INTRODUCTION:
THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL LEGACIES IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES

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On a rainy day in November 2004, William Jefferson Clinton, convalescing from heart surgery, assembled two former presidents, the current incumbent, and several foreign statesmen and celebrities to inaugurate the twelfth presidential library, his library in Little Rock, Arkansas. It is yet another library that aspires to superlatives, certainly in regard to the quantity of its holdings, as an architectural statement, and soon, perhaps, in terms of the number of visitors. The opening of a new presidential library has become a showy event of major news value akin to presidential inaugurations and state funerals. It constitutes a display of power, prestige, and pride in the most visible of American political institutions but also another step in the former chief executive’s battle to actively shape his presidential legacy. Yet the clamor surrounding new presidential libraries today (soon to be repeated with an edifice for George W. Bush in Texas)—the fund-raising efforts, the refusal of some universities to host a library on their campus, or, conversely, the competition among communities to become presidential library sites in the hope of development fees and tourist dollars spurring economic growth—has little to do with the comparatively modest origins of the presidential library idea.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first president who considered his presidential papers part of the “national heritage” and decided to preserve them for posterity. Most of his predecessors had treated them as private property and simply took them home and dealt with them as they saw fit. Nobody took issue with this practice although, as one scholar put it, it amounted to “playing darts with a Rembrandt,” since it often facilitated the papers’ destruction or scattered them across the country. Roosevelt consciously decided to depart from this previous practice. In December 1938, he resolved to set up a library at his private estate in Hyde Park, New York, and to donate his papers to the American public, marking the beginning of the presidential library system. Subsequent presidents have followed suit and expanded Roosevelt’s innovation into a network of presidential libraries. With the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, the system became part of the National Archives. Its Office of Presidential Libraries today administers twelve presidential libraries, as well as the Nixon Presidential Materials, and maintains a staff to deal with the materials of the current administration.
By contrast, Germany—before and after unification—never developed a comparable system of “chancellor libraries.” There is no law that establishes a foundation for a former chancellor or federal president. Principally, the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives) is in charge of preserving politicians’ papers, but collecting artifacts and setting up a museum to celebrate a particular politician’s life and times lies outside of its purview. Also, the Bundesarchiv must compete with party foundations, private institutions, and, to a lesser degree, the Memorial Foundations of German Politicians. Only a few such memorial foundations—clearly modeled on the presidential libraries—exist. They are publicly funded and were set up to honor a select group of German statesmen: Otto von Bismarck, Friedrich Ebert, Konrad Adenauer, Theodor Heuss, and Willy Brandt. These five German memorial foundations operate on a much smaller scale than the presidential libraries. The relationship between the two is not closer than that of third cousins. Indeed, trying to discuss them together smacks of comparing apples with oranges, as political scientist Dieter Dowe aptly put it at the conference documented in this volume. It is much easier to collect differences between the two systems than similarities. For instance, the presidential libraries are of different immediate political relevance than their German counterparts. It is inconceivable that the memorial foundations would ever foment public controversies as their American counterparts repeatedly do.5

Yet as different as the systems may be, both sides have identified a need for transatlantic communication. This was the driving idea behind the conference Access—Presentation—Memory: The Presidential Libraries and the Memorial Foundations of German Politicians held at the German Historical Institute (GHI) in Washington, DC, from September 8 to 11, 2004. The conference—a joint effort of the GHI, the Memorial Foundations of German Politicians, and the Office of Presidential Libraries at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)—brought together practitioners and scholars from the twelve presidential libraries, the five German memorial foundations, and the National Archives. They were joined by historians studying the American presidency and the German chancellory, archive specialists, and representatives of public interest groups working for access to presidential records. The conference did not simply compare the two systems, nor did it merely present each institution. Instead, it was structured along topical lines, covering issues of mutual interest ranging from historiographical, academic, and practical concerns to archival history, issues of memory, and problems of archival access.6

This volume presents a selection of papers from that conference. It opens with a closer look at how the general public comes into contact with the presidential libraries and German memorial foundations. In the United States, it is the attached museums that get the most attention, with
more than 1.5 million annual visitors to the exhibitions. One idea of the conference was to subject the exhibitions to an unusual assessment: a representative of one of the German foundations traveled to various presidential libraries and examined how biographies were exhibited in the presidential museums, while a historian from the presidential libraries’ side went to Germany to visit the memorial foundations. Each side thus offered a fresh perspective on the other’s exhibition practices.

Thomas Hertfelder visited the exhibitions at the Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson, and Bush libraries and discovered “a whiff of royalism.” The exhibitions show idealized biographies of white males who were sports buffs in their youth and lifelong patriots surrounded by their large, happy families. The potential tension between a critical analysis of the historical background of a presidency and the celebration of a president’s legacy is usually avoided by overly emphasizing the latter. The locations of the museums themselves contribute significantly to this perception through their connection to the biographies exhibited inside. Roosevelt in Hyde Park, Kennedy in Boston, Johnson in Austin—the presidents are remembered far from the site of their political power in Washington and re-embedded into their local points of origin.

John Powers visited all the German foundations and thought that they substantially enriched political education. The exhibitions strive to combine the biographies of the statesmen with the political background of their life and times. The history of National Socialism features prominently in these exhibitions, but they also attempt to show the political transformation of Germany from the Kaiserreich to the Federal Republic. However, Powers finds that party politics receive too much attention to the detriment of a more private view of the exhibited statesmen. Also, some major historical occurrences have not yet been incorporated into the exhibitions, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the political change after 1990, and long-term processes like migration. He recommends including more interactive and audiovisual elements and moving away from printed text in order to make the exhibitions more vibrant.

Concerns about access to politicians’ records, featured in the conference title itself, are represented in this volume by contributions from Martin Sabrow, Thomas S. Blanton, and Hartmut Weber. Sabrow delivers a case study of the history of access to the Stasi files. What started out as an unprecedented “success story”—public access to the files of a defunct regime’s secret service—turned into a highly charged controversy that pitted historical scholarship and the right to know against individuals’ right to privacy. The turning point came in 2000, when former Chancellor Helmut Kohl challenged the right of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR to make public the information the Stasi had assembled about him. Sabrow blamed the
subsequently impaired access situation on two factors. First, the CDU Party finance scandal of the outgoing Kohl administration increased the interest in the Stasi tapes of Kohl’s telephone conversations. Second, there was the uncompromising stance of the personalities involved, namely Kohl, Minister of the Interior Otto Schily, and Federal Commissioner Marianne Birthler. Historical scholarship is paying the price: the latest court ruling on the case further increased the web of restrictions already in place, thereby putting an end to the revolutionary and cathartic act of exposing the files of an oppressive secret service.

When it comes to leading politicians’ papers, the German Bundesarchiv has a different set of legal problems. Its president Hartmut Weber regrets the unclear meaning of the Federal Archives Law. When leaving office, politicians often hand their papers over to the private archives of the party foundations, regardless of whether the material pertains to official or private matters. For official state papers, however, the Bundesarchiv is the legally designated depository. The federal government finally addressed the issue in a cabinet resolution in July 2001, which prohibited the heads of ministries from removing original papers and ordered them to distinguish between party business and official business. Whether this resolution will be adequately honored remains to be seen.

Thomas S. Blanton, director of the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, moves the focus to current issues of access to presidential papers. Founded in 1985, the archive simultaneously functions as a research institute for international affairs, a library, and an archive of specific declassified U.S. documents: those obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), through a public interest law firm that defends and expands public access to government information through FOIA, and through an indexer and publisher of the documents. By constantly applying the FOIA to pry loose government documents, the archive is the “natural enemy” of the government’s attempts at secrecy. Blanton discusses one of the archive’s most famous cases, the litigation over White House e-mails that referred to the Iran-Contra deal during the Reagan administration. Whereas the National Security establishment wanted to get rid of these high-level electronic exchanges, the e-mails survived, thanks to a six-year lawsuit brought by the National Security Archive. Henceforth, White House e-mails would be considered part of presidential records, covered by legal provisions for their preservation.

Another set of articles takes a comparative look at the history of the presidential library system and the memorial foundations of German politicians. Dieter Dowe gives an overview of the history of the German memorial foundations. As much as the presidential libraries were the model for the creation of the foundations, a quick look at the respective budgets, exhibition space, personnel, and visitor numbers quickly dis-
closes the modesty of the German undertaking and drives home the point that such a comparison involves the aforementioned apples and oranges. The first foundation, the Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus in Rhöndorf, was set up under the Grand Coalition in 1967 as a non-profit organization. In 1978, it was turned into a federal institution. The same procedure was applied in the late 1980s to the Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte, first founded in Heidelberg in 1962. The Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung in Berlin, the Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung in Friedrichsruh, and the Stiftung Bundespräsident-Heuss-Haus in Stuttgart were additions of the 1990s. Of these five, only the Bismarck foundation sparked political controversy. Historians with a Social Democratic background questioned whether a democratic society should honor the “Iron Chancellor” with a foundation, which set off a heated debate in parliament. Party politics led to the affirmative resolution of the debate. Indeed, a major difference of the German system is the large role parties play in the German foundations. In Germany, parting chancellors or presidents do not automatically have foundations named after them. Dowe acknowledges that who decides whether a statesman is “worthy” enough and what accounts for “worthiness” or historical “greatness” in the first place remains sketchy at best.

Frank Burke, former Acting Archivist of the United States, presents the corresponding story for the development of the presidential libraries. His article, “Pride or Protest: Community Responses to Presidential Libraries,” focuses on the different reactions of local communities to the prospect of hosting a presidential library. Whereas the Truman Library in the president’s hometown of Independence, Missouri, was something of a grassroots project with widespread community support, the plan to locate the Kennedy Library on the campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, met with strong resistance. The Kennedy papers moved instead to Columbia Point, which overlooks Boston Harbor. Although cooperation between a university campus and a presidential library could potentially be fruitful, such an arrangement has not necessarily always been a good match: Stanford University refused to host the Reagan Library, and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, turned down the Nixon Library. Over the years, the legal status and the mode of financing presidential libraries have evolved, too. Roosevelt considered his papers to be private property but donated them to the United States. The controversy over the ownership of the Nixon papers and his famous tapes led to the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 and the Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978, which settled the ownership question in favor of the state. The NARA thereby became the designated custodian of presidential and vice-presidential papers.
In his contribution, sociologist Barry Schwartz challenges the very notion that past presidents are worth commemorating either with a library or by other means. By focusing on the interaction of cultures of memory and the political culture in the United States, Schwartz examines the history of the public holiday Presidents’ Day. Observed on the third Monday of February, it replaced the celebration of Washington’s and Lincoln’s birthdays in February, which had been gradually marginalized by the popularity of Valentine’s Day on February 14th. The decision in 1971 to make Presidents’ Day a federal holiday stemmed less from a desire to show reverence to the presidents than an attempt to unify divergent practices of observing the various February holidays. Schwartz doubts whether any president deserves to be honored with a federal holiday and sees the merging of the former birthdays into this meaningless holiday as evidence of waning respect for the office of the president in general.

The volume closes with three case studies that examine the shifting image of a statesman over time. David Greenberg in “Richard Nixon in American Memory” looks back at the many speculations about who the “real” Nixon was, a controversial point even during his lifetime. Two recent interpretations try to reinvent Nixon: one as the experienced elder statesman in his conducting of international affairs, the other as a foreign policy advisor to Bill Clinton. Both try to paint him as a liberal in domestic policies. Greenberg rejects these interpretations as attempts to detract from the defining event of Nixon’s presidency, the Watergate crisis, and replace the image of Nixon as a crook. In domestic policies, Nixon did not generate a progressive agenda but only reacted to the dominant, liberal political climate in the country. Greenberg predicts that the image of “tricky Dick” will prevail despite these recent attempts at revision. Nixon’s negative, manipulative personality carries too much weight in the public memory.

Walter Mühlhausen portrays a very different politician in his analysis of perceptions of Reich President Friedrich Ebert. Even in his own party, Ebert became controversial due to his role in the revolution of 1918/19. The Weimar Republic never had much loyalty for its first president, nor did Ebert work to polish his image. His untimely death in 1925 dramatically changed the situation. The Social Democrats turned him into a political icon, named a foundation after him, and made his grave a site of pilgrimage. Once the National Socialists were in power, public remembrance of Ebert came to a halt: only Social Democrats in exile tried to keep the flame burning. After the war, the GDR viewed Ebert as a traitor of his class, whereas in the Federal Republic, the left wing of the SPD grew critical of him during the 1960s for having missed the “opportunity” of 1918–19. Only after unification in 1990 did Ebert join the ranks of those
considered leading German statesmen, and he was honored with a memorial foundation.

Andreas von Seggern concludes the case studies with the history of public remembrance of Otto von Bismarck. Even during his lifetime, Bismarck had become the object of popular adulation and even took on mythical dimensions after his death in 1898; numerous Bismarck memorials are scattered across Germany. A new assessment of the “Iron Chancellor” emerged after World War II, when nationalistic approaches to German history were finally delegitimized. It was not until the 1980s that Bismarck remembrance again entered public debate, when the West German minister of the interior suggested saving part of the decaying Bismarck estate near Friedrichsruh, now home to a museum and the Bismarck Foundation. The latter was founded only after unification with major backing from Chancellor Kohl. The foundation, Seggern emphasizes, relates to Bismarck only as an object of historical inquiry and steers clear of older strands of personal reverence.

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I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who helped to bring about the conference and make it a success, in particular, Wolfgang Schmidt of the Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung in Berlin, Thomas Hertfelder of the Stiftung Bundespräsident-Theodor-Heuss-Haus in Stuttgart, and Sam McClure of the Office of Presidential Libraries at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. They were my immediate contacts and co-organizers over many months preceding the conference. This volume would not have been possible without the editing experts at the GHI, namely Jonathan Skolnik, Patricia Casey Sutcliffe, and senior editor David Lazar. Our interns Anja Matthes, Eskea Wegner, Flemming Schock, and Ryan Handy helped prepare and run the conference and assisted with this publication in various ways. Without the decisive support of Christof Mauch, director of the GHI, this volume might have never seen the light of day. Finally, I would like to thank the authors of the articles assembled in these pages, who facilitated my job by their display of patience when it was needed most.

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Notes

1 After the transfer of his files from the White House to Arkansas, Bill Clinton’s first question to David E. Alsobrook, the director of the Clinton Library, was: “How much stuff do I have? Is it more than LBJ’s?” In fact, it is: the Clinton administration left approximately
76.8 million pages of paper documents (of which 20 million are e-mails), 1.85 million photographs and over 75,000 museum artifacts, amounting to 35,686 cubic feet of records. This makes Clinton’s library the biggest thus far. Alsobrook reported the quotation at the conference this volume documents. See note 6. The figures are taken from the library’s web site at http://www.clintonlibrary.gov/, which also features pictures of the building, the exhibition, and a replica of the Oval Office.


4 See the official NARA site at http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/. The recently opened Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, IL, a private, non-profit organization, is not part of the presidential library system.

5 Two recent examples: In November 2001, President Bush issued Executive Order 13233, which increased the incumbent president’s power over the records of his predecessor(s), the vice-president(s), and his own administration. Open government advocates criticized E.O. 13233 as a violation of the spirit, even the letter, of the 1978 Presidential Records Act. The critics attacked it as a restrictive tool designed to deny the release of presidential and vice-presidential documents sought by scholars and journalists. The order was challenged in court by the American Historical Association, the National Coalition for History, the National Security Archive, and other organizations. For an introduction to the issues, see the coverage in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the monthly column by Bruce Craig for the National Coalition for History at http://www.h-net.org/~nch/, the web site of the National Security Archive at http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/ (accessed May 2006), and the survey article by Timothy L. Ericson, “Building Our Own ‘Iron Curtain’: The Emergence of Secrecy in American Government,” American Archivist 68 (Spring/Summer 2005): 18–52.

The other example is the public scrutiny accompanying the transformation of the private Nixon Library and Birthplace Foundation in Yorba Linda, California, into the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum as part of the official presidential library system administered by the National Archives. Particular criticism has been directed at the fact that the foundation received congressional funding to prepare for the transition, whereas traditionally, outgoing presidents have raised private funds to cover 100 percent of the costs of their library. The funding in this case, some critics argue, constitutes a violation of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Act of 1974. The discussions around the transfer are being covered by Bruce Craig for the National Coalition for History (see above), here, in particular, Vol. 10, no. 35 (10 September 2004). The still private Nixon Library also made unfavorable headlines when it canceled a widely publicized conference on Nixon and the Vietnam War in March 2005. See Scott Shane, “Nixon Library Stirs Anger by Canceling Conference,” New York Times, March 11, 2005. Shortly thereafter, a group of renowned historians protested the planned move of presidential files and tapes from the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, to Yorba Linda in an open letter posted on the web site of the National Security Archive. See http://www.gwu.edu/%7Ensarchiv/news/20050310/index.htm (accessed May 2006).