, exposure, and transparency. Considering Clinton's request and Polshek's statement, the politics of transparency thus inform the desire to create an institution that will include and engage a visiting body reflecting the nation's diversity. The public nature park, which includes paths in the Arkansas River Trail, literally grounds Clinton's promise for unfettered access and creates a figurative image of flowing opinions and ideas as scholars and ordinary visitors continually pass through. Before entering the museum, visitors encounter Clinton as a powerful facilitator who views building an informed *and* active citizenry as one post-presidential responsibility.

If Clinton wanted the atmosphere of the public exhibition galleries to generate a sense of textual transparency, their brightness and airiness also reveal his desire to make environmental responsibility a facet of public service. Sustainable principles, including preservation of the natural and built environment, inform all aspects of Polshek designed buildings. When planning the Clinton Center, the architecture team had two primary goals: surpass requirements of the prevailing energy efficiency standards and incorporate new renewable energy generation

¹³ Julie V. Iovine. "Spin Masters Molding Myth with a T-square." *New York Times* 14 Dec. 2000: F1. *Business Insights: Essentials*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

technologies.¹⁴ A layer of solar screens helped realize Clinton's hopes for bright, uplifting gallery spaces while still preserving the displayed artifacts. The sourcing of recycled materials to compose the museum's interior demonstrated concern for conservation. As described by a museum publication (available for purchase at the gift shop), "using recycled tires, bottles, and cans in many aspects of construction" allowed the architects to employ "cast-offs of the 20th century to create a shining example of environmental responsibility in the 21st century."¹⁵ By incorporating lessons about environmental stewardship into the Clinton Center's built and landscape architecture, the institution became the first Presidential Library and Museum to earn a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certification, later upgraded to Platinum EB status.¹⁶

Just as the cantilever building translates Clinton's vision of governmental and citizen collaboration for 21st century progress into physical form, the Center's green initiatives reflect the administration's dedication to ensuring a healthy national and global environment. In a policy alcove titled, "Protecting the Earth," the museum covers Clinton and Gore's efforts to protect the environment while improving the economy, an agenda that involved supporting the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Environmental Protection Agency's stricter clean-air standards.¹⁷ The alcove also addresses Clinton's commitment to land preservation, realized through the addition of eight million acres to the National Park system. Finally, the alcove connects with an exhibition panel covering Al Gore's initiatives, giving the former Vice President credit for leading on environmental policy. Architecture, exhibits, and presidential power thus intersect at the Clinton museum to teach visitors about the environmental responsibilities of both American

¹⁴ "William J. Clinton Presidential Center." *Ennead Architects*. n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

¹⁵ *The William J. Clinton Presidential Center*, 32.

¹⁶ "William J. Clinton Presidential Center."

¹⁷ All information on exhibition content and design comes from a visit on January 8, 2014.

and global citizenship. Adopting renewable energy technologies, recycling, reducing waste, driving less or driving more eco-friendly vehicles, supporting federal environmental regulations, and contributing to the protection of national landmarks all emerge as possible methods for citizen involvement. These efforts span class boundaries, geography, and governmental levels, another subtle reminder of Clinton's desire to create an inclusive community of public servants. By including the Vice President, furthermore, the Clinton museum's narrative of environmental stewardship portrays the executive branch as a collaborative unit dependent upon multiple expert sources.¹⁸ Neither the "Protecting the Earth" policy alcove nor the panels dedicated to Gore's contributions argue for the success of the administration's environmental agenda. Rather, responding to existing problems with widespread reforms emerges as a sufficient response for a responsible national and global citizen.

When choosing the site for his Presidential Library and Museum, Clinton not only wanted to return home but also to reshape it into a viable tourist destination. While born in Hope and raised in Hot Springs, Clinton came to political maturity in Little Rock, where he served as governor for twelve years. The city government's pledge of thirty acres in a former warehouse district, empty and spoiled by industrial pollutants, fit perfectly within the former president's scheme for a mutually contributive institution. Situated adjacent to the Arkansas River, immediately off of Interstate 30, and a ten minute walk from the River Market district, building the Clinton Center on this land would anchor redevelopment of the city's downtown by cleaning up the waterfront, generating tourism revenue, and supporting future development projects. Studies commissioned in the summer of 2004 showed the Clinton Center had already brought \$1 billion in private investment to the immediate area. According to Barry Travis, chief executive of

¹⁸ Vice President Dick Cheney does not appear within the Bush museum narrative, and the Nixon museum does not cover any contributions of his Vice Presidents.

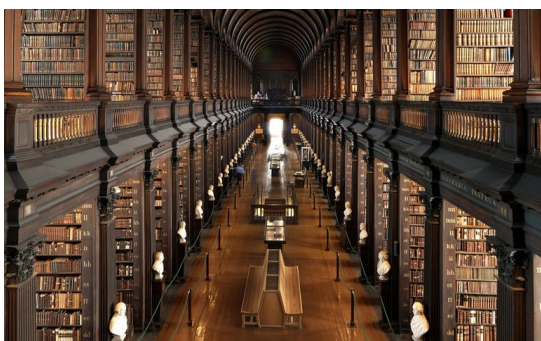
the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau, “If the library attracted 150,000 to 300,000 visitors a year, we calculated there would be from \$8.6 million to \$17.5 million in direct tourism expenditures, and that doesn’t include any other types of economic development that the library might spawn.”¹⁹ The Center’s contribution to Little Rock’s rehabilitation dominates journalistic and museum narratives about the institution’s identity; during my January 2014 visit, a docent stopped her tour to point toward Little Rock’s downtown skyline, physical evidence of urban development, and portrayed the location of the museum gift shop as a deliberate effort to revitalize the River Market district. Clinton’s conceptions of community, opportunity, and responsibility intersect in the transformation of an industrial wasteland into a legacy center.

Museum officials, docents, city representatives, and journalists have focused on how the Clinton Center has benefitted Little Rock, more than how the institution’s development scheme has informed Clinton’s legacy. As the conversation surrounding the early planning stages of Barack Obama’s Presidential Library and Museum has demonstrated, scholars, critics, and citizens believe that location can teach visitors about the president’s personal and political character as well as his relationship with the American people.²⁰ During Clinton’s own search process, the former president set his sights on an Arkansas institution from the beginning. But New York, his post-presidential residence, also emerged as a possible contender. Establishing his library and museum in New York, Clinton might have demonstrated a greater concern for Hillary’s political future and identified himself as an elite politician with little regard for the

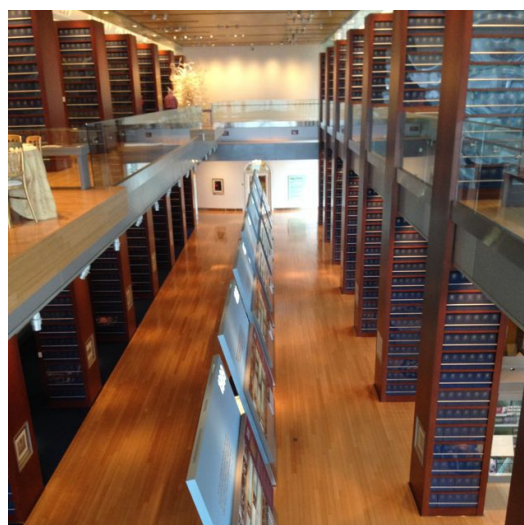
¹⁹ Fred A. Bernstein. “Archive Architecture: Setting the Spin in Stone.” *New York Times* 10 June 2004: F1. *Business Insights: Essentials*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

²⁰ Hawaii, New York, and Chicago have emerged as the top contenders in the competition for Obama’s Presidential Library and Museum with many placing Chicago, where he developed as a politician and grew his financial base, as the frontrunner (See Glanton and Skiba, Gonyea).

community that supported his earliest political initiatives.²¹ By building in Little Rock, Clinton paid respect to the Arkansas community and showed that a responsible public servant recognizes loyalty. Furthermore, by drawing attention to his pre-presidential years, he portrayed himself as a perpetual student, one who examines foundational experiences for applicable lessons in the present and future. The location of the Clinton Center has stimulated economic development, has attempted to rehabilitate Clinton's personal and political identity, and has taught visitors that ideal citizens support both their local and national community.



3.3. The Long Room, Trinity College Dublin, c.2012. (Photo from Irish Welcome Tours)



3.4. The Public Exhibition Galleries at the Clinton Museum, 2014. (Photo by the author)

After visitors walk through the doors of the museum, they continue to receive lessons about citizenship and participatory democracy within the public exhibition galleries. Because of the building's cantilever architecture, visitors must take an escalator from the entrance lobby to reach the first floor of gallery space. After watching an orientation video and walking through a replica of the Cabinet Room, they enter the main exhibition hall, a two-story tall space with a

²¹ The architecture firm and the exhibit company responsible for the Clinton museum's development and design both operate out of New York City. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Clinton assured the nation, "the heartbeat will be here," meaning Arkansas (Sack).

timeline of Clinton's eight years in office dominating the center of the hallway and fourteen policy alcoves nestled on either side of the timeline on the first level. A series of 28-foot tall columns filled with blue NARA archival boxes connect the first with the second floor. When visitors ascend to the upper level, they gain a spectacular view of the Arkansas River from one perspective and from the other, an encompassing view of the public exhibition galleries, evoking the grandeur of the Long Room at Trinity College Dublin, albeit with a modernist twist.²² While the timeline and alcoves contain the content informing Clinton's representation, a series of columns and the interior architecture render in space the former president's opinions on the methods of narrating history. Often acting as "curator-in-chief" during the exhibition design process, Clinton understood that a single museum could never equally address all the events of his eight-year administration nor capture his and the nation's sentiments from the period. By modeling his museum on a library, a space "that collects the broadest range of material and information and displays it in an easily accessible arrangement where each visitor can delve into it according to his or her level of interest," he could achieve a desired balance between diverse visitor interests and his own perspective.²³ Through interior design, the Clinton museum reimagines America's Presidential Libraries and Museums as spaces for education rather than entertainment.

According to the Office of Presidential Libraries, America's Presidential Libraries and Museums present presidential documents and artifacts to the public, "for study and discussion,"

²² Through information panels and the content of docent tours, the museum ensures that visitors relate the main galleries with the Long Room, demonstrating the seriousness of Clinton's belief in the value of libraries as well as the importance he places upon his experiences as a Rhodes scholar. Clinton attended the University of Oxford during his time as a Rhodes scholar, but he traveled throughout Ireland and became intrigued with their national politics, a fascination he would bring to his administration ("An American Presidency Tour").

²³ *The William J. Clinton Presidential Center*, 37-38.

not for the entertainment of visitors nor the creation of sentimental, collectivist experiences of national history.²⁴ While the exhibition design of the Clinton museum seems to follow this stated vision, the Reagan and George W. Bush museums often display copies of executive orders and citizen gifts alongside interactive games, moments for playful engagement with unique decisions or events from the president's life rather than reception, consideration, and synthesis of historical detail. Because Clinton viewed himself as a lifelong student, as Jodi Kanter argues, his library relies upon an enormous amount of text to tell the story of his administration. In her article on performing presidential character, she writes, "The story that the Clinton library tells derives its force from its claims to comprehensiveness and shared authorship. It is a methodical and linear narrative with a large bibliography and an extensive list of co-authors."²⁵ Both Clinton's definition and Kanter's remarks represent libraries as neutral environments, where librarians follow cataloguing procedures that ensure ease of accessibility for researchers. Archivists, or curators within the museum space, rely upon subjective labels and categories to present information, a reality that often elevates particular themes or events above others in visitors' consciousnesses.²⁶ When considering how Clinton's museum as a public access library conveys citizenship lessons to visitors, therefore, textual omissions in the exhibitions and the politics of space must inform the argument.

The museum's representation of the Monica Lewinsky affair reveals the limitations of openness and transparency at the Clinton museum. The president's sex life should not fall under

²⁴ National Archives and Records Administration. Office of Presidential Libraries. The Presidents Are Expecting You. N.d. Print.

²⁵ Kanter, "Character-in-Chief," 351.

²⁶ Representatives from Appelbaum Associates, the exhibit design firm overseeing the Clinton museum project, thank members of Clinton's former White House staff for directing the Exhibit Content Committees and writing much of the exhibit text. The intimate involvement of Clinton loyalists further calls into question the objectivity of the museum's narrative (*The William J. Clinton Presidential Center*, 168).

public scrutiny, but the scandal does represent a breach in Clinton's open communication with the nation for the House ultimately brought articles of impeachment against him for perjury and obstruction of justice. Reference to the Monica Lewinsky affair appears in the "The Fight for Power" alcove, but the scandal receives only passing notice. While Clinton had not been forthcoming about his relationship, the museum argues that the impeachment trial resulted more from the political culture of personal destruction and the Republican drive for power than the president's behavior.²⁷ Whether the Lewinsky affair should receive full treatment in the public exhibitions depends upon one's opinions of the scandal, expectations of presidential character, and perhaps, party affiliation. The omission received mass attention in the print media leading up to the museum's opening, so the contemporary news climate implicitly argued that the museum's representation of the scandal destabilized the institution's promise of encouraging scrutiny.²⁸ Furthermore, because the museum bases the relationship between the president and citizens on information shared equally between both parties, the compact representation of the affair reminds visitors of the imbalance in power. Even if the museum strives for immediate and honest exchange, the president ultimately controls how the public receives particular information and consequently, how they arrive at opinions on the president and his politics.

As a public space meant to uphold NARA's promise of unbiased citizen education about the presidents and American democracy, the Clinton museum cannot misrepresent or withhold information without endangering the potential for visitors to participate in the joint effort of historical analysis and nation building. Furthermore, the representation of the Lewinsky scandal reminds visitors that executive authority extends beyond the White House and into the spaces of

²⁷ "The Fight for Power." The William J. Clinton Presidential Center. Little Rock, Arkansas. 8 Jan. 2014.

²⁸ See Suzanne Goldenberg's article for *The Guardian* and James Jefferson's article about the museum's dedication.

Clinton's post-presidency, enabling curators to prioritize events and ideas on the former president's legacy agenda. By drawing inspiration for his museum from the interior architecture of the Long Library in Dublin, evoking an image of himself as student, and advocating an exhibit design that allowed visitors to select the information of most interest, Clinton paradoxically opened himself to increased scrutiny. Each textual omission exposes the latent power politics structuring the representation of his character and his administration. Rather than full participants in the creation of collaborative scholarship, visitors learn that officials can justify control over present and future national narratives by excluding the public when personally convenient. Neither a temple demanding full reverence nor a forum allowing for informed, democratic discussion, the Clinton museum operates as a sanctuary striving to supplant the signs of a powerful executive with Clinton's characterization as an embattled yet persevering collaborator.

Architecture, landscape, environmental principles, location, interior design, and exhibitions can produce fraught and often contentious sets of lessons about presidential power, public service, democracy, and citizenship, especially at the Clinton Center. Through architecture, visitors encounter the representation of Clinton as a tireless public servant, learning that unrelenting belief in future national prosperity drives committed service to the nation. The interaction between architecture and landscape, as realized in a public nature park, creates sensations of access and exchange; public servants view themselves as embedded within an expansive network of shared ideas and thus, deliberation and dialogue must guide the decision-making process, whether at the local or federal level. Collaboration and inclusion further emerge as characteristics of an ideal body of public servants through the Center's green initiatives, which draw attention to shared authority within the White House and the possibility for national involvement. Clinton's decision to locate his library in Little Rock and to rehabilitate a former

industrial space draws lifelong learning into the comprehensive lesson on citizenship. Americans must remain informed to act as responsible and effective public servants. Finally, by employing the concept of a library to describe the museum's operating principles, the Clinton museum instructs visitors in the limitations of participatory democracy. The president may advocate for increased responsibility and full access to governmental procedures, but during times of personal (and perhaps national) crisis, citizens must forfeit the right to critique, accepting the singular, federal script.²⁹

While the Clinton Center presents an ambitious vision of public service, the underlying presence of executive authority foregrounds the limitations placed upon democracy and citizenship. Envisioning democracy as a process, defined by communicative interaction between leaders and citizens, the museum recreates the contemporary form of democracy as a political system, in which representatives – here, the president – give voice to the collective opinions and ideas of Americans.³⁰ For a president who based his administration on ideas and deliberation, Clinton had the opportunity to reimagine the Presidential Library and Museum as a think tank, one encouraging new citizen initiatives and providing visitors with the necessary resources. The museum certainly exposes visitors to the main issues of his presidency through text-heavy exhibitions, but this design still does not provide an avenue or suggestions for immediate civic action. Embracing contrasting symbols of executive power, as displayed through the Cabinet Room and Oval Office replicas, the museum instead reproduces the hierarchical relationship between the president and citizens with its attendant valorization of executive authority.

²⁹ David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter. "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community." *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies*. Ed. Robert E. Denton, Jr. and Rachel L. Holloway. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1996. 8. Print.

³⁰ Hacker, "Virtual Democracy," 65.

A Network of Ideas and The Epicenter of American Democracy



3.5. The Cabinet Room Replica, 2014. (Photo by the author)



3.6. The Oval Office Replica as Seen from Visitors' Perspective, 2005. (Photo from Clinton Library)

Unlike most of America's Presidential Libraries and Museums, the Clinton museum features two life-sized replicas of West Wing spaces. After watching the orientation video and reading about the 1992 campaign, visitors transition in time and space as indicated by an aesthetic change from grey to white walls and a silencing of media commentary. They pass through a set of doors evenly spaced along the wall, meant to represent the outer wall of the West Wing looking out onto the Rose Garden, and enter the Cabinet Room replica. No other Presidential Library and Museum simulates this space, a comfortable meeting place for making policy decisions, military plans, and peace agreements. During the American Presidency tour, the docents focus on the tangible aspects of the room rather than its significance to the Clinton administration. Visitors exit the space knowing the museum faithfully replicated the dimensions and objects of the White House Cabinet Room, as if material authenticity instills within visitors a sense of the joy, confusion, tension, and resolution experienced during Clinton's eight years.³¹

Those who choose to linger in the space have the opportunity to learn about the diverse

³¹ Similar to the birthplace at the Nixon museum, any claims to authenticity at the Clinton museum encounter the former president's history of manipulating the truth or most significantly, his impeachment in the House. Visitors must consider whether to accept materiality as one means of recuperation.

representatives of the Executive Office of the President and to dissect the anatomy of decisions on the budget crisis, the Kosovo War, and welfare reform through touch-screen monitors.³² The Cabinet Room in the Clinton museum, therefore, operates as an interactive replica, balanced between symbolizing the American presidency, executive power, and stored labor potential.³³

For President Clinton, Cabinet appointments presented the opportunity to represent the diversity of America within the West Wing and replicating the Cabinet Room, the chance to showcase an alternative form of executive power. During his 1992 campaign, Clinton ran on the promise to create a cabinet that “looked like America,” and he made the selection process a priority during the transition time from the governor’s mansion to the White House. Upon assumption of the office, he had crafted a Cabinet including three women, four African Americans, and two Hispanics.³⁴ A space for the vigorous exchange of ideas in generating innovative solutions to national challenges, the Cabinet Room symbolizes Clinton’s understanding of diversity as one of America’s greatest strengths. Furthermore, in this collaborative environment, power and authority disperses throughout the executive branch rather than centering within the president. To harness the labor potential of individual members, the president must delegate responsibility to his appointees, relying upon their special expertise to govern the nation effectively. The Cabinet Room replica thus works with the explicit content and narrative framework of the public exhibition galleries to represent the nature of the presidency,

³² Unlike the Decision Points Theater, “The Administration at Work” uses archival interviews to explain the decision-making process.

³³ In *Presidential Temples*, Benjamin Hufbauer examines the rhetoric of the Oval Office replica at the Truman museum in Independence, Missouri, and he expands the conversation on symbols of the presidency by drawing in the valorization of presidential labor (64-66). As an alternative symbol of the presidency, I believe Hufbauer’s arguments apply to the Cabinet Room replica.

³⁴ Shirley Anne Warshaw. “Finding the Vital Center: The Clinton White House.” *The Clinton Presidency and the Constitutional System*. Ed. Rosanna Perotti. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. 64. Print.

the relationship between the president and citizens, and the characteristics of an ideal citizen. Leaders and citizens should support bidirectional deliberation rather than unilateral decision-making.

While Clinton appears as an active public servant alongside average American citizens in the primary exhibitions and the Cabinet Room, this representation does not model Clinton's governance while in office. As James P. Pfiffner argues in a Brookings Institution study, "Despite all of the time he spent on cabinet selection, Clinton did not revert to 'cabinet government.' The major policy initiatives of the administration were developed in the White House...In his first year as president, the cabinet met only seven times."³⁵ Despite governing from the Oval Office rather than the Cabinet Room, the former president did not leave office with a legacy of outright abusing executive power. In exercising war powers and using executive orders, Clinton followed the precedent set by his immediate predecessors, perhaps solidifying the same practices for expansion by his own successors. The office saw a contraction to the appointment powers, weakened by partisan politics of the late 1990s, the protection of presidential privilege, and the immunity from civil liability.³⁶ Clinton's relationship with the above executive powers and privileges, however, cannot encompass his entire style of executive governance. As Elena Kagan, Clinton's Associate White House Counsel, has argued, the former president sought control over both the policy-making decisions of the branch's independent

³⁵ Stephen Hess with James P. Pfiffner. "George H.W. Bush 1989-1993, William J. Clinton 1993-2001." *Organizing the Presidency*. 3rd ed. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. 152. Print.

³⁶ Nancy Kassop. "Clinton, the Constitution, and Presidential Power: His Legacy for the Office of the President." *The Clinton Presidency and the Constitutional System*. Ed. Rosanna Perotti. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. 140-159. Print.

agencies and the presentation of those policies to the American public.³⁷ Clinton thus presented an intimate relationship with his Cabinet as a main priority for his administration during the transition period, but once assuming office, he embraced the concept of a unitary executive and fought to preserve the expansive style of executive governance shaped by his predecessors.

If the Cabinet Room and the Oval Office replicas represent an interrelated conversation on the American presidency and presidential power, the Oval Office seems more accurately to symbolize Clinton's actions while in office and his understanding of the president's role in American democracy. For Clinton, entering the Oval Office produced feelings of standing on, "democracy's hallowed ground." The museum designed the replica so as to flood it with natural light, generating a sense of transparency and ensuring that visitors would sense, "the majesty and mystique of this cornerstone of our republic," as well as, "the sense of possibility, optimism, and determination to make tomorrow better than today..."³⁸ Clinton's language portrays the Oval Office as a sacred place of American civil religion, Robert Bellah's reinvention of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory through which he argues that veneration of saints, places, objects, and engagement in ritual practices support national unity.³⁹ Because the Oval Office did not become the primary symbol of the presidency until FDR's administration, Clinton places himself firmly within the legacy of expanded executive authority. While the Cabinet Room defines the president as a collaborator in the affairs of governance, the modern Oval Office invests the president with the right to determine the progress of the nation without considering alternative perspectives.

³⁷ Steven G. Calabresi and Christopher S. Yoo. "Bill Clinton." *The Unitary Executive: Presidential Power from Washington to Bush*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 396. Print.

³⁸ *The William J. Clinton Presidential Center*, 40.

³⁹ Robert N. Bellah. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*: 134.4 50 Years (Fall 2005) referenced in Hufbauer, Benjamin. *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. 6-7. Print.

A Third Way for the 21st Century?

The current model of the Presidential Library and Museum system restricts the promise of former presidents and NARA to create democratic spaces for public education for these federal facilities exhibit the tremendous authority of the twenty-first century executive, a system that often tends towards unilateral rather than collaborative decision-making. While former President George W. Bush repeatedly described his museum as the people's space, one where he had relinquished control over his legacy to popular historical judgment, the Bush Center reproduces the same narratives from his administration and employs techniques of memorialization to stymie conversations about terrorism before 9/11. Clinton similarly makes citizens the prominent actors in rhetoric concerning his library and museum, but unlike Bush, he links education about the past with public service in the present. To support communities, protect the earth, maintain a strong economy, and ensure progress in the twenty-first century, citizens must not only see themselves as contributors within the museum's exhibition narratives, they must also have the opportunity to question how Clinton's actions both harmed and benefitted the nation. The museum accomplishes the first condition but falters in fulfilling the second, due largely to the naturalizing discourse of the museum as unconstructed library. Including a public policy school rather than a public policy institute, however, evidences Clinton's genuine desire to support citizen engagement and participation. As a whole, the William J. Clinton Presidential Center practices responsible public service through its school, contributions to economic development, and rehabilitation of the natural environment. When examining only the Clinton museum, the institution reproduces the problems of presidential self-commemoration, specifically the ability to recuperate one's personal and political identity without significant

public input and to disseminate a singular narrative, filled with achievements and only minor failures, to future generations.

His bridge to the twenty-first century thus balances between the temple and forum models of America's Presidential Libraries and Museums. Seeking to instill within a newly informed citizenry a passion for responsible service to the nation, Clinton instead succumbs to both personal and political hubris. As a student of history encouraging the same type of civic education for visitors' enlightenment, the former president could have created a third way institution, one concerned with presidential history yet more interested in citizen response to the administration's policies. Instead, the Clinton museum teaches visitors that dissimilar expectations inform the public service of presidents and citizens, specifically that presidents will always hold the power to shape the conditions of participation while citizens do not possess the same potential for disruption.

Reimagining Presidential Commemoration

“Historians tell us that democracy is built on conversation – people talking to one another.”

-*Citizens and Politics*, 1991¹

¹ *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. Report prepared for the Kettering Foundation by the Harwood Group. Washington, D.C.: Kettering Foundation, 1991.

The debate swirling around the future Barack Obama Presidential Library and Museum – three years before the end of his administration – has drawn energy from the nation’s fascination with legacy and history, twin pillars contributing to a confused sense of American identity and democracy in the twenty-first century. On January 31, 2014, only one year into President Obama’s second term, a group of the president’s closest allies formed the Barack H. Obama Foundation to oversee the fundraising and planning process for his future Presidential Library and Museum. Talk surrounding who would lead the development team began last spring, and after the official announcement of Marty Nesbitt and Julianna Smoot as co-campaign coordinators, the conversation has turned towards the institution’s form and location. From local dailies to college newspapers to national publications, various journalists have debated whether the library and museum should locate in Hawaii, New York, or Chicago – three locations representing unique periods in Obama’s personal and political life. While most participants in the debate have assumed that the current president’s institution will follow the now standard model of archive, museum, and policy center, the editors for *BloombergView* have proposed forgoing a single, built institution and instead pursuing a cloud model. Citing Obama’s identity as the first digital president and reforms in library technology, the group argued that the president should embrace the opportunity to portray himself as a citizen of the nation rather than a loyalist to one constituency.¹

The touristic imperatives of America’s Presidential Libraries and Museums will ensure the eventual presence of the Barack Obama Presidential Library and Museum as part of the built environment, but *Bloomberg’s* suggestion asks Americans to consider the politics of presidential power informing these institutions as well as the means for financing these increasingly large

¹ Editors. “Obama’s Presidential Library Belongs in the Cloud.” *BloombergView* 17 Feb. 2014. Web. 18 March 2014.

legacy enterprises. In an age of anti-big government, why do Americans continue to invest their money in sprawling monuments to the modern executive? Because these institutions have retained the title of library and museum, they continue to represent themselves as spaces for the neutral collection and display of presidential history. While actually operating as sites for the commemoration of presidential heroism, they attempt to convince visitors of their critical engagement with the historical record. As a nation, Americans place their collective trust in museums to instruct them about their past in hopes of building a better future. The Presidential Libraries and Museums instead often present visitors with a skewed representation of events, revealing their greater concern with presidential commemoration than national education.

FDR established his library and museum forty years removed from the excess of the Gilded Age, yet concerns for cultural contribution and monumentalism informed both his decision to create a new form of presidential commemoration and the ever-increasing size of today's Presidential Libraries and Museums. During his development process, FDR looked to Andrew Mellon, former treasury secretary during the 1920s, for inspiration. Mellon had offered his private art collection to the United States to found a National Gallery of Art, a contribution he believed would secure his immortality in the nation's cultural consciousness.² Today, presidents consider their predecessors as well as their own interests when imagining the shape, size, and purpose of their Presidential Library and Museum, and there appears no attempt to survey the contemporary national political and social landscape for design suggestions. As particularly evidenced by the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, location and architecture can teach visitors lessons about responsible civic action; the Bush Presidential Library and Museum similarly can educate through its size.

² Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 26-27.

Presidents, their foundation team, architects, and exhibition designers must consider how the design, form, and aesthetics of these post-presidential legacy spaces – not just the textual content and objects on display – present implicit lessons about the modern presidency and national priorities. The continuing presence of thirteen Presidential Libraries and Museums scattered across the country, a physical sign of big government and the imperial presidency, starkly opposes the prevailing debate about the national deficit and fiscal austerity. By building legacy monuments approximately every ten years, the federal government recognizes citizens' fascination with national history and their corresponding faith in museums as the proper cultural institution for public education but additionally, they exhibit a lack of imagination and at worst, they refuse to reflect upon the relationship between federal politics, citizenship, and public, democratic spaces.³

As President Obama and his foundation begin to conceptualize his Presidential Library and Museum, they should afford greater attention to considerations of citizen engagement, response, and identity. While the desire to see the objects of presidential labor may draw tourists to these spaces, this fascination with consumable materiality does not require visitors to assume a passive identity. Rather than constructing an exhibitionary space centered upon presidential and national history enclosed within the years of the administration, future Presidential Libraries and Museums need to include informed spaces focusing on public dissent and the long-term effects of executive policy. Incorporating interactive features such as data collection banks and alcoves where docents lead visitors in discussion about the presented narrative would encourage

³ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan discuss at length the sources Americans trust for history education with museums emerging as the top option. See: Rosenzweig, Roy and David Thelan. *The Presence of the Past / Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Print.

immediate and critical engagement with the material and more significantly, ask visitors to conceive their visit as a civic action. NARA has considered alternative models for the federal system. But in order to reimagine rather than simply reform America's Presidential Libraries and Museums, they must turn their full attention to the operations of the forum. Shrinking the size and emphasizing the archival function represent two profitable starting points. Identifying visitors as serious citizens interested in history and conversation as constitutive, stabilizing elements of American democracy can transform these spaces into vehicles for civic participation in the present. Reimagined, reinvigorated Presidential Libraries and Museums can teach Americans that responsible citizenship wrests upon concern with current challenges and willingness to engage in deliberation rather than preoccupation with controlling the collective cultural memory of future generations.

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