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Jodi Kanter. *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. 198 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-3520-6.

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Farmer on Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush

Presidential libraries are odd institutions. They house the presidential archives, where federal employees work to preserve, protect, and serve to researchers both the most sensitive and most mundane documents. An important part of the executive branch, they prove that in the United States, the government is transparent and, with a few exceptions, the papers of the president belong to the people. At the same time, the same federal workers oversee the presidential museum, with exhibits shaped and often financed by a private presidential foundation. These foundations are often populated by White House employees, the president's family, and loyal supporters whose unstated, but understandable, goal is to create a compelling, largely positive portrait of their former boss, loved one, or friend. Sometimes these missions align, but often they do not—a fact I know all too well. For five years, I served as the Nixon Presidential Library's first education specialist. There I worked with Timothy Naf-tali on the Watergate gallery, the subject of first chapter of Jodi Kanter's newest work, *Presidential Library as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush*.

Kanter's work adds to an extremely small but telling scholarship on these curious private-public partnerships. While presidential libraries have been the subject of some excellent articles and book chapters, there are only two other full manuscripts: Benjamin Hufbauer's classic

Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory (2006) and Anthony Clark's more recent *The Last Campaign: How Presidents Rewrite History, Run for Posterity, and Enshrine Their Legacies* (2015). As their titles imply, both of these assessments of the presidential library system are rather critical. Kanter comes to similar conclusion, but through a very different lens. Where Hufbauer and Clark analyze the libraries from a historical perspective, as an associate professor in theater, Kanter combines museum and theatrical theory to evaluate the presidential museum performance. In keeping with this theme, the author examines three different types of scripts found within the museums: historical, representational, and cultural. Similarly, the book is divided into three parts. In part 1, Kanter examines the funding of the museums and their spatial organizations and insightfully concludes that presidential libraries need to clearly communicate which portions of the museum are funded by the foundation and which are funded by the government (p. 10). The second, and strongest, section explores the different aspects of "American character" embodied in the life story, postpresidential accomplishments, legacy, and design of each individual library and thereby each individual president. In the third and final part, Kanter offers insight on how to improve and diversify the museum experience.

At times, *Presidential Library as Performance* reads

like a travelogue. This is both a strength and a weakness. In describing the exhibits, some of which have since been removed, Kanter necessarily acts as both guide and reviewer. This is engaging, but personal. Guests experiences can vary greatly, especially when history and memory collide. However, as Kanter correctly notes, the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), which administers the presidential library system, has conducted very few visitor surveys to serve as evidence for more thorough conclusions.

Though admittedly biased, I also believe Kanter overestimates the ability of library directors to implement

their own agenda. They often face enormous pushback from NARA leadership. The struggle between Naftali and his supervisors at the Nixon Library is far more interesting than the fight between Naftali and the Nixon Foundation. The Foundation's positions were mostly predictable. They respected the former president and wanted to present him in the best possible light. The reaction of NARA's leadership, which often positioned itself as a mediator between the Foundation's interest and that of the Nixon Library staff, was far more unpredictable. Although Clark comes close, that story has yet to be fully written.

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