ITH A WHIFF OF ROYALISM: EXHIBITING BIOGRAPHIES IN AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES

Thomas Hertfelder

“I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress.”¹ With these words, Alexis de Tocqueville summarized his nine months of travel across America in 1831–2. It is by no means coincidental that this classic analysis of American democracy, long unsurpassed in discernment and clarity, was penned by a European nobleman. Tocqueville, endowed with the skeptical viewpoint of a post-revolutionary liberal, succeeded almost single-handedly in exposing the ingredients of American democracy against the backdrop of Europe’s experience of the revolutionary age. What Tocqueville’s American hosts considered ordinary and, hence, hardly worth mentioning, was analyzed by the probing gaze of this fascinated European, who questioned the familiar ideas and categories he had brought along from France. Tocqueville was able to see “more than America” in America because his European perspective led him to consider aspects of European life that he hadn’t recognized at home, and to unearth much more than his American contemporaries assumed they knew about their country.²

In the vein of Tocqueville’s reflections, I would like my observations to benefit from the heuristic productiveness of marveling. They deal with a genuinely American institution designed to explore and to transmit history: the presidential library. Presidential libraries present the biographies of American presidents to the public, but in which ways? Which historical topics and patterns of interpretation do they employ? How do they position themselves as agencies of collective memory within contemporary discourse? My analysis is primarily based on the biographical exhibitions of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library (Hyde Park, New York), the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Boston), the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (Austin), and the George Bush Presidential Library (College Station, Texas).³

In the following, I first discuss the historical patterns of interpretation that shape the presidential libraries. Secondly, I examine the meanings suggested by a presidential library’s chosen location, and then, I elucidate some common structural elements underlying presidential biographies. Sections four and five demonstrate how presidential libraries develop the
concept of leadership, and how they integrate and interpret historical disasters and biographical contingencies. The sixth section reflects upon the “musealization” of the Oval Office and other instances of simulated reality. I then situate the previously discussed exhibitions between the competing ideals of “history” and “legacy.” My concluding observations try to gauge the role of presidential libraries in the social memory of the United States.

“Presidential Synthesis” as Master Narrative

There is no place better suited than Washington, D.C.’s prestigious avenue, the Mall, to find a vivid contrast between European and American notions of history. The wide boulevard, lined with numerous museums and representative buildings, runs its unswerving westward course from the Capitol past the Washington Memorial and the rotunda of the World War II Memorial straight up to the Lincoln Memorial, whose neo-classical structure completes the imposing vista. Washington, Lincoln, and the victorious war: simple and effective, this urban topography constructs a linear story from the decisive reference points of American history in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. This line admits neither rupture nor disturbance: the memorials to the wars in Korea and Vietnam are slightly off the central axis. The view of this constitutive historical constellation—with the towering obelisk of the Washington Memorial as the symbolic point of origin—remains unobstructed. Continuity and linearity define the nation’s historical self-image and self-confidence.

The abstract symbolism of linearity and continuity acquires a concrete historical profile in the exhibit “The Presidency: A Glorious Burden,” which the National Museum of American History has presented at the Mall’s western end for several years. Here, visitors catch sight of a long gallery of portraits of all American presidents alongside a timeline. One after the other, like pearls on a string, the forty-two images—from George Washington to George W. Bush—represent over 200 years of national development. The unbroken succession of the holders of the country’s highest office highlights an aspect of American history which shows the fundamental difference between the European and the American historical experiences: no nation on the European continent, least of all Germany, can claim such a period of continuous statehood under the banner of liberty and democracy. Yet this personalized form of historical presentation is a common sight for the European beholder; European monarchies displayed their legitimacy through sprawling family trees and extensive galleries of sovereigns. The exhibition at the National Museum of American History adapts this simple principle of presentation, an example of the remarkable proclivity of revolutionary democracies to draw on pre-democratic forms to create their own self-image.4
The academic counterpart to this popular historical approach is the “presidential synthesis,” a type of political historiography according to which the history of the United States becomes most pertinently manifest in its presidents and their respective administrations. The presidential synthesis, given considerable acclaim in the 1950s and 1960s by eminent scholars such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and William E. Leuchtenburg, was embedded in the liberal narrative of the “consensus school,” which conceived of American history since the colonial period as the continual unfolding of an all-pervasive liberal tradition, downplaying historical forces such as social conflict and populism. Bolstered by the U.S. victory in World War II and facing a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union, these historians interpreted the national past in terms of continuity, stability, homogeneity, and progress—without, however, losing sight of the flaws of this progress. Informed by these ideas, the presidential synthesis saw the chief executives as the driving force behind liberal reform and political progress in the U.S. The popularity of the presidential synthesis justifies its designation as a master narrative. Its influence derives from an array of factors. As mentioned above, the narrative stands for the unbroken continuity of the American political order; each administration becomes a constitutive moment which both establishes legitimacy and draws on tradition. Second, the presidential synthesis supplies a simple chronological structuring principle which renders over two centuries of American history both tellable and memorizable. Third, the narrative accommodates a disposition which Robert Dallek has called “the country’s obsession with personality”: in this pattern of interpretation, each president represents not only the state and executive power but also embodies American virtues, particularly the “virtues of leadership.” Fourth, the narrative ties in with familiar forms of political dramaturgy and makes for a presentation of U.S. history in which expert findings and cultural memory interlock. Meanwhile, the presidential synthesis, with its focus on the persona of the president, has become marginal in academic historiography. Eric Foner has pronounced it dead, while aware of its tenacity. It lives on, in the National Museum of American History, and also in high school and college text books, and in the museum shops of presidential libraries—on pencils, rulers, fans, playing cards.

In Germany, it is otherwise. Even though the Federal Republic of Germany has existed for fifty years, the German past is marked by national breakdowns, war, division, and totalitarian regimes. Breaks and discontinuities are the basic stock of the German historical experience. Against the backdrop of this “shattered past,” it is only logical that the Federal Republic has not adopted the narratives of continuity which inform American presidential libraries and memorials. Emblematic of the
nation’s experience of discontinuity, Germany honors only a few select politicians with national memorials.

Places

Michael Beschloss once observed that one need only walk through a presidential library to learn a great deal about the respective president; one needn’t read a single document. Beschloss’s assumption is borne out by a visit to Roosevelt’s family estate in Hyde Park [Figure 1]. The visitor gains more than merely an impressive sense of the wealth of the New York families who built their luxurious country estates in the Hudson Valley prior to World War I. Hyde Park also makes us think about the possible correlations between Roosevelt’s unwavering self-confidence and the conditions of his privileged upbringing. The Dutch Colonial architecture of the library, whose blueprints were designed by Roosevelt himself, tells us quite a bit about how tradition shaped the “great innovator.”

No visitor to the Kennedy Library in Boston could miss the dramatic panoramic view of the surrounding bay offered by the glass-enclosed

![Figure 1. The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Dedicated on July 4, 1940. Photograph by Thomas Hertfelder.](image)
pavilion [Figure 2]. Kennedy spent vacations on his sailboat, Victura, near here. The view from the pavilion encompasses Dorchester Bay and Boston Harbor, the area where the president’s Irish ancestors arrived in the New World in the mid-1800s. As a result, visitors may also enjoy identifying the unmistakable Bostonian accent in Kennedy’s ubiquitous voice.

On May 22, 1971, Lyndon B. Johnson opened his presidential library in Austin, Texas [Figure 3]. It does not take much imagination to read the massive design of the colossal building complex as an allusion to both the way Johnson saw himself and to the “flawed giant’s” impressive physical stature. On the whole, “Texas” serves as a code for many of the features of the thirty-sixth president of the United States: his rough manner, his imposing physical presence, his rather loose choice of words, his body language, and his genial way with people. The exhibit inside the building does not fail to display the hallmarks of this Texan identity, including his cowboy hat and boots emblazoned with the state of Texas, and a photograph of him so adorned.

I encountered similar symbols at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, a town of 67,000 in the heart of Texas. Here, too, “Texas” is cast as a decisive factor in determining the course of the future
president’s life: as a young Yale graduate in 1948, Bush began to work in the Texas oil business and made a fortune; his political career began in the 1960s with the Texas Republicans.

Roosevelt in Hyde Park, Kennedy in Boston, Johnson in Austin, Bush in College Station—in the decentralized system of presidential libraries, each occupies a particular place on the map of the United States. The one-dimensional, that is, chronological, succession of the presidents along a time axis thus becomes a two-dimensional web of geographical nodes—that, as the examples of Boston and Austin demonstrate, have already become firmly encoded in the “mental maps” of contemporaries through manifold cultural associations. Remembered moments in time now become spatial and take on symbolic meaning. At the end of a president’s tenure, the public persona leaves the symbolic realm of the nation’s power, Washington, DC, and the White House, for a new home situated in one or another region of the national memory. The president connects himself once more, preferably forever, with the American people, thus proving to be a true representative of the nation.

In his classic study of sites of the Annunciation in the Holy Land, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs investigated places in Palestine
that are mentioned in the Gospels. He found that, beginning in the fourth century, these sites were increasingly associated with biblical events or persons. In this fashion, geographical sites evolved into pillars of the collective memory of Christian communities. For Halbwachs, “spatial footing” and “differentiation in space” play a crucial role in constituting communal memories, regardless of whether the stories that sprang up around these places are true. American presidents also make use of place as a cultural mnemonic.

Biographies

Each presidential exhibition holds a two-fold drama in store for the visitor: the drama of American history and the drama of a particular American biography. This construction of American biography is, more precisely, a sort of ideal biography of white males who, by virtue of birth or upward mobility, ultimately belong to a certain socioeconomic class. Three aspects illustrate these trajectories. The first is the prominence of family. Often, a given exhibit begins and ends with the presentation of a preferably large, vivacious model family. The family provides the meta-political framework for a biography, indicating the concept’s central social meaning.

In Johnson’s case, the ancestral family on display allows us to examine the humble origins from which this Texan made it to the very top. The Johnsons, while not at all poor, appear as a guarantor of the “log cabin myth,” the popular legend according to which most presidents are of somehow humble origins. With Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Bush, however, it is obvious that they do not fit the myth; they were all scions of the well-to-do East Coast establishment. For this reason, the reinterpretations are all the more revealing. Roosevelt makes up for his lack of a requisite arduous social rise by managing to conquer the White House despite his severe disability. In Kennedy’s case, the interpretation gains validity from an intergenerational perspective: the history of Kennedy’s Irish immigrant family reads like a perfect success story, the American Dream. Next to a picture showing his extended family in the 1930s [Figure 4], we hear John F. Kennedy declare, “My great-grandfather carried nothing with him except a strong religious faith and a desire for liberty.”

Paul Watzlawik’s quip that, in America, “not giving a darn about sports” is considered “at the very least unmanly, if not outright unpatriotic” is often confirmed in the exhibitions. The introductory film of the Kennedy exhibit features JFK swimming and playing baseball and tennis; a youthful Roosevelt also swims and plays golf; and in College Station, we witness George Bush’s outstanding baseball talent. Even Lyndon B. Johnson, certainly anything but a sportsman, can be spotted in a catcher’s
uniform. Sports are a central part of the ideal American biography, embodying vigor, competitiveness, and a spirit of fair play. For George Bush, it is the adrenaline factor which connects sports with politics. Perhaps it was this adrenaline factor that compelled him to parachute onto the grounds of his presidential library (albeit in tandem) on June 13, 2004, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday not once, but twice. The public stunt proved more than his physical prowess: by invoking his early years as a bomber pilot, he reaffirmed an association of athletic achievement and patriotism.

Hence, in addition to family and sports, there is a third characteristic of the American biography: patriotism that will stand the test of war. The exhibitions document at length how Kennedy and Bush emerged from World War II as war heroes [Figures 5 & 6]. Even the patriotic commitment of Lyndon B. Johnson, who was unable to point to any acts of bravery, is recalled in his exhibit: his diary is opened to a report of a night mission in New Guinea, and we see the Silver Star he was awarded by General MacArthur.

In addition to these cultural aspects, all four biographies are informed by interpretive patterns specific to American historiography. Let us take Figure 4. The Kennedy family in the 1930s. John F. Kennedy Library. Photograph by Dorothy Wilding, courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library.
George Bush as an example. In College Station, we learn that, after graduating in 1948, he set out with his wife for Texas in a red Studebaker in order to start a life there by working hard. To drive the point home, the exhibit features a beautiful red 1947 Studebaker as the leading symbol [Figure 7], with the following explanation:

**Figure 5. Display on JFK in World War II. Photograph courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library.**
Remember how the covered wagons of the 19th century carried Americans westward to new frontiers? Some of these early wagons were made by the Studebaker brothers of South Bend, Indiana. Roughly a century later, a low-slung 147 two-door coupe made by the same enterprising company served a similar function for George Bush.

The classic interpretation of the settlement of the western frontier as a defining experience in shaping America’s national character is transferred here onto a phase of George Bush’s life. The president emerges as a kind of pioneer, and his life takes on the qualities of a paradigmatic American biography.  

In fact, the exhibitions remind one of how thoroughly American presidents derive their self-image from the history of their high office. An anecdote from the Nixon era illustrates this point. On one of his last days in the White House, Richard Nixon was overheard as he engaged in loud discourse with some of his predecessors while restlessly pacing back and forth in front of the presidential portraits. Some observers determined that Nixon had finally lost his mind for good.  

But in regard to the
president’s self-image, his behavior makes perfect sense. The fiction that a presidential incumbent dwells in a sort of imaginary community with his predecessors is part of the position’s symbolic inventory. Lyndon B. Johnson, for instance, kept a series of volumes containing all the State of the Union addresses from George Washington to John F. Kennedy on his Oval Office bookshelf, in addition to an enormous edition of Washington’s works. He was thus constantly reminded of the unbroken succession of his office. The exhibit also informs us that Johnson called his domestic reform project, the Great Society, “an extension of the Bill of Rights,” thereby establishing a direct link between his presidency and the Constitution of the United States.

We also find such reminders in the Kennedy Library. In the TV studio where Kennedy and Nixon squared off during their first campaign debate in September 1960, we witness how Kennedy starts off by emphatically invoking Abraham Lincoln, while just a few feet away in Kennedy’s duplicated Oval Office replicas of the legendary lanterns of revolutionary Paul Revere recall the era of the Boston Tea Party. Towards the end of the exhibition a video shows sixteen-year-old Bill Clinton as a member of a delegation of the Boys Nation on July 24, 1963, shaking Kennedy’s hand.

Figure 7. Replica of George Bush’s red Studebaker, George Bush Library. Photograph by Brian Blake, courtesy of the George Bush Presidential Library.
in the White House Rose Garden. At the same time, an older Clinton retrospectively describes this experience as an initiation.28 The exhibitions painstakingly chronicle such encounters between future and incumbent presidents: the youthful Clinton with Kennedy, a young Johnson with Franklin Roosevelt, a young Roosevelt with his distant relative Theodore Roosevelt. In the exhibitions, the presidents are consequently linked within an imaginary web created by early “initiatory” encounters or other symbolic references.29

Leadership

One of the key catchphrases in the 2004 presidential campaign was a term we are reluctant to translate into German in a political context: leadership. If one follows George W. Bush’s arguments, leadership is the determining qualification for an American president. Bush made that clear during a campaign interview with Time: “It’s essential that the world and the country see a resolute nature. Leaders set a vision, they listen, they make decisions, and they lead. . . . If you say, ‘write your job description,’ I’d say, ‘decision maker.’”30

As we know, though, great decisions are usually made behind closed doors. What goes on in the arcane realms of power often remains obscured from public view for decades. The interplay between society’s perception of a president and the “real” life behind the scenes can be enacted in manifold ways. The White House Map Room in the Roosevelt exhibition is one good example. On a wall consisting of a semi-transparent cloth panel, we see a closed door with a guard posted next to it. After a short time the panel disappears, giving way to a view of the brightly lit, authentically furnished Map Room. This was the center for military communications in the basement of the White House where Roosevelt regularly kept track of developments during World War II. An offstage voice explains that security regulations were extraordinarily strict and that everything that transpired in this room was “top secret.” Eventually the phone rings, the president is announced, and immediately one hears Roosevelt enter the room, greeting all cheerfully. From this point on the ticker rattles and phones ring while Roosevelt makes his decisions in a firm voice. A few minutes later the ghostlike scenario ends, the lights go off, and the visitor once again faces a closed door. What are we supposed to make of this elaborate illusion? Its appeal derives from the surreptitious, “keyhole” view we are offered into realms normally closed to us, the technical gimmick that Walter Benjamin termed a “shock.”31 An enhancing factor is the peculiarity of the exhibit: the old-fashioned clatter of the ticker, the curious encryption machine, the furniture. Above all, the fictitious scenario seeks to demonstrate Roosevelt’s
quiet determination, understood as the core virtue of the commander in chief.

There is one instance where the image of a president’s strong leadership qualities is challenged, namely at the Johnson exhibition in Austin. The exhibit accomplishes this through perspectival refractions. The commander in chief’s point of view on the Vietnam War is contrasted with the perspectives of others directly involved; next to a picture of Johnson as a confident leader there is another showing the confounded frenzy in the Oval Office during the 1967 Detroit Riot.

Contingencies, Disasters, and the Limits of the American Dream

These biographical success stories effortlessly manage to integrate failures and setbacks as steps on the road to triumph—Whiggism par excellence.\(^3\) Roosevelt’s polio, a chance misfortune, is presented as part of a meta-personal narrative of overcoming obstacles. The exhibit in Hyde Park reveals how Roosevelt managed to surmount this condition with unflagging optimism and willpower; tour guides habitually point out the path that FDR used to struggle along laboriously on his crutches in order to battle his paralysis. A cabinet powerfully displays the heavy braces and positions Roosevelt’s suffering in the domain of religious martyrdom by presenting crutch and walking cane arranged in the shape of a cross. During his presidency, the American media did not print a single picture of the disabled president in his wheelchair, supposing that the general sentiment of the age would see a president in a wheelchair as irreconcilable with the prevailing notions of leadership.\(^3\) Indeed, the exhibition reproduces this culture by making no further mention of Roosevelt’s disability.\(^4\) When the wheelchair suddenly appears in Roosevelt’s study, it is an almost subversive element in an otherwise coherent narration [Figure 8].

A display about the Vietnam War demands a different kind of approach. The American intervention was no unfortunate contingency, but rather the outcome of deliberate political decisions which did not achieve the desired results. The Johnson exhibit in Austin does not hesitate to present Vietnam as an American disaster. However, the emphasis is not on wrong decisions by Johnson and his aides. Instead, Johnson’s situation is interpreted as “tragic”: by seeking a middle course between the options of controlled withdrawal and all-out escalation, the exhibition suggests that Johnson forfeited support at home.\(^3\) The exhibition shows a remarkable critical perspective by making the paralysis of Johnson’s aides a topic and by providing a forum for individual Vietnam veterans and their experiences. However, because the exhibition insists on a “tragic” plot,
questions hardly ever arise regarding Johnson’s ideological and strategic misjudgments, his ploys to deceive the American public, and possible alternatives to his policies.\textsuperscript{36}

Aside from the Vietnam War, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was the other great American tragedy of the 1960s. In the Kennedy Library visitors are led into a dark corridor. On the left wall, five monitors document the events of November 22, 1963. In an endless loop, all five screens show the same well-known, unsettling images: an unsteady camera, people diving to the ground, wailing police sirens. Then there is an excerpt from the special newscast during which an emotional Walter Cronkite announced the death of the president. At the end there are scenes of the state funeral. The exhibit presents Kennedy’s assassination as a media event whose nightmarish images reflect panic, terror, and the disintegration of order.\textsuperscript{37} In doing so, the exhibit abstains from any attempt at an explanation: visitors receive not a single word of background information about the assassination and its bizarre aftermath. Because the subject matter is left entirely to the visual imagery of November 22, one experiences Kennedy’s murder as the incomprehensible, shattering intrusion of evil itself into the American dream as historical contingency assumes its most radical form. Lee Harvey Oswald’s name is never mentioned; the killer is committed to a damnatio memoriae. JFK’s story does not end here. The exhibit continues underneath the caption of “legacy.” De-
signed to attest to the enduring validity of Kennedy’s ideas, we read his message, “A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.” We also see Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Rights Bill which Kennedy had got underway, pictures of the 1969 moon landing, and a piece of the Berlin Wall. The tour ends in the great glass-enclosed pavilion which allows a view of the waves of the Atlantic, a panorama unobstructed save for a huge U.S. flag in front of the open sky. In the opening of the horizon, the contingent intrusion of evil gives way metahistorically to a visionary future for the American spirit [Figure 9].  

The Oval Office and Other Multiplications of Reality

Those following in the footsteps of American presidents have the rare opportunity to indulge in a special sort of déja vu at such diverse places as Atlanta, Independence, Grand Rapids, Boston, Austin, Little Rock, and Simi Valley. In each of these places, a presidential library has duplicated the Oval Office, right down to the original furnishings. This has bemuddled more than a few European visitors, for example, Umberto Eco, who pronounced such “furious hyperreality” as a feature of contemporary America. Instead of referring to the actual Oval Office symbolically, by means of pictures or individual objects, the whole room is copied, with the result that signifier and signified seem to merge [Figure 10]. Eco explains this as Americans’ obsession with having something more real than real; yet in their perpetual quest for the “real McCoy,” they create something altogether false. Here the European sees his own standards fail short when applied to America and inevitably misses crucial aspects. The Oval Office is, after all, not simply an office space. It is a central element in the inventory of symbols and rituals in America’s civil religion. It is in the Oval Office that a president makes important announcements or launches military attacks. It is impossible to represent a room charged with such high-caliber political symbolism with yet another set of symbols; the sole form of representation adequate for the room’s significance is the real presence.

Eco’s observation highlights the very different standards for public displays in Europe. There would, for instance, certainly be reservations in Germany about a robotic display of a talking and smoking Theodor Heuss or Willy Brandt. Not so in Austin: here, a chipper Lyndon Johnson, dressed as a rancher—a robot, complete with rolling eyeballs and slow-motion gestures—entertains his visitors with humorous anecdotes [Figure 11]. The robot is almost touching, nostalgic in our age of digital simulation; here, a hyperreal mode of presentation has quickly become conventional, even ironic. In the United States, the boundaries between the original and its replication, between reality and its musealization
appear to be shifting even beyond the museum doors. Johnson, for example, had a habit of signing the most important laws of his Great Society program with about a dozen pens each, namely, by using a new pen for every stroke of his signature. Each time, at the end of the lengthy spec-

Figure 9. The pavilion of the John F. Kennedy Library. Photograph by Thomas Hertfelder.
tacle, he would give the pens away as mementoes. Reality is not only changeable, it can also be multiplied; both possibilities seem to be equally legitimate.

Multiple Oval Offices, robots, and other hyperreal objects notwithstanding, presidential libraries mostly keep to the usual museum practice of displaying unique specimens that are both vivid and meaningful. Some exhibits are material relics of dramatic events: the coconut shell into which Kennedy had carved the message that brought his crew rescue when his torpedo boat was shipwrecked in the Pacific Ocean; the briefcase of the U.S. ambassador in Saigon bearing the traces of the Tet Offensive’s inferno; or the target a U.S. soldier found in the office of the toppled Panamanian President Manuel Noriega in December 1989. The cardboard is riddled with bullet holes and carries the inscription, applied with a red felt-tip pen, “Bush.”

History or Legacy?

It has often been said that, in American political culture, the element of the visionary plays an outstanding role, especially in the evaluation of
presidents. Visions that remain unrealized, however, become legacies. Those interested in legacies do not look to history to learn what has actually happened (Ranke). Instead, they want to highlight certain historical threads and use them as a model for today and tomorrow. What-

Figure 11. The robot LBJ speaks. Lyndon B. Johnson Library. Photograph by Thomas Hertfelder.
ever is incompatible with this model is written in lowercase or blotted out, and the distinction between past, present, and future is blurred. For many historians, thinking in legacies is, at best, a nuisance. Historians strive to approach something like the “truth”—no matter how subject to perspective this truth may ultimately turn out to be. As opposed to the “legacy” viewpoint, “history” insists upon some detachment from its subject in order to broaden perceptions of context and possibility, the norms and limitations of an era, and the structural tension between the given present and its various pasts. “History” insists on the alterity of the past, from which one can deduce neither generally applicable patterns nor timeless norms. The question, then, is one of “history” versus “legacy.”\(^{43}\)

On this scale, the Franklin D. Roosevelt exhibition in Hyde Park is the one that comes closest to “history.” Every single exhibit testifies to the distance separating the present from Roosevelt. Furthermore, the somewhat old-fashioned mode of presentation makes for a rather endearing quality: it leaves time for contemplation, and it forgoes emphatic messages. Roosevelt is a great president, but he remains a man of his time.

The Kennedy Library in Boston is at the other end of the scale; it is committed to the legacy of the thirty-fifth president of the United States.\(^{44}\) The exhibition allows visitors to immerse themselves in Kennedy’s world. Twenty-one video monitors show JFK in action and innumerable audio presentations evoke the president’s ideas and visions. Here, Kennedy becomes an almost uncanny presence. The message is clear: this eminently charismatic man shaped an era and now, in Boston, we are welcome to fall under his spell once again.\(^{45}\) The exhibition is an emotional experience, which comes at the price of a lack of distance. The visual evocations leave little space for contextualization, and critical reflection is not always stimulated. Kennedy himself is the interpreter of his times, as well as an ambassador to the future.

The Bush Library steers a middle course between the poles of “history” and “legacy.” Bush was no fan of “the vision thing,”\(^{46}\) and “legacy” means just as little to him. Accordingly, there is hardly any mention of programs, visionary outlooks, obligations, or legacies. Instead, the exhibit offers a variety of historical information which reaches far beyond Bush’s biography. The broad contextualization of Bush’s biography does not produce an image of the president as a hero removed from history, but as a man of his time—a great man, to be sure. History is turned into a grand drama,\(^{47}\) narrated with ample theatricality and a certain hypertrophy. At the center is George Bush, who without fail made right decisions. The exhibit takes on traits of a monument. If visitors do not come away with any notable visions, they take with them the certainty that the policies of the forty-first president were beyond reproach in every respect.
The most interesting exhibition in this context is the Johnson Library. It allows for diverse perspectives on the Vietnam War, on poverty, and on racial tensions. The exhibition offers a look “behind the scenes” and is less geared towards the normative project of a “legacy” than to the discourse of ideological criticism typical of the Johnson era: history is the product of our perspectives and interpretations. The exhibit’s reading of Johnson as “tragic,” however, shields the president from overly critical scrutiny.

At this point, allow me to suggest a “caveat.” It certainly would not diminish the accomplishments of the American presidents if one of them were to admit that they, too, are fallible. This acknowledgment has obviously not yet entered the presidential libraries’ politics of memory. Political blunders, personal failures, and disastrous decisions quite simply do not exist here. Would Roosevelt’s star be any less lustrous if the exhibition let us know that his New Deal hardly managed to overcome the Great Depression? Would Kennedy’s legacy be lessened if the Bay of Pigs invasion were to receive more than a passing mention in one caption? It was important to Johnson that visitors to his library also learn about sorrow and failure. Why then does it omit the fact that he misled the American public during the escalation of the Vietnam War? And why shouldn’t visitors to College Station hear that George Bush stumbled over the issue of economic policy?

These blank spots cannot be attributed solely to the clout of the presidents’ families or other powerful groups. It is rather because the minute presidents are no longer in office, they undergo a remarkable transformation. They become something like “republican kings,” whose foremost duty is to represent the greatness of the nation, its history, and values. The exhibitions seem to follow the principle in English common law that “the king can do no wrong.” More than a mere whiff of republican royalism hovers above presidential libraries.

Memory

Presidential libraries are at once national archives, academic research centers, platforms for public discussion, and popular museums. They thus operate at the intersection of three different forms of historical memory: the official U.S. politics of memory, popular historical images, and the scholarly exploration of the past. As museums, presidential libraries have become sites of pilgrimage: the Johnson Library recorded over 200,000 visitors in 2003, followed by the Kennedy Library with 165,000 guests, while the Clinton Library in Little Rock, which opened in November of 2004, envisions a record 300,000 annual visitors. This suggests that “master narratives” are far from dead.

Presidential libraries not only present the biographies of individuals. Rather, their intellectual and cultural frame of reference is the imagined
community of the entire nation, including all races, classes, genders, and other groupings. The libraries rely on a proven inventory of symbols and interpretative patterns, and these possess considerable integrating power. The ideal American biography offers a great potential for identification, as do the universalistic concepts of liberty and equality. The narrative of ultimate triumph in the face of adversity appeals to the spirit of the American Dream, along with the republican virtues in the name of the legacy of great men. It is also typical of the liberal narrative of progress that underprivileged groups do not appear on the national radar screen until they have become the objects of successful political action: farmers and industrial workers under the New Deal, African Americans with the introduction of the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s, the disabled as beneficiaries of the Americans with Disabilities Act of the first Bush administration. These observations support John Bodnar’s thesis that the fabrication of collective memory has always coincided with an attempt to incorporate “vernacular cultures.” The Bush Library has shown that there are alternative approaches for a presidential library: in the spring of 2004 it presented a special exhibition entitled “We Grew Up in the Brazos Valley,” which illustrated the lives of twenty-two elderly African Americans from the area. The exhibit, part of the library’s African American Diversity Program, is evidence of how a group with a unique collective memory can partake of the presidential library’s symbolic capital without necessarily being co-opted into national master narrative.

In the current debate over who has primacy in the interpretation of American history, the presidential libraries seem to be steering a course of containment against the idea of “multiple histories.” If there is validity to Pierre Nora’s view that “memory is attached to the tangible: space, gesture, image, and object,” then presidential libraries offer a wealth of effective strategies for cultural mnemonics. Will these strategies succeed in countering the dissolution of a unified national history into a multitude of contending histories? From the perspective of a European outsider and historian, I would ask—with all due caution—whether there may be more room for the presidential libraries to open their biographical exhibitions to a more critical view, one that may embrace a variety of perspectives and give voice to the diverse needs for historical reassurance that co-exist within today’s fragmented society. Perhaps the exclusiveness of republican royalism can become a sheltering roof under which conflicting collective memories can be articulated. The presidential libraries do function as agencies of a national “collective memory,” and they seem to be doing well. And yet they may also be transforming into platforms for what David Glassberg calls “collected memory.” In this capacity, they could make another valuable contribution to the precarious cohesion of a culturally diverse society that is, after all, one nation.
Notes


2 On Tocqueville’s and other European social scientists’ views of America, see the recent study by Claus Offe, *Selbstbetrachtung aus der Ferne. Tocqueville, Weber und Adorno in den Vereinigten Staaten* (Frankfurt/Main, 2004), 15–58.

3 For this study, I visited these institutions in May 2004. For their kind support, I thank Christof Mauch and Astrid M. Eckert (GHI); Sam McClure and John Powers (National Archives, College Park); Mark Hunt and Herman Eberhardt (Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library); Deborah Leff and Frank Rigg (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library); Betty Sue Flowers and Sandor Cohen (Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library); Douglas Menarchik and Patricia Burchfield (George Bush Presidential Library); and David Whiddon (Washington, D.C.). Many thanks in particular to Andreas Daum (SUNY, Buffalo) for his friendly advice and encouragement.


20 Sanford Lakoff in “Liberalism in America” defines the American Dream as follows: “the ‘American Dream’ as it developed after the Civil War was increasingly not a reverie about establishing the New Jerusalem, despite occasional experiments with utopian communities, but a yearning for a better life in the here and now.”

21 Quoted from his farewell speech on his visit to Ireland in June 1963.

22 Paul Watzlawik, *Gebrauchsanweisung für Amerika* (Munich, 2003), 142.

23 In the exhibit, Bush is quoted as follows: “The adrenaline factor in politics is identical to the adrenaline factor in sports. The extra last throw of a horseshoe where you need a ringer. The time at the plate where either you produce or don’t. And there is a similar feeling in politics, on election eve, say, or facing a debating situation, or a crisis in legislation.”


27 Quoted in the exhibit’s section on Johnson’s Great Society program. The commentary corroborates Johnson’s point of view: “It is a concept whose roots reach deep into the American past.”


29 McDonald uses the term “mystical fraternity,” *American Presidency*, 467.


34 An exception is Roosevelt’s Ford, which is on display. The visitor is told that the car was a special model for drivers unable to use their legs.

35 As one text panel explains: “The beleaguered President, haunted by the accelerating cost of the war in suffering and national unity, but convinced that capitulation would lead to disaster, searches desperately for a viable way out. He can find none.”


37 On the role of the media in the aftermath of the assassination, see Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of the Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992).

38 This observation confirms John Bodnar’s assumption that tensions and fears caused by past events are constantly minimalized in the official regime of American memory. See John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992), 247.
The Oval Office in the Johnson Library is presented on a slightly smaller scale. The Roosevelt Library only shows the president’s desk in a reconstructed section of the Oval Office. Instead of reconstructing the Oval Office, the Bush Library has his offices at Camp David and on Air Force One.


On civil religion, see Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1–21; on the president’s ritual and symbolic tasks, see James MacGregor Burns, *Presidential Government* (Boston, 1965), 327–8; Burns compares the ceremonial dimension of the presidency with the court of Versailles.

See, for example, Dallek, *Hail to the Chief*, Chapter 1: “The Vision Thing.”


Robert Dallek remarks on how hard it is even for a professional historian to resist this spell: “The images are so powerful, so compelling—it’s hard even for me to be objective,” quoted in Paula Span, “Monumental Ambition,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, February 17, 2002, 29.


See Johnson’s speech at the dedication of his presidential library: University of Texas Press Release, May 22, 1971, Statement file, Box 300, LBJ Library.

This principle was mentioned in the discussion of the executive authority as it was proposed by the Federalist Papers in order to distinguish the American president from the English king. See McDonald, *American Presidency*, 199.


See Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1995), 296.
