

Testimony of Professor Martha Joynt Kumar
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Infrastructure and the House Committee on Oversight and Government
Reform on “Presidential Libraries: Their Mission and Future Direction”

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Chairman Mica, Chairman Issa, Ranking Members Rahall and Elijah Cummings, and members of the committees. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss presidential libraries and their importance to what students know about a crucial part of American history, what a substantial group of interested citizens can find out about their presidents, how scholars learn about our institutions of government, and people coming into executive office get an accurate portrait of what happened in particular circumstances in earlier administrations.

When President Franklin Roosevelt provided for a library with the materials from his career, he did something no president had previously done. Prior to that point, the disposition and condition of presidential papers was at the whim of relatives who sometimes gave papers as gifts and even burned them, inadequate storage conditions that ruined many papers, and a host of problems that resulted in only a portion of a president’s papers preserved and available for research. If they did exist, a president’s papers were rarely in one place. President Roosevelt sought to break that pattern by bringing together all of his papers from his earlier government positions and campaigns, and then making them available for public use. On December 10, 1938, he announced the creation of a library and his purpose in doing so. “Because these papers relate to so many periods and activities which are not connected with my service in the Federal Government, I do not wish to break them up [among the various institutions where he served] ... In other words, it is my desire that they be kept as a whole and intact in their original condition, available to scholars of the future in one definite locality.”¹ Having papers from throughout a president’s life provided students as well as scholars with a full view that we had not previously seen of a president, his career, and of the presidency. With his

successors following the record-keeping practices observed by President Roosevelt and with federal legislation governing control and maintenance of the papers, we now have an important portrait of our history that benefits students, scholars, and government officials alike.

As preparation for my testimony, I wrote political scientists who specialize in the presidency and asked them how their students use presidential libraries and, in their work as presidency scholars, what difference presidential libraries make to their research. The responses came from all over the country, and even Canada, with a uniform refrain of how important presidential libraries have become for those of us who examine executive leadership as well as those studying individual presidents. My informal survey established several points about the use and importance of presidential libraries to students and scholars alike.

1. Presidential Libraries Are a National and Regional Resource for Those Studying the Operations of Government and Individual Presidents.

Professor Brandon Rottinghaus of the University of Houston spoke of his reason for making presidential libraries a key resource for all of his research projects on the presidency. “The libraries are invaluable because they hold history in the moment, where secondary sources may misremember or mischaracterize events or trends.”² For Professor Kathryn Tenpas of the University of Pennsylvania, “there simply is no substitute for the libraries – the primary sources – memoranda, correspondence, polling data – shed enormous light on an institution whose work remains largely shrouded in secrecy, particularly in the midst of an administration.”³ Presidential libraries are important to students and to government officials for similar reasons.

Students at all levels benefit from library visits. Whether they are university students or ones in high school and elementary school, trips encourage young people to understand government and the history of our presidents. Teaching students is part of what presidential libraries do every day. They bring history to life and remove the intermediaries and the filters.

Learning about presidential decisions. Having the libraries located in nine states and all four basic regions of the country has brought the presidency to the public. The libraries have become a valuable part of many undergraduate and

graduate programs and allowed students to open a window on the presidency without traveling to Washington. With the presidential libraries located so broadly, students nationwide can afford to travel to one or more of them and have rich experiences. For example, Professor Randall Adkins at the University of Omaha takes his students to the Harry S. Truman Library where they take part in a decision-making exercise.⁴ He takes advantage of the library's civic education program known as the White House Decision Center. The library staff created a decision-making simulation that utilizes formerly classified documents dealing with real-life events and choices that President Truman made. Among the decisions his students have worked with are the Berlin Airlift and the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Students serve as "advisers" who consider what strategies to recommend to the "president" and then present them to him or her. After the president selects his course of action, the group develops a statement to give to the press.⁵ The ensuing press conference has students playing reporters as well as the president. "Adkins then has his students write research papers on decisions made during the Truman Administration using files that include oral histories and photos as well as documents. "It is, by far, one of the best active learning experiences that I have seen," said Professor Adkins.

Students learn through the archival work of faculty. In many instances, students benefit from presidential libraries through the research work of their faculty. Professors often provide students with the raw data they are working with on their own research projects. Almost all respondents to my request for information on how professors make use of presidential libraries mentioned how they utilize materials they gather for their own work for the benefit for their students. Professor Terry Sullivan of the University of North Carolina, for example, who is writing about President Lyndon Johnson's bargaining practices with Congress, uses the president's tape recordings in his courses on the presidency and presidential leadership. These tapes are an important tool as students get to hear what it is a president says when he is bargaining with members of Congress, not what people might think he said. Students can hear President Johnson talk with a key opponent of civil rights legislation, Senator Richard Russell.

Scholars use library materials as a basis for their published work.

Scholars depend on presidential libraries as a key resource for their own writing. The presidency section of the American Political Science Association has an annual award for the best book on the presidency. In reviewing the winners for the twenty years the prize has been awarded, at least 75% of the books drew heavily on presidential library materials. The winning books cover a broad range of subjects including presidential leadership, decision making, and the actions of individual presidents. Their titles point to the variety of subjects they explored through using library documents. Here are a few of them: *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance* by David Lewis; *The Presidency and Women: Promise, Performance, and Illusion* by Janet Martin; *Jimmy Carter as President* by Erwin Hargrove; and *Managing the Presidents Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy Formation* by Andrew Rudalevige. Library materials were important to them all.

Presidential libraries are a resource for those in government. Students and scholars are not the only beneficiaries of the materials in presidential libraries. Presidential libraries are an important resource for those coming into office as well as officials who need information on past government actions. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States [The 9/11 Commission] made heavy use of presidential library materials from earlier administrations in order to discover how events developed and earlier situations were handled. In recent Supreme Court nomination hearings, the Senate Judiciary Committee staff reviewed presidential library files to see what actions and recommendations John Roberts and Elena Kagan had in their service in the Reagan and Clinton White Houses. White House staffs in all recent administrations have drawn on actions taken by their predecessors by calling up materials from presidential libraries.

Archivists are a crucial aspect of the presidential library experiences.

With millions of records in each library, sifting through for relevant materials is a challenge for researchers. Library archivists serve as the indispensable element linking researchers with pertinent documents. Library archivists serve as facilitators making students visits successful ones. All researchers benefit from the

expertise of the archivists, professors in my sample reported. "The archivists at each facility are among the country's leading experts on 'their' president," commented Professor Rebecca Dean of the University of Texas at Arlington.⁶ "Without their assistance, the resulting research would have been less well-informed, less interesting, and ultimately less valuable in the acquisition of new knowledge on presidents." In my experience as well, archivists made my one or two week trips to libraries to explore White House communications materials productive ones. Before going to the libraries, I worked with an archivist specializing in White House communications to make the most of my time there.

2. Presidential Libraries Are Important to What We Know about the Presidency as an Institution and about Individual Presidents. Materials in the library allow us to test the common assumptions we have of how the presidency operates and what particular presidents did while in office. The President's Daily Diary and presidential tape recordings are examples of valuable resources cited by presidency scholars as key resources for them in their work.

The President's Daily Diary as a resource. The President's Daily Diary is an important tool available at the libraries to test assumptions relating to how presidents spend their time. Professor Janet Martin of Bowdoin College in Maine noted its importance as a student resource. "Access to the presidential daily diaries has been wonderful in ferreting out who actually sees the president, including Cabinet secretaries."⁷ The Daily Diary, many of which are available online, track the minute-by-minute movements of a president from one room to another. The Diaries record who is in meetings and when they come and go. Through such careful tracking, we know who was with a president when he was considering particular policies and we have the documentary records preserved as well. By bringing the two types of materials together, we can get a solid portrait of the environment when he was considering issues and responses to events.

Professor Martin and many of our colleagues wrote of the benefit of having presidential materials online. For Martin, digital archival material means having oral history interviews and the Daily Diary online. Professor Graham Dodds of Concordia College in Montreal commented that he appreciates that "some of the

libraries' archival materials are available online...such that I can do some good research without having to physically travel to the libraries.”⁸

Another presidency scholar pointed out that the Daily Diaries are useful in testing common wisdom about presidents and the presidency. Professor Sullivan said that popular wisdom can be called into question with evidence provided by materials in the library. For example, he tested the idea that President Reagan had relatively short work days by comparing the length of the work day of several recent presidents. It came out the President Reagan worked a similar workday to Presidents Johnson and Nixon and “a considerably longer work day than President Kennedy or President Eisenhower.”⁹

Tape recordings and phone calls. Other primary materials that are important in understanding a president and his times are the tape recordings many presidents made of phone calls and meetings they had. A president's conversation with members of Congress, interest groups, Cabinet secretaries provide a window on the chief executive's relationships and how he conducted business. President Johnson's phone conversations give listeners a good sense of presidential persuasion and of the commitment he had to press for his legislative initiatives he wanted Congress to adopt, such as the civil rights bill of 1964, voting rights, and Medicare. Audio recordings of meetings and documents from the Cuban missile crisis provide a fine example of how a leader makes important decisions.

3. Cooperative Ventures as a Model for Libraries in the Future. There are many ways in which the presidential libraries can work together with those studying presidential actions, White House organization, and the passage of events during a chief executive's time in office. In some cases there are groups beyond the library foundations that provide funds for researchers to travel to one or more libraries. The White House Historical Association, for example, has provided travel support to several scholars visiting the libraries to research aspects of the White House, its organization, particular presidencies, and White House life. In other cases, there are ventures where scholars can work with presidential libraries to enhance the library collections.

An example of a fruitful cooperative venture between scholars and the presidential libraries is the White House Interview Program. Funded by The Pew

Charitable Trusts in 1999-2001 and developed by presidency scholars in the political science community for officials coming into the White House in 2001, the program is built around interviews with former White House officials in seven offices important to a good start of an administration. The White House offices were Chief of Staff, Staff Secretary, Press Office, Office of Communications, Presidential Personnel, Office of Management and Administration, and the Office of White House Counsel. The interviews with officials heading those offices and serving as deputies from the Nixon Administration through the Clinton one formed the basis of essays scholars wrote for the team coming into the White House in 2001 and 2009. The interviews are housed at the individual libraries with many of them are available online. I worked with Sharon Fawcett and the Office of Presidential Libraries to develop a deed of gift that would provide for the interviews to be placed in the libraries associated with the presidents the staff people worked for and made available under rules acceptable to the interviewees and the libraries. The project demonstrates that what is good for scholars can also be good for those coming into the government and for presidential libraries. Altogether, presidential libraries have become an important source of information for students, scholars, and government officials. There are many ways to insure they will remain as valuable to so many communities.

¹ President Franklin Roosevelt, press conference, December 10, 1938.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15582&st=presidential+papers&st1=>

² Email message from Professor Brandon Rottinghaus, Department of Political Science, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, February 1, 2011.

³ Email message from Professor Kathryn Tenpas, University of Pennsylvania, Washington Program, Washington, DC, February 9, 2011.

⁴ Email message from Professor Adkins, Department of Political Science, University of Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, January 28, 2011.

⁵ Harry S. Truman Library, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whdc/>

⁶ Email message from Professor Rebecca Dean, Department of Political Science, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, January 26, 2011.

⁷ Email message from Professor Janet Martin, Department of Government, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, January 26, 2011.

⁸ Email message from Professor Graham Dodds, Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, January 27, 2011.

⁹ Email message from Professor Terry Sullivan, Department of Political Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, January 26, 2011.