

The Bully Pulpit on Display: How Presidential Libraries Present Presidential History

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ABSTRACT

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Scholars have portrayed presidential libraries and museums as either whitewashed and propagandist temples to presidents or highly valuable institutions of American democracy. However, the literature lacks a discussion of the curatorial process for creating the contested exhibits and the choices that were made in that process, leaving out a conversation of curatorial voice and authority in presidential libraries. The purpose of this study was to identify the curatorial choices made in presenting presidential history in presidential library and museum exhibitions. Qualitative data collected from curators at nine of the 13 presidential libraries operated by the National Archives and Records Association (NARA) were collected in this phenomenological study. Findings suggested that a major goal of presenting presidential history was to showcase the significance of the president, especially focused on accomplishments, relevancy, and legacy. Additionally, findings indicate that curatorial authority was kept to the individual libraries rather than NARA or the president's private foundation.

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Glossary of Terms

AOTUS – Archivist of the United States

LP – Office of Presidential Libraries, bureaucratic office that oversees library policies and regulations. Part of the NARA system.¹

NARA – National Archives and Records Association, executive agency that oversees all National Archives sites. Reports to the President rather than Congress.²

Civil Religion - The implicit religious values of a nation as showcased through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places related to the national history.³

Imperial Presidency – A presidency characterized by uncontrollable actions that exceed the constitutional limits of the executive branch.⁴

¹ The National Archives, "Office of Presidential Libraries," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/office.html>

² The National Archives, "What Is the National Archives and Records Administration?," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/about>

³ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005), 42

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger and Frank Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana, *The Imperial Presidency*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

*But even the President of the United States
Sometimes must have
To stand naked*
Bob Dylan, "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding"

The Office of the Presidential Libraries (LP) is a federal agency that oversees a system of archives and museums dedicated as repositories for presidential records that are operated by the National Archives and Records Association (NARA). Each president since Herbert Hoover has joined this system, often building his own library on the site of his family home or in his home town. Existing scholarship on this system of libraries was vast and often critical. Some scholars focused on the quality of the presidential history being presented as well as the information missing from the exhibit narrative. For instance, Benjamin Hufbauer asserted that presidential museums venerated a monolithic historical narrative, one that was a "whitewashed and glamorized portrait of each president" intended to uphold an image of an imperial presidency that supported an American civil religion with the president as a god-figure.⁵ In contrast, other scholars focused their attention on the presidential museums as important institutions where American democracy was honored through the history and public discussions of the executive branch.⁶ That viewpoint was substantiated by NARA in its official description of the libraries: "Presidential Libraries promote understanding of the presidency and the

⁵ Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, Culture America, Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2005, 140

⁶ Sharon K. Fawcett, "Presidential Libraries: A View from the Center," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 3 (2006), 30

American experience. We preserve and provide access to historical materials, support research, and create interactive programs and exhibits that educate and inspire.”⁷

However, existing scholarship on the presidential library and museum system does not include a discussion on the curatorial practices within the libraries. Curatorial authority, or “how a curator might exert authority over an institution, collections, objects, knowledge, and public understanding”, is often the driving force behind an exhibit’s purpose, presentation, and impact.⁸ If presidential libraries and museums determine the public’s understanding of the presidency and the American experience through their exhibitions, then it is critical to understand the intent and perspective of those who were empowered to create those exhibitions. The purpose of this study was to identify the curatorial choices made in presenting presidential history in presidential library and museum exhibitions and to add to the growing body of scholarship in this area.

⁷ National Archives, “Presidential Library History”

⁸ Sarah Longair, “Cultures of Curating: The Limits of Authority.” *Museum History Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015), 1

CHAPTER 2: Literature

*While money doesn't talk, it swears
Obscenity, who really cares
Propaganda, all is phony*
Bob Dylan, "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding"

This research was informed by four categories of literature: bias, propaganda, and whitewashed history in the federal presidential library system; American civil religion and how the presidential library system venerated the notion of an imperial president; the value of the presidential libraries as institutions of American history working to promote the executive branch; and curatorial voice or authority found within the broader museological scholarship.

The presidential library system was instituted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939 when he donated his papers and a portion of his Hyde Park, New York estate to NARA. The libraries are one-part public museum and one-part research archives and are typically located in the birthplace or hometown of the president. Roosevelt's intention was to create a system that preserved the work of the president for future generations.⁹ He declared the importance of this preservation at the opening of his Presidential Library and Museum in 1941:

To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must,

⁹ National Archives of the United States, "Presidential Library History," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/history.html>

above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgement in creating their own future.¹⁰

The eleven presidents who succeeded Roosevelt, as well as one president who preceded him, followed his lead in preservation of their presidency, resulting in the following libraries: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum; Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum; Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum and Boyhood Home; John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum; Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum; Gerald R. Ford Museum; Jimmy Carter Library and Museum; Ronald Reagan Presidential Library; George Bush Presidential Library & Museum; William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park; and George W Bush Presidential Center.¹¹

Signed into law by Dwight Eisenhower, the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 (PLA 1955) permitted presidents to build libraries from private funds and donate the building, their objects and artifacts, and their papers to the government. This deed of gift ensured that the administration and operations of each library would be managed by the federal government and funded by the federal budget. This legislation encouraged presidents to build facilities to house their historical legacy, but it did not require each president to participate.¹² It was not until 1978 that any president was required to give materials to the

¹⁰ National Archives of the United States, "Presidential Library History"

¹¹ The National Archives, "Presidential Libraries and Museums of the National Archives," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries>

¹² United States Congress, "Presidential Libraries Act of 1955," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws/1955-act.html>

NARA. Stemming from concern for transparency and public interest after the Watergate scandal, the Presidential Records Act of 1978 (PRA 1978) asserted that all documents and records generated by an administration were owned by the people of the United States, and by default, NARA.¹³ If a president chose not to create his own library and museum, his papers would be permanently housed in the main National Archives repository and accessible to the public. Soon after, the Federal Budgetary Committee realized that the budget for these libraries was becoming burdensome on federal resources and in 1986, a second Presidential Libraries Act (PLA 1986) was passed. PLA 1986 required each president to provide a 20% operations endowment for every 70,000 square feet of facilities deeded to NARA.¹⁴

According to Don Wilson, a former Archivist of the United States (AOTUS), the libraries had two main purposes: to archive the papers of the president and his advisors and make them publicly available, and to raise the “public consciousness of the burdens of presidential decisions” through the implementation and use of a public museum.¹⁵ Richard Cox rebutted this claim saying, “the libraries seem to have taken on a life of their own,

¹³ United States Congress. “Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978,” August 15, 2016. <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws/1978-act.html>

¹⁴ United States Congress. “Presidential Libraries Act of 1986,” August 15, 2016. <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws/1986-act.html>

¹⁵ Don W. Wilson, “Presidential Libraries: Developing to Maturity,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1991), 771

becoming immune to suggestions that the system may have outlived its usefulness."¹⁶ He continued:

If we are honest, we need to understand that the President, incumbents and former holders of this office often do not want the American people to know certain things, especially as found in their records. The Presidential Library system does not seem to be the ideal solution to such a reality, equivalent to having the fox guard the hen house.¹⁷

To scholars like Benjamin Hufbauer, the museums had a reputation for being one-sided, monolithic venerations of the individual presidents.¹⁸ Hufbauer argued that as the system grew, the libraries began to "attempt to elevate individual presidents into the civil religion of the United States."¹⁹ According to Hufbauer, as more libraries opened, the political interest of the presidents began to dominate how they interacted with their libraries. The libraries became shrines of an imperial presidency and akin to sanctuary sites of the civil religion of American patriotism, allowing for the repression of unflattering information and casting shadows over controversial historical material.²⁰

¹⁶ Richard J. Cox, "America's Pyramids: Presidents and Their Libraries," *Government Information Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2002), 47

¹⁷ Cox, 56

¹⁸ Benjamin Hufbauer, "Spotlights and Shadows: Presidents and Their Administrations in Presidential Museum Exhibits," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 3 (2006), 122

¹⁹ Hufbauer, "Spotlights and Shadows", 118

²⁰ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*

Hufbauer invoked the notion of a civil religion from social scholars in the United States in the 1960s. Robert Bellah argued that civil religion was a tool for understanding aspects of American history and life and a means of guarding against uncritical patriotism.²¹ Hufbauer explained the key elements of civil religion as including:

“saints,” such as Washington and Lincoln; sacred places, such as Mount Vernon and the Lincoln Memorial; sacred objects, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; and, finally, ritual practices, such as the Pledge of Allegiance, Fourth of July celebrations, and pilgrimages to sacred sites.²²

In a civil religion, these elements become invaluable patriotic aspects of a society where harsh criticism of their importance is an extreme social taboo. With a strong taboo in place, it was understandable to see how civil religion perpetuates unfailing patriotism—or veneration—of these sacred elements.²³ Additionally, as Marcela Cristi argued, civil religion could be used to spread patriotic propaganda to “force group identity and to legitimize an existing political order by injecting a transcendental dimension or a religious gloss on the justification.”²⁴

²¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005), 42

²² Hufbauer, "Spotlights and Shadows", 119

²³ Rhys H. Williams, "Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama's America," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013), 240-41

²⁴ Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion : The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics*, Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001, 3

Hufbauer argued that “presidential libraries often fit better with a reading of civil religion that sees it as having ties to state propaganda. Presidential libraries, for the most part, are temples that promote the best possible place for their subjects within civil religion while promoting the imperial president.”²⁵ The term imperial presidency was coined by Arthur Schlesinger with his 2004 book *The Imperial Presidency*. This book explained that with the evolution of the US Presidency and the growth of security, privacy, and presidential power—how it served the Constitution and harmed it—US Presidents became imperial figures, untouchable to the average citizen and the leader upon the throne.²⁶ To Hufbauer, the imperial president was the largest issue in presidential libraries. The libraries evolved from being about the president’s sometime hobbies and collectibles during Roosevelt’s time to being about the preeminence of the president himself; the libraries perpetuated this protected status by representing certain politically specific aspects of the president’s administration as imperial decisions that left little room for questioning whether the president acted in the best interest of the public and the nation. He stated, “What is at stake in this transformation of presidential commemoration is how presidencies and presidential authority are remembered, and how these constructed memories shape contemporary and future presidential authority.”²⁷

²⁵ Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows”, 120

²⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger and Frank Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana, *The Imperial Presidency*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

²⁷ Hufbauer, *Spotlights and Shadows*, 118

Hufbauer furthered this argument by asserting that the imperial presidency mirrors that of Roman emperors who would “have an exaggerated list of ‘things achieved’ engraved in stone, written with the help of their advisors. These ancient examples are prequels to the self-promoting museums in presidential libraries, which are largely curated by the former presidents themselves.”²⁸ Furthermore, the libraries “promote an expansive view of presidential power...It’s not a coincidence that the federal presidential library was invented by Franklin Roosevelt, identified by Schlesinger as the first modern ‘imperial president.’”²⁹ Hufbauer posited that the presidential library system had followed this pattern since its inception.

Hufbauer also asserted that presidential libraries fell into three categories:

... a group that features celebratory and even propagandistic displays, consisting mainly of the newer presidential libraries; a group that features some good attempts at public history but which still have a way to go before they meet the National Council on Public History guidelines for “historical truth”; and finally, one library that meets high standards for good public history that might become a model for some of the museums at other presidential libraries.³⁰

²⁸ Benjamin Hufbauer, “President Obama’s Library Will Be a Spin Temple Worthy of a Pharaoh,” *Politico*, May 1, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/obama-presidential-library-116695>

²⁹ Hufbauer, “President Obama’s Library”

³⁰ Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows”, 125

The library Hufbauer declared as “the library that meets high standards for good public history” was the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. He argued that it managed to correct its earlier installations perfectly to present a balanced, fact-based interpretation of the president.³¹ Hufbauer went on to recommend that the libraries employ the expertise of historians to follow the Truman Library’s lead to ensure more balanced displays. He explained that:

The problem with many of the museum exhibits at presidential libraries is that they often present a white-washed view of history, one that shows that the president in question was always acting in the best interests of the nation, and one in which scandals and missteps are repressed. This is especially true at the more recent presidential libraries. The newer presidential libraries rarely present a historical consensus in their exhibits, but rather are close to being political propaganda.³²

The argument of propaganda was echoed by Anthony Clark, a former Legislative Director in the House of Representatives, who, through his congressional work, was styled an expert on presidential libraries and NARA. He argued, as Hufbauer did, that presidential libraries were tax-payer-funded political propaganda that painted presidents in uncritical,

³¹ Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows”, 124

³² Benjamin Hufbauer, “Is There “Noncontroversial” History at Presidential Libraries?”, *The Public Historian* 28, no. 4 (2006), 85

noncontroversial, and untouchable images.³³ Clark argued that NARA was allocating funds to rewrite history, saying:

The government hosts biased, factually incorrect, legacy-polishing exhibits and partisan political events, and the taxpayers support them. And records languish, unprocessed and unavailable, as NARA allocates scarce resources to exhibits, education and public programs rather than to the core function of the libraries: records.³⁴

According to Clark, the American public was unknowingly paying for propaganda about modern political history. Additionally, H. Prentice Baptiste and Katie Townsend argued that the museums were applying political lenses to the curated exhibit spaces and the history they presented to the public. They defined *political* as “being any act based on or motivated by a partisan or self-serving objective.”³⁵ Their report found that presidential libraries were “perpetuating the myth that the presidents of the United States were perfect leaders.”³⁶ The detailed years’ worth of collected data showing a multitude of ways that

³³ Anthony Clark, *The Last Campaign: How Presidents Rewrite History, Run for Posterity & Enshrine Their Legacies*, North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

³⁴ Anthony Clark, “Presidential Libraries Are a Scam. Could Obama Change That?” *Politico*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/07/presidential-libraries-are-a-scam-could-obama-change-that-215109>.

³⁵ H. Prentice Baptiste and Katie Townsend, “Examining the Presidential Libraries: Students Find Biases and Recommend a Multicultural Perspective,” *Multicultural Education* 16, no. 1 (2008), 48

³⁶ Baptiste and Townsend, 48

presidential libraries and their umbrella agency were severely biased toward preserving the president's image rather than presenting fair information, saying that they were "riddled with omissions, with over emphasis, and with misdirection, all resulting from those who controlled the information."³⁷

In response to the critical portrayal of presidential libraries, some scholars came to the defense of the NARA system and argued that the libraries were vestiges of American democracy and vital pieces of American history. Sharon Fawcett is a prominent voice in this discourse where she aimed to put to rest contentious arguments like Hufbauer's, claiming that his multiple publications were aimed solely at arguing that the libraries' "primary function remains the transformation of presidential history into presidential myth for the general public."³⁸ While Hufbauer argued that the federal control over the libraries harbored a revisionist history, Fawcett countered that the libraries are far more independent.

More significantly, even after their transfer to the government, these libraries, while bound and frustrated by the requirements of bureaucracy for hiring and procurement, were otherwise left largely on their own. With little guidance from Washington, the libraries developed their exhibits and public programs, defined procedures for administration of their collections, and managed their relationship with their foundation.³⁹

³⁷ Baptiste and Townsend, 51

³⁸ Fawcett, 14

³⁹ Fawcett, 17

This independence meant that each library was removed from federal opinion makers, refuting claims by Hufbauer, Clark, and Cox that each institution was a political arm.

Further support of Fawcett's argument was found in the *Presidential Libraries: A GSA Handbook*, which states: "exhibits in Presidential Libraries will be consistent with the dignity of the presidency and will present historically accurate and balanced interpretations of the former President and major events."⁴⁰ The handbook was instituted nearly 50 years ago and well before the last two congressional acts appeared, but the language is quite clear; if the libraries heed this operations manual, the history they present would be factually based. Fawcett did clarify that the manual ceased to be "strictly enforced when funding for new exhibits shifted from the government to the foundations or other non-appropriated revenue sources."⁴¹ Once PLA 1986 was authorized, the outdated manual was largely abandoned allowing for each institution to approach their exhibits more independently.⁴²

In an article commissioned by NARA in 1991, Linda Fisher argued the value of the libraries, saying "Americans build monuments to remind us of, and to communicate to others, our political heritage. When the edifices are visibly situated, they become central democratic institutions."⁴³ Fisher continued by saying that the library's role was dependent

⁴⁰ *Presidential Libraries: A GSA Handbook*, General Services Administration, NARR P 1856.1, Washington D.C., December 20, 1968.

⁴¹ Fawcett, 18

⁴² Fawcett, 18

⁴³ Linda Fischer, "The Role and Function of Presidential Libraries," *National Archives and Records Association*, 1991, 6

upon “its particular locale, the size of its holdings, and the desires of the former president and his family, Library Director, and Presidential Foundation. As long as a library thoroughly satisfies its core mission, the institution... [can] serve as broad a clientele as possible, thereby obviating any criticism of elitism.”⁴⁴ Fisher’s article continued, “Ralph Bledsoe, Director of the Ronald Reagan Library, recognizes that a Presidential Library plays an official role as a local representative of the Federal government. As such, the library can become a political resource for the local community.”⁴⁵ Robert Norton Smith, former director of the Herbert Hoover Library, presented the same argument, saying “like the office they commemorate, presidential libraries are living institutions...they are not monuments to one person alone. Rather they are storehouses of information and classrooms for democratic instruction.”⁴⁶ From these arguments, it seemed that the libraries fulfilled an important aspect of American historical context by bringing history of the highest position in the nation to multiple locations around the country to reach and educate citizens.

Fawcett argued that the design of exhibits followed a rough timeline in that “the initial exhibit in each presidential library represents an important transition for the former president.”⁴⁷ She explained that the first exhibit was often created and installed before the

⁴⁴ Fisher, 14

⁴⁵ Fisher, 25

⁴⁶ Robert Norton Smith, "A Presidential Revival - How the Hoover Library Overcame a Mid-Life Crisis," *Prologue-Quarterly Of The National Archives* 21, no. 2 (1989), 116

⁴⁷ Fawcett, 30

museum was deeded to the government. Therefore, the design process, oversight, and funding of the first exhibit installation was done by the foundation. Thus,

That exhibit is in itself a historical artifact—representing how the former president views his life and his presidency. At the time these first exhibits are installed, there is little historical perspective to draw upon. The deep political division in this country plays out in the initial exhibit. As a result, the exhibits are more engaging to those who supported the president than to those who did not, those who felt disenfranchised, or those who were blithely unaware of the events and policies of the administration. These exhibits reveal strongly held views but not reasoned historical perspectives on what a president has or has not achieved.⁴⁸

The first exhibit was a natural portrayal of the president's public image given how short of a time frame the library had for developing it and how limited historical perspectives existed at the time of development.⁴⁹ NARA explained,

While the funding source of an exhibit plays a role in its interpretative theme, it is also worth noting that the most recent Presidential Libraries have exhibits that feature contemporary issues and topics. Exhibits in the Presidential Libraries evolve as the themes transition from contemporary to historical. Examples of more critical interpretations of Presidents include the Truman Library's exhibit on his decision to use the atomic bomb and the Nixon Library's recently renovated exhibit on

⁴⁸ Fawcett, 30

⁴⁹ The National Archives, "Frequently Asked Questions," August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/faqs.html>

Watergate. Where the Truman exhibit can rightfully be lauded today for its balanced content, a more recent Library may well receive similar praise when that Library reaches the age of the Truman Library and reflects the perspective that only time and more historical research can provide.⁵⁰

From these explanations, it appeared that the exhibits tracked an evolutionary path dependent on the age and historical context available.

While Fawcett, NARA, and Fisher explained the importance of the exhibits to their institutions, Jason Lantzer was the only scholar to directly address how exhibit spaces in the museums were created. He argued that because museums were places “where academic history openly clashes with popular history”⁵¹, presidential libraries faced a complicated task to present as fair a narrative as possible to any visitor that came through the door. Even without influence from NARA, these institutions faced an uphill battle to present any narrative. Where Hufbauer and Clark argued that revisionist history determined the rose-colored exhibitions in the libraries, Lantzer established the opposite. Lantzer argued that NARA was not in the business of rewriting history; they were simply working to preserve it with as much dignity as possible. They focused their attention on the proper care of the artifacts and records rather than the content surrounding them.⁵²

⁵⁰ National Archives, “FAQ”

⁵¹ Jason S. Lantzer, “The Public History of Presidential Libraries: How the Presidency Is Presented to the People,” *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* 6, no. 1 (2003), n.p.

⁵² Lantzer, n.p.

According to Lantzer, “the federal government had no input when it comes to exhibits. However, the National Archives does keep watch for ‘questionable’ exhibits and events...they try to identify potential problems or bias. The National Archives wants these very political museums to be as ‘apolitical’ as possible.”⁵³ Lantzer’s arguments seemed to point to the issue of curatorial authority—also known as curatorial voice—within the presidential libraries. If NARA reviewed the exhibits for “questionable” content only, then the curatorial authority laid somewhere else.

Alex Roland explained the phenomenon of a curatorial voice and authority in museums: “museum visitors hear many voices. The artifacts themselves speak with the greatest clarity and authority, carrying the burden of the exhibit. A curatorial voice emerges from labels, story lines, and even the selection of artifacts. The museum itself gives voice to its history and purpose.”⁵⁴ This curatorial voice is often associated with a sense of authority over the information; the curator imparts expert or *authorized* knowledge to the visitor through label text and narrative. Across the museum field, curatorship covers a vast array of duties. Perhaps most significant among them is preservation of collections and presentation of those collections to the public.⁵⁵ Sarah Longair explained that “an intimate knowledge and understanding of the institution’s collection is a fundamental component of curatorial authority. Object identification and documentation provided the building blocks

⁵³ Lantzer, n.p

⁵⁴ Alex Roland, "Voices in the Museum," *Technology and Culture* 39, no. 3 (1998), 483

⁵⁵ Longair, 3

on which to construct a curator's claims to expertise."⁵⁶ Furthermore, many curators hold their posts "for many decades—such length of service around a particular collection enabled them to amass a wealth of knowledge,"⁵⁷ further establishing their expertise. Roland extended this idea of expertise to the institution as well. Using the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum as an example, Roland explained that the prestige of the institution held as much power to inform the significance or authority as the objects or curated voices. "Putting the object on display in the most visited museum, within sight of the halls of Congress, burdens the exhibit still further. The NASM would be an ideal place if only it could insulate its exhibits from the symbolism of the place."⁵⁸

Whether individually or through institutional policy, a curator does not necessarily intend to lecture, manipulate, or even propagate through their exhibit design. Much of the impact of a curator's work depends on the person experiencing it. As Susan A. Crane noted, "museums are not supposed to lie to us; this act seems like a breach of faith. Assuming that our own memories are fallible, we rely on museums as well as on historians to get the past 'right' for us."⁵⁹ However, issues of misinterpreted authority do happen. Peter Bednar and Christine Welch explained that the content of a message was not given form until the person receiving the message gave it one.

⁵⁶ Longair, 3

⁵⁷ Longair, 3

⁵⁸ Roland, 483

⁵⁹ Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997), 51

In other words, there is no content before the message is given form, and efforts to find differences between form and content would become highly questionable, to the point of being futile. Form and content are always one 'package' – one cannot subsist independently of the other. Each combination of content and form is unique, in the sense that any change of form will also change the content. Recognition of a change of form by a human reader of the message must by definition conjure different associations from that person's past history – thus changing her interpretation of the message.⁶⁰

According to Bednar and Welch, the message meant nothing until the person reading it attributed meaning to it. Disagreements between curatorial voice and visitor interpretation do occur, but, considering Bednar and Welch's explanation of misinformation, it may boil down to a matter of lived experience and not necessarily intent.

Hufbauer suggested that entrusting historians to construct the narrative in the libraries would ensure a more balanced message, yet Roland argued that even historians were culprits of naiveté and hubris which led to a message without a strong enough spine to stand up for itself.⁶¹ Roland asserted that visitors were just as culpable in overwhelming the exhibit with their own voice, saying "their voices entered the museum from the streets and ultimately overwhelmed the curators, the museum, and finally the artifact itself."⁶² The

⁶⁰ Peter M. Bednar and Christine Welch, "Bias, Misinformation and the Paradox of Neutrality," *Informing Science* 11 (2008), 88

⁶¹ Roland, 486

⁶² Roland, 486

myriad of voices at play expressed their own expectations and interpretations into the exhibit. Both intent and impact of a message are important, as Longair argued: “a critical element in the study of curatorial authority is the need to test their public pronouncements — which themselves were designed to legitimize and establish their authoritative voice.”⁶³

Authors like Hufbauer, Clark, and Prentice and Townsend made strong cases for the issue of whitewashed, unbalanced, and propagandist history in presidential library exhibits. According to Hufbauer, all of the libraries fit into three categories, which seemed to indicate that all but one library was failing to present adequate history. This assertion also fit with what authors like Fawcett, Lantzer, Fisher, and the National Archives argued about the exhibits, namely that the exhibits evolved with the age of the president and his administration and became more balanced and fair the further removed from contemporary history they were. While these two bodies of literature—one led by Hufbauer, the other by Fawcett—seemed to agree on the type of exhibits found in the libraries, they diverged in most of their arguments. Fawcett maintained that the libraries were important pieces to the story of American democracy and the first generation public image exhibit was part of the president’s history itself. Hufbauer stated that the libraries became temples to imperial presidents and represented praise and homage to democratically elected officials—something that he believed was incongruent with American democracy.⁶⁴

⁶³ Longair, 5

⁶⁴ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*

What seemed to be missing from either of these bodies of literature was a discussion on the curatorial practices within the presidential libraries. Literature on curatorial voice and authority asserted that the expertise of the curatorial staff was instrumental in presenting the institution's story. Curators were steeped in the knowledge of the artifacts around them, which made them the authority on the story behind those artifacts.⁶⁵ It seemed that the message the curator chose to present in the exhibits they designed was at the crux of what Fawcett and Hufbauer argued, yet was missing from their scholarship.

⁶⁵ Roland, 483

CHAPTER 3: Study Design

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to identify the curatorial choices made in presenting presidential history in presidential library exhibitions. The study was designed to explore the following four guiding questions:

1. What are the goals and objectives for presenting presidential history?
2. What are the narrative concepts and themes for the curated exhibitions?
3. Who influences the content and narrative of the curation?
4. Does influence from NARA impact what history is presented in the exhibitions?

Exhibit goals and objectives are important to ascertain from participants in order to address many of the claims made by Hufbauer and Clark that asserted the libraries were intentionally presenting propaganda or whitewashed history. The first question was intended to identify if the library had a particular target audience when designing the core exhibit as well as what goals were driving the design of the exhibit. The second research question pointed to the same assertion of whitewashed history in the literature, but it was extended to identify how the curated story was presenting the president—chronologically, biographically, or in some other fashion—while focusing on the narrative themes of the exhibit.

Research questions three and four addressed curatorial authority and voice within the individual libraries. Both questions were designed to elicit information about which parties were involved in deciding what stories were told in the exhibits—family members, former administration staff, the president himself, or government officials—while also

seeking to find whether the president's political party influenced any content displayed, as Fawcett suggested it might. Additionally, the fourth question sought to find the level to which NARA determined content because the literature showed two disparate arguments about NARA's involvement in content creation.

Ultimately, these four questions were designed to identify what curatorial authority looks like while presenting presidential history within a federally operated space.

Research Design

To answer these questions, a phenomenological study was designed. A phenomenological design allowed for the exploration of the lived experience of curators designing and presenting presidential history within their individual museums. Subjects were asked to participate in one in-depth, semi-structured interview. The interview consisted of nine standard questions, each with one to four additional or follow-up questions [see Appendix B for interview guide]. These nine questions addressed the important aspects of curating the core narrative for the presidential museum and identifying the key influencers on the choices that were made in the curation process.

Sample Selection

Subjects for this study were chosen purposively. There are 25 presidential libraries in the continental United States, but not all of them are NARA institutions. For this study, NARA-operated sites were identified as participants due to the extent to which existing literature focused on the relationship between the federal government and the president's

private foundations in influencing the exhibit content. Therefore, libraries outside of the federal jurisdiction of NARA were not included. Additionally, only libraries that had current curated spaces were eligible. Therefore, this study focused on the 13 libraries under the umbrella of LP that had physical core exhibits installed [see Appendix A for full list].

The eligible sites were contacted through publicly available email to introduce the study and extend an offer for their participation. Interested parties were given additional information about the research protocol and consent forms assuring anonymity [see Appendix C], and were scheduled for interviews. Interview questions were not provided in full to subjects before the interview to reduce the possibility of participants providing prepared responses to questions. The goal was to have free-flowing conversations about the participants' work and the exhibit spaces free from prepared statements.

Data Collection & Analysis

Staff members who asked to participate in interviews were the current supervisory curators at each museum. In the instance that the library did not have a current supervisory curator on staff, the next closest staff position was substituted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone (ranging 30-60 minutes in length) in January and February of 2018. These interviews focused on the curators' personal experiences designing exhibits in their current library to avoid receiving answers that generalized about other libraries or the field as a whole. The conversation topics explored included tenure with NARA and experience as a curator, core exhibit narratives, exhibit funders, exhibit goals, and the people involved in making content choices.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed using traditional Microsoft applications such as Word, Excel, and Voice Recorder. To assess the findings, data were analyzed using emergent coding—or identifying patterns, themes, and differences throughout all responses to interview questions—for each major question as an inductive analysis of the qualitative data [see Appendix D for rubric]. Patterns and trends identified by repeated words, phrases, or sentiments became the majority of the codes used.

CHAPTER 4: Results and Discussion

*Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial
Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while
Bob Dylan, "Visions of Johanna"*

Description of Sample

Nine of the 13 federally operated presidential libraries participated in this study (see Appendix A for list). Eight of the participants were supervisory curators while one participant formerly held the supervisory curator role before a promotion. Five of the libraries were dedicated to Republican presidents and four were dedicated to Democrat presidents. The oldest participating institution was 56 years old and the youngest was 14 years old. Out of respect for participant privacy, quotations and associations will be anonymized throughout these findings.

Findings and Analysis

To understand the phenomenon of curating within presidential libraries, interview questions were designed to elicit responses from participants about their individual experiences within their current library. When discussing exhibits, only permanent core exhibitions/galleries were considered; temporary exhibitions were not included in this study. Three of the curators were not involved in the initial content creation of the current core exhibitions in their libraries. However, they agreed to speak of their experience and knowledge of the exhibit to the best of their ability.

Background Questions: How long have you been working in curation and within the NARA system?

To set the context of the curators' experience in the field, participants were asked how long they had worked in curation, how long they had been associated with NARA, and how long they had worked in their respective library. Of the nine participants, five answered that they had worked for more than 25 years in curation positions; the average amongst all nine participants was 22 years of curatorial practice. Four participants answered that they had been working within NARA for over 22 years; the average tenure within the NARA system amongst all participants was 19 years. Finally, when asked how many NARA institutions for which they had worked, four participants said they had always worked in the same library; two participants had worked in two or more NARA institutions; two participants had spent half of their careers in a NARA institution; and one participant had worked outside of the NARA system until joining their library three years prior to this study. These results appeared to indicate a strong foundation for curatorial expertise in the libraries.

Research Question 1: What are the goals and objectives for presenting presidential history?

This research question was intended to address the intention behind presidential library exhibits. Participants were asked about the specific goals for the core exhibit and whether it was designed for a specific target audience. When asked about the exhibit goals, three participants indicated that their permanent exhibits had a goal to represent only the president's time in office, three participants specified that the goal was to speak about the

full life of the president—“from cradle to grave”—throughout the exhibit, and two participants said that the goal was about representing the legacy of the president in the gallery. One participant was distinctly different and said they used two core exhibits to tell the story, one devoted to the presidency and the other focused on biography. For the presidency gallery, the library had two goals:

“We had two primary goals. The first one was to focus on the importance of decision making in the presidency. So we focused on the difficult decision that [the president] had to make and by extension that every president has to make. The second focus of that exhibit was that we wanted to make sure the theme was that there is no *one* storyline in history. There are people who disagree no matter what we put in the exhibit, people who disagree with that interpretation. So we consciously went through the exhibit and included components we call ‘dissenting views’.”

This was the only participant to mention using dissenting views as an intentional piece for the exhibit. This seemed to indicate that incorporating confrontational history was rare in the exhibitions. However, the other eight participants addressed their intention not to editorialize history and allow visitors to arrive at their own conclusions about the history:

“I think the goal in each case is to tell as complete a story as you can with the resources that you have. You don’t want to push people to an answer; that’s not our objective. You want people to reach conclusions on their own.”

“Since we opened, we have taken an even-handed look at the presidency. That is what we were dictated to do when we opened. [...] didn’t want a shrine to himself, he wanted everything open so that the American people, historians, scholars can see everything from his presidency and make their own decisions whether or not his presidency was a success or failure.”

This intention to keep away from historical conclusions appeared to indicate that the curatorial process wanted to stay clear of a dominant argument. It appeared that the curatorial process approached exhibits with a goal to avoid rewriting history in favor of presenting the history that was available.

The second part of the research question asked participants about their target audience for the exhibit. One participant said the exhibit was designed to attract supporters of the president. The remaining eight participants clarified that a very broad, general audience was the main target. They specified that this broad audience included school groups, young adults, college students, retirees, people who remembered the president in their lifetime, and “generally uninformed” tourists. Within these responses, seven participants specified that a large portion of their audience showed signs of not knowing or remembering the history of their president.

“I know that as the years go by there are fewer members of the audience who have a President [...] as part of their living memory. So I think, you know, back in the early 90s it was assumed that a lot of the audience actually might have remembered President [...], whereas nowadays there’s fewer parts of the population that do.”

These participants said that this reality required the library to revamp its content to attract a younger audience who were removed in years from the president. It seemed the longer a president had been out of office the more necessary it became to have a broadly accessible exhibit. The consensus toward a broad audience fit with the strong inclination for not editorializing history. This seemed to indicate that the libraries aimed to make their exhibits accessible to as many visitor groups as possible.

Research Questions 2: What are the narrative concepts and themes for the curated exhibitions?

The second research question addressed three main inquiries. Participants were asked about their core/primary exhibit and how recently it had been installed. They were asked to explain the narrative and concept of the core exhibit. And finally, they were asked

if there were elements of the president's history that they intentionally left out of the exhibit.

When asked about the age of their exhibit, three participants said their library had core exhibits dating back to the early 1990s, four participants' libraries had core exhibits dating to the early 2000s, and two participants' libraries had core exhibits dating to the mid-2010s. Of the nine participants, two specified that they were redesigning their core exhibit at that time. One participant said their library still featured the full original installation while two participants said that their library's core exhibit featured some sections from the original installation, but much of it had been refreshed. The other six participants said their library was on the second or third full installation.

Since only three libraries featured sections of their original installation, it seemed that enough time had elapsed for the majority of the libraries since their president left office to evolve their exhibit content, as Sharon Fawcett argued.⁶⁶ Interestingly, the three participants who said their library still featured original installation content were also among those that spoke about the need to make exhibits more accessible to younger visitors who did not necessarily know the histories of their presidents. This seemed to indicate that the evolution of the exhibits correlated to the evolution of the audiences, where the presidential history required more explanation the older it became.

Participants were asked to explain the overall narrative and concept of their core exhibits. Seven participants specified that they designed their exhibits to be a chronological biography of the president. An eighth participant said that the exhibit was a biographical

⁶⁶ Fawcett, 42

exhibit but not chronological, instead allowing visitors to jump around in the galleries at whim. The ninth core exhibit employed a different approach by focusing on the administration years of the president and was not designed to be biographical or chronological.

“Like other [libraries] I have been to, they’re taking the entire life of the president from childhood through the presidency and then the presidency is just one section in the exhibit. But for us, almost the entire exhibit is the [...] years of the [...] presidency.”

Three libraries said they utilized the president’s own voice—through recordings and primary source material—to have him tell his own story.

“Another strategy was to present people with an opportunity to hear, in President [...] own voice, him explain his own policies and actions.”

Six participants said they wanted to bring visitors back to the historical era of the president. Four of those participants said that their exhibit incorporated a fully recreated Oval Office to reflect that historical era. One participant said they built only half of the Oval Office into the exhibit, due to space limitations. Another participant said they intentionally avoided the Oval Office and instead rebuilt a post-presidency office space into the exhibit.

“We do not have an Oval Office installed and it’s going to stay that way. What we do have, which is kind of interesting, is the office he used in retirement that he maintained at [...] College. We have that recreated and we have all the original furnishings—books and everything—that he had there. I think that is a little more personal and tells a little bit more about the person rather than the president.”

Additionally, five libraries included gallery space and/or narrative space for the First Lady as a key actor in the story of the president and the White House. These results seemed to indicate that the whole story of the president, as a person as well as a politician, was an

important element in designing the exhibits. It appeared that there was a desire to immerse the visitor into experiencing the White House and the president's era to help set the environment for understanding the president's decisions.

Participants were asked if the exhibits had purposefully excluded any elements of the president's history. Five participants said no, three participants said yes, and one participant was somewhere in the middle. The explanations given for excluding history were: 1) curators chose to stay away from personal or private foibles of the president to focus on presidential history; and 2) the design team assumed that some history was general knowledge and unnecessary to include in the exhibit.

"Some controversial things [are] not on exhibit because the designers just figured that everybody knew that."

This finding appeared to indicate that presidential controversies lie on a spectrum and the library needed to cull lesser events to speak to larger issues. The libraries that avoided personal foibles, however, did so intentionally which suggested that arguments from Hufbauer and Clark on presenting the president in a favorable image had some supporting evidence. One participant had a unique answer to this question. Rather than omitting information to paint a more positive picture, their exhibit design missed the opportunity to explore the president's accomplishments in office more.

"It's just his whole story up through his presidency, which they don't tell very well. They still dodge some of the things that, you know... I think we're all humans and I think showing the flaws and showing the humanity of those people is really important. And in some places it's better than others, there are things they can do better here. He really was trying all kinds of stuff and [his successor] was able to give them more traction. It's a weird thing where people were complaining that [...] was doing too much or not enough—you know, what do you do then?"

This answer seemed to show that the library would like to frame the president more positively than history remembered him, placing it on one end of the spectrum. On the other end of the spectrum, one participant emerged as an exemplar:

“We didn’t shy away from the topic. We dealt with the subject but we didn’t deal with it with our own opinion. We had voices of people who were living at the time talking about what they felt about the decision to use the [...] and you hear all of this and see all of this in the exhibit, and then we simply provide the timeline of what happened and then we have a comment book there and let visitors voice their own opinions about whether his decision was the right one or not.”

This library chose to highlight controversial and uncomfortable history, and encouraged public conversation. Placing comment books and incorporating dissenting views into the gallery space allowed for the voice and message of the space to be affected by the viewer as well as the institution. This correlated to what Bednar and Welch argued about the interpretation of messages and how the receiver was the one who made the meaning out of the message.⁶⁷ This also supported Hufbauer’s argument that a handful of libraries had figured out how to present their history in balance.

Overall, there were three major themes and one minor theme found throughout the nine interviews: accomplishments, relevancy to today, situated within historical context, and legacy. Five participants used the word “accomplishments” frequently to describe their approach to content. Seven participants used the phrase “situating within historical context” or similar notions to describe their narrative. Six participants spoke about emphasizing the president’s “relevancy to today” for their overall concept. Two of the libraries declared that their exhibit was designed to speak to the legacy of the president.

⁶⁷ Bednar and Welch, 88

“How these accomplishments were monumental for his time and how those accomplishments passed by an old white guy in the 19--s are still relevant today and touch the lives of every American.”

“The general concept and narrative is to put people back into the 19--s era. So we have a series of immersive environments.”

“There’s so much major events of the presidency period in particular that I think we’re trying to underscore [...] relevance to today. So much of what he established, or his admin established, we’re still living with. There’s just all of the relevant things that we’re trying to make connections to today’s world.”

“It just goes chronologically all through his public service and all the different areas that he was a public servant. That’s the main driving force: a value of public service and being ethical and moral and doing the right thing.”

These themes seemed to coalesce and point to a broader idea of presenting the president to the public: significance. Accomplishments, relevancy, and legacy are words that reflect a value judgement related to the significance of a particular thing or person. This significance is then juxtaposed to the historical context of the president’s time and actions to further strengthen the importance of the significance. Each of the nine participants used at least one of these themes in their description of the core exhibit. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to assert that these exhibits are designed to present presidential significance.

Research Question 3: Who influences the content and narrative of the curation?

The third research question was addressed in three ways. Participants were asked about the content creation process for their exhibits, what parties were involved in the content process, and whether the president’s political affiliation influenced any of the process.

All of the libraries created an exhibit content committee to design their exhibits. All participants specified that they used an exhibit design firm for the design expertise but not

content. Content committee members included library directors, supervisory and assistant curators, and library archivists. Occasionally, other library staff members were involved such as a facilities manager. Eight participants said that their president's family was involved with the library in some form. However, only three participants said that family members worked on the content creation process. Six participants said that members of their foundation also sat on the committee. Three participants said that members of the president's cabinet or administration were involved in the content process, but did not necessarily drive the content.

“The chairman of the Foundation who was an aid to [the president], was consulted on every step of the process and even sat in on meetings and made his concerns known.”

“They [cabinet members] were certainly queried about it. They don't drive any of the content. There are a number of them that we reach out to for input, but aside from providing quotations and some videos, it's not a major part.”

Six participants clarified that they did not have cabinet or administration members involved in the process.

Three libraries said that the core exhibit involved the president in the design process. The other libraries specified that their president was not involved because he had passed away before the exhibit was created.

“When you have living presidents and living first ladies that changes the dynamic of the libraries and the way those stories are told completely because they are interested in how they're portrayed.”

“I think that the government is to be thanked for that in most cases in the libraries, especially for redesigns. If the government weren't there to step in and say, 'Ok, you got your first round to say what you wanted to say and now we're bringing in the historians and we're going to kind of tweak it a little bit and we have a better perspective now...' I think the redesigns have more of an opportunity to balance things out.”

This seemed to follow Fawcett's claim that presidential library exhibits have different evolutionary stages to them.⁶⁸ The first evolutionary stage occurred when the president was still around and was trying to maintain a public image for himself. Once the president had passed, and historians had advanced the body of research, the exhibit evolved to a more balanced display.

Additionally, five libraries specified that their refreshed exhibits were reviewed by historians. Though, one of these five libraries was an outlier, saying:

"We sometimes use historians. We try to move away from editorializing history because we have plenty of content already. If we want a quote from one of the documents in the collection downstairs, or a newspaper article, we use attribution. We don't need to go to historians for their two-cents on the topic."

It seemed that the established NARA archivists could substitute as historian or expert for smaller elements in the exhibit.

A major theme found in the exhibit goals question also appeared in the content design question: the desire not to editorialize history in the exhibit. It was most prevalent when participants were asked whether the president's political affiliation influenced the exhibit narrative. A resounding "no" from all nine participants was the answer.

"The process through the Archives staff, whether at the library or in Washington, is making every effort to not interpret but present the facts."

"One of the things that is very important to us as we develop anything for the museum is to make sure that it is balanced and accurate. So any content that's developed, we run it by professional historians to make sure that what we say is first of all correct and then to make sure that it is a balanced and accurate view of things."

"We're supposed to tell the history, not promote one party over another. That's a misconception a lot of people have, they consider, you know, a Republican president

⁶⁸ Fawcett, 30

so all you're going to be doing is telling the Republican politics. That's not true, not at all."

"You know, our goal is history, it's not legacy. That's the foundation's job to support presidential legacy and they get to pick and choose. We on the NARA side, our goal is accuracy of history."

They all explained that their libraries were federal agencies and as such were required to be nonpartisan. Each library clarified that political party was only present in the exhibit spaces to present facts about elections and events throughout the president's time in office.

Research Question 4: Does influence from NARA impact what history is presented in the exhibitions?

The fourth and final research question was addressed with six questions.

Participants were asked: what NARA funds; what the president's private foundation funds; how much involvement NARA has in overall operations of the museum; what portions of the facilities NARA does not control; who has the final authority to approve exhibit designs; and who were the largest funders for the museum.

Unanimously, the participants said that NARA only funded facilities, conservation, and general operational costs, including maintenance, custodial, archival, and curatorial staff.

"The primary influence they have is over the logistics of the physical aspects of the building—whether the cases meet certain requirements, the humidity, lighting, etc.—they don't have any impact in the way of content except for perhaps having to research for the content we want. As far as the content of the history that is displayed, they don't have any influence on that."

The foundations funded all other elements of public engagement including exhibits and public programming.

“Most of our education programs, almost all of our exhibits and a lot of our special events are funded by our foundation. In other words, if we didn’t have the support of our foundation we would basically be a custodial type place where people can come and do research and look at the collections. But we would be doing almost no outreach or public programs or exhibits without the help of our foundation.”

Three participants said that some parts of the property were owned solely by the foundation. These areas included event space, ticketing, and retail. One of these three participants explained that the PLA 1986 legislation enabled them to expand the foundation-owned facilities. This library took the opportunities afforded by the legislation further than the other libraries. The revenue from their foundation-owned spaces was earmarked to safeguard against a furlough of federal library staff in case of government shutdown, ensuring that the library could remain open year-round regardless of changes to the federal budget.

To further clarify where exhibit decisions were made, participants were asked about the final approval for their exhibits and who held that authority. All nine participants said that NARA had authority over conservation and security of objects to ensure that artifacts were protected, but they did not approve content. They clarified that this meant that NARA only reviewed exhibits for conservation and environment. According to all participants, the levels of approval through NARA included conservators, administrators in LP, and ultimately the AOTUS. Four participants said that the private foundation was asked for approval of the content because it was the sole funder of the exhibit, but its approval was

secondary to the library's director and curatorial staff. According to all nine participants, the director of the library approved the final design with the curatorial staff.

“There were some efforts in the past to move that decision making to Washington and then the libraries would just carry out what was approved and concepts that were developed back east. But it was determined that that was an unwieldy process and, I think, an inappropriate one, because if you're going to hire professionals to do these jobs and make these decisions, you should let the professionals do them.”

This suggested that each library was a separate entity under NARA and their curation process reflected that independence.

Summary of Findings

The three major themes found throughout the data involved curators: trying not to editorialize history; presenting the accomplishments, relevance, historical context, and legacy of the president; and keeping curatorial voice within the individual library. The findings seemed to support arguments from both sides of the literature. Hufbauer's argument that the libraries specifically focused on positive and praise-worthy history found some support in this study.⁶⁹ The findings indicate that the exhibits strongly focused on presenting the accomplishments of the president above all else. Furthermore, the language used to discuss the content and narrative of these exhibits—accomplishments, legacy, relevancy, and historical context—suggested that the *significance* of the individual president was the guiding goal. This was supported by the number of libraries that focused on the president's time in office rather than expanding on his personal history.

⁶⁹ Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*

Additionally, Fawcett's claim that the libraries were important to the history of American democracy because they present and represent the executive branch of the federal government also found support in these data.⁷⁰ The findings suggested that the exhibits did have an evolutionary track and that it was strongly dependent on the age of the library, the presence of a living president, and the amount of historical research that was available. Participants shared that the early installations of exhibits were created by the president himself or his foundation on his behest and appeared to be more focused on a positive image of the president. It was not until a certain amount of time had passed and more historical research had appeared that the exhibits were redesigned with a broader historical context, and became more balanced and fair.

Anthony Clark's assertion that funding models from the private foundations dictated the content⁷¹ was not significantly supported in these findings. The findings strongly suggested that the involvement of the foundations in any content decisions was subordinate to that of the museum's curatorial staff and archivists. The division of funding models seemed to separate content creation from financial support. While all exhibits were dependent on the foundation for funding, there was not significant evidence to suggest that the foundation determined what was displayed. The curators' partnerships with historians and expert archivists seemed to be the dominate method for keeping content consistent, fair, and balanced. It appeared as if the foundation funding is simply funding.

⁷⁰ Fawcett, 31

⁷¹ Clark, "Presidential Libraries Are A Scam"

However, many participants spoke about the connections between the foundations and exhibits and how it had occasionally hindered the production of their exhibits. One participating library was working toward redesigning the core exhibit for the better part of 25 years because the foundation was not able to provide adequate funding for the project. This seemed to suggest that, while the foundation did not determine content, it still played a major role in whether content was displayed at all. Likewise, while Hufbauer, Clark, and Prentice and Thompson argued that the libraries presented whitewashed history, the findings suggest otherwise. Only two libraries said that they intentionally left some history out of their exhibit, saying that they made conscious decisions to avoid the president's private life in favor of presidential accomplishments. These themes seemed to coalesce and suggest that presidential libraries were not inherently propaganda institutions, and while some eras of the museum's evolution might fall into that category, in the long run they were intended to be removed from historical journalism.

Finally, the data seemed to suggest that curatorial voice in presidential libraries was kept to the individual library rather than the broader NARA system. The director and curatorial staff of each library held the final authority to approve exhibit content. The review process included several people in NARA and occasionally the foundation, but the library remained the authority on exhibit installation. Additionally, some libraries used primary sources and recordings of the president in the exhibit narrative, which suggested that the voice of the exhibit was primarily of the president himself. Additionally, by passing the content through the eyes of historians, archivists, curators, and the president himself (where available) worked to keep the authority or voice in-house; the libraries did not appear to include voices outside of this small group of experts and professionals in content

decisions. One outlier to this pattern showed a direct intention to include dissenting views and comments from visitors within the exhibit. However, the initial content was still designed and curated by the small team of experts, suggesting that the curators still had authority over the content displayed.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the curatorial choices made in presenting presidential history in presidential library and museum exhibitions. Research on presidential libraries lacked a conversation about the curatorial process and choices made when presenting presidential history. Existing literature focused on either the issues of incomplete or whitewashed history in the exhibits or the importance of the presidential history in these institutions to the broader historical landscape of America.

Findings from interviews suggested that presidential exhibits were not intentionally one-sided. Rather, the curatorial committees—comprising members of presidential foundations, NARA staff, library and archive staff, and outside design firms—passed their content through many levels of review to ensure a non-editorialized narrative. Libraries reported a strong theme of focusing on accomplishments, relevancy, historical context, and legacy within their exhibit spaces, indicating that *significance* of the president is the dominant content goal. Additionally, the findings indicated that the curatorial voice in presidential libraries was centralized within the individual libraries. Neither the private foundations nor NARA had strong influences on the content choices.

Furthermore, once the exhibits had evolved from their first installation, the libraries worked to incorporate as many voices as possible in the design process, including allowing the presidents to tell their own stories through their own recordings and primary sources. This seemed to indicate that curatorial voice was dependent on the extent of the president's involvement and the age of the relevant history. By encouraging historian input and finding ways to incorporate visitor commentary into the narrative, like incorporating

dissenting views or spaces for visitors to leave their own conclusions in the exhibits, presidential libraries could embrace a communal voice in their exhibits.

The sample size of this study limits its ability to be generalized out to the broader library or archival system in the United States, including other National Archives institutions. However, though the presidential libraries and museums that fall outside of the NARA system may have different funding relationships than the NARA sites, the findings from the research questions focused on content, narrative, and curatorial process are consistent enough to suggest similar themes in all 25 presidential libraries.

While this study addressed the gap in the literature around curatorial choices in presidential library and museums, additional research would strengthen it. For instance, including the four remaining NARA presidential libraries and museums in a study could provide a more conclusive understanding of the issue. Furthermore, some of the major interview questions could have been structured differently to elicit more depth of responses, especially in regards to the involvement of those who influenced exhibit content. Additionally, further research regarding the design and interpretive content in the exhibits as well as a document analysis of the exhibit content as installed would complement this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Presidential Libraries List

President	Library Name	Location	Year Opened	Study Participant
31	Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum	West Branch, IA	1962	X
32	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum	Hyde Park, NY	1941	
33	Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum	Independence, MO	1957	X
34	Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum and Boyhood Home	Abilene, KS	1962, joined NARA 1966	X
35	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum	Boston, MA	1979	X
36	Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum	Austin, TX	1971	X
37	Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum	Yorba Linda, CA	1990, joined NARA 2007	
38	Gerald R. Ford Museum	Grand Rapids, MI	1981	X
39	Jimmy Carter Library and Museum	Atlanta, GA	1986	
40	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library	Simi Valley, CA	1991	X
41	George Bush Presidential Library & Museum	College Station, TX	1997	X
42	William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park	Little Rock, AR	2004	X
43	George W Bush Presidential Center	Dallas, TX	2013	

Appendix B – Interview Guide

Interview Script

Project: *The Bully Pulpit on Display: How Presidential Libraries Present Presidential History*

Consent Script

Thank you for participating in this study. I am asking you to participate in an interview that is part of a research study being conducted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Museology Master of Arts at University of Washington. The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify the curatorial choices in presenting presidential history in Presidential Library exhibitions. This study is grounded in the following questions:

1. What are the goals and objectives for presenting presidential history?
2. What are the narrative concepts and themes for the curated exhibitions?
3. Who influences the content and narrative of the curation?
4. Does influence from NARA impact what history is presented in the exhibitions?

This interview will be approximately 45 minutes, with 9 major questions. Your participation is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time without any penalty. I am digitally recording this interview, but only I will listen to the recording. Interview responses will be anonymized in the written report, and while I may use your quotes, they will not be attributed to you.

If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me via e-mail or phone. Before we get started, do you have any questions?

Interview Script

Please keep in mind throughout this interview that I am primarily interested in your personal experiences as a practitioner in presenting presidential history within this specific library.

1. How long have you been working in curation?
 - a. How long have you been with this library?
 - b. Have you always worked in this current capacity?
 - c. Have you worked in any other capacity for the National Archives?

What are the goals and objectives for presenting presidential history?

2. What were the goals for the exhibition?
 - a. Possible follow up: *What objectives were set to reach those goals?*
 - b. Who is the target audience for this exhibition?
 - c. Possible follow up: *Who wanted to target that audience?*
 - d. Possible follow up: *Was the curated space designed specifically to attract that audience?*

What are the narrative concepts and themes for the curated exhibitions?

3. What is the primary or core exhibition in this library?
 - a. How recently was this exhibition installed or refreshed?
4. What is the concept for the exhibition?
 - a. Possible follow up: *Was there more than one concept that influenced the exhibition?*
 - b. What is the overall narrative of the exhibition?
 - c. Possible follow up: *are there multiple narratives present in the exhibit?*
5. What pieces of the president's history were purposefully not included in the curated space?
 - a. Possible follow up: *What influenced the decision to not include those pieces?*
 - b. Possible follow up: *Were these omissions included in previous iterations?*

Who influences the content and narrative of the curation?

6. What is the content creation process for exhibitions?
 - a. Is there a content committee for deciding exhibitions?
 - b. Possible follow up: *Who sits on the content committee?*
 - c. To what extent did the president have a say in the curated elements?
 - d. What about his Cabinet/Administration members?
 - e. Were any family members involved?
 - f. Possible follow up: *Are there other members of the board, leadership, or NARA who had a say in the curation?*

7. To what extent did the president's political affiliation influence the narrative of the exhibition?
 - a. Possible follow up: *Was this intentional?*

Does influence from NARA impact what history is presented in the exhibitions?

8. How much involvement does NARA have in the overall operations of the library?
 - a. Are there portions of this library that are operated outside of NARA?
 - b. What is the funding relationship between this library and NARA?
 - c. Outside of NARA, who are the largest funders and donors to the library?
9. Who has the final approval authority for the curated spaces?
 - a. Does the final approval ever change hands?

Appendix C – Participant Consent Form

The Bully Pulpit on Display: How Presidential Libraries Present Presidential History

Becky Forsberg, University of Washington Museology Master's Thesis Study

Research Participant Consent Form

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that participation involves one 60-75 minute interview focused on personal experience as a practitioner in presenting presidential history in National Archives libraries.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a Master's thesis published through ProQuest by the University of Washington.

I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a private cloud-based server accessed only by the researcher, Becky Forsberg, until completion of her Master's degree in June 2018.

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained through the completion of this project in June 2018.

I understand that under freedom of information I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Names and contact details of researchers:

Researcher

Becky Forsberg
University of WA Museology Student
Museology
forsbr@uw.edu
425.770.8987

Academic Advisor

Wilson O'Donnell
University of WA Associate Director of
wilsonod@uw.edu
206-543-4642

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix D – Data Coding Rubric

RQ 1: What are the goals and objectives for presenting presidential history?					
What were the goals for the exhibition?	Legacy - 2	Not legacy - 1	Time in office only- 3	Full life story - 4	
Who was the target audience?	General/broad - 8	Supporters - 1			
RQ 2: What are the narrative concepts and themes in this library?					
What is the primary/core exhibit in this library?	biographical - 8	chronological - 7			
How recently was it refreshed/installed?	Since 1990 - 3	Since 2000 - 4	Since 2010 - 2	Currently being redesigned - 2	
What is the concept/narrative for the exhibit?	accomplishments - 6 (1 aiming to)	first lady - 5	In own voice - 3	Oval office - 4	Other office - 2
	tech - 5	public service - 1			
What pieces of the president's history were purposefully not included in the curated space?	None - 5	Personal follies - 2	Space limitations - 4	Not enough accomplishments - 1	Designers thought it was general knowledge - 2
RQ 3: Who influences the content and narrative of the curation?					
What is the content creation process for exhibitions?	Design firm - 9	Inspired by collections - 8	Sometimes foundation asks - 1	organize content committee - 9	
Who is involved?	Foundation - 6	Archivists - 9	Director - 9	Curators - 9	President - 4
	Family members on content - 3	Family members not on content - 5	No family - 1	Historians - 6	Cabinet members - 3

To what extent did the president's political affiliation influence the narrative of the exhibition?	None - 9	Not editorialize - 8	Government facility - 7		
RQ 4: Does influence from NARA impact what history is presented in the exhibitions?					
How much involvement does NARA have in overall library operations?	custodial/maintenance - 9	object regulations and policy - 9	no day to day - 5		
Who has final approval authority?	Director - 9	NARA conservators - 9	Foundation - 3		
Are there portions of the facility operated outside of NARA?	Yes - 3	event space - 3	admissions/retail - 3		
What does NARA fund?	facilities	conservation	archival	contract staff	
What does the foundation fund?	exhibits - 9	programs - 9	ticketing - 2	retail - 3	furlough library - 1
Who are the largest funders?	Comes from foundation - 9	Don't know - 7			
BQ 1: How long have you worked in curation and within the NARA system?					
How long have you been working in curation?	30+ - 3	25+ - 2	15+ - 2	10 and under - 2	
How long have you been with this library?	30+ - 1	20+ - 1	10+ - 4	Under 10 - 3	
Have you always worked	registrar - 3	exhibits - 3	collections - 1		

in this current capacity?					
Have you worked in any other capacity for the National Archives?	Different library - 2	National Archives main building - 1	outside NARA - 3	No - 3	