

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

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When the RFC failed to get industry restarted by the fall of 1932, unemployment and bank failures rose, while the government's adoption of what were seen as inflationary measures led foreign investors to fear that the United States would soon abandon the gold standard as Britain and other nations had done. Those, particularly the French, who had gold in American banks, began to make heavy withdrawals. Hoover, believing that maintenance of the gold standard would be essential to restore international trade, resisted the pressure for devaluation but could not stop the runs. Banks weakened by heavy withdrawals were crippled, and a new surge of failures hit during the interregnum between the presidential election and Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933. Any confidence created by previous Hoover policies evaporated. Rappleye doubts that the situation could have been stabilized, even if Roosevelt had been willing to endorse Hoover's policy during that period.

During his long post-presidency Hoover was obsessed with trying to persuade Americans that he would have handled the depression better than Roosevelt if only he had been reelected in 1932. The Democrats, who read public opinion more accurately, were delighted to campaign as if Hoover were the candidate, no matter who the Republicans nominated in election after election. Hoover's useful contributions to post-war foreign policy and to governmental reorganization, Jeansonne notes, were lost in the noise.

Whether one argues, as Jeansonne does, that Hoover's depression-era policy was selfishly subverted by Democrats, or that uncontrollable circumstances, fatal flaws in the president's personality, and rigidity in his ideology undermined his efforts, as Rappleye sees it, neither of these books is likely to reverse the popular image of the thirty-first president. Nevertheless, both are highly readable, and those who want to understand the evolution of American policy toward management of the economy should read them.

Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush, by Jodi Kanter. Theater in the Americas Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. xii, 179 pp. Table, illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Timothy Walch is the director emeritus of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and a volunteer at the Iowa City Center of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

The presidential library—rarely has a research and educational facility caused so much consternation within the academic community. Critics

point to their size and opulence. They argue that the exhibits are uncritical and often adulatory. Worst of all, critics are apoplectic that former presidents use these libraries to polish their legacies and rewrite history. In fact, some pundits refer to these libraries as “temples” and “palaces.”

Yet presidential libraries continue to thrive even in the midst of all the criticism. In fact, each new library—there are 13 and counting—is bigger than the ones that preceded it. As if to make matters worse, many of these libraries have evolved into multi-building presidential centers, and more than a million Americans tour exhibits, attend concerts and programs, participate in conferences, and use documents and photographs at presidential libraries each year.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the controversy and the popularity of these libraries have stimulated a spate of academic studies. The pioneering work in this growing field is *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (2005). Author Benjamin Hufbauer challenged the grandiosity of the architecture and the uncritical themes of the exhibits and argued for more modest buildings and more critical, scholarly exhibits.

The latest scholar to take up the cause is Jodi Kanter, associate professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at George Washington University. Looking at these libraries from a fresh perspective, Kanter turns away from evaluating presidential libraries as unbiased scholarly institutions. “We should not,” she notes in her introduction, “waste our energies in lamenting the museums’ tendency to misrepresent history in the service of aggrandizing the presidents they commemorate. . . . If we evaluate them as rigorous historiography, they inevitably will disappoint” (4). In contrast, Kanter argues that “the lens of performance can help us to view the presidential museum more productively.” In this regard, she proposes that visitors assess each library as a “performance” composed of exhibits, setting, architecture, and spatial arrangement. Kanter argues that this so-called lens of performance allows the visitor to see “a particular version of the American story in order to dramatize particular ideas about who the president is and what he does” (5).

To expand on her thesis, Kanter offers chapters on three distinct “scripts”: the historical script—the basic historical facts of each administration; the representational script—the design and presentation of those facts to visitors; and the cultural script—the conclusions and opinions that visitors are expected to take away from their time at each library.

Of particular interest to Iowans is how the Hoover Presidential Library fares in Kanter’s analysis. The coverage is informative if brief, focusing primarily on how the exhibits present Hoover’s post-presidential

legacy. These passages will be of value primarily to readers who have not visited the Hoover Library.

Overall, this book will be of interest to cultural anthropologists and scholars of theater and performance, but it will have little appeal to presidential scholars or casual visitors to presidential libraries. There is no doubting the sincerity of Kanter's effort, but most citizens who use or visit these libraries will not comprehend her "lens of performance." As they have done since the first presidential library opened in 1941, the American people will come to these institutions to study and learn about the presidents and their administrations. They will not over-think the experience.

The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America, by Gretchen Buggeln. Architecture, Landscape, and American Culture Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxix, 345 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 paperback.

Reviewer David R. Bains is professor of religion at Samford University. His research interests include American Protestant liturgical thought and church architecture.

Gretchen Buggeln's *The Suburban Church* is a masterful account of the most prolific era in American church building. Buggeln rigorously, but often lovingly, details the creation and use of suburban churches in the Midwest in the two decades following World War II, a period that witnessed a major transition from historic styles to modern forms. Buggeln describes how church members and architects sought to create spaces that would unite the "family of God" (167) and show that a faith in the transcendent was alive in the present.

In her first chapter, Buggeln traces the international development of a movement for modern church architecture through the 1960s, showing that the Midwest played a leading role. Several midwestern churches, including the innovative and economical Methodist church in Plainfield, Iowa (22–23), garnered national attention. Buggeln's book is based in part on onsite architectural and historical studies of this and 95 other churches. Only a handful are in Iowa, but much of what she says about churches in Minnesota, Illinois, and other states also applies to Iowa.

In chapter two, Buggeln introduces three architects who are the focus of her study. Edward Dart and Charles Stade were based in the Chicago area; Edward Sövik's office was near Minneapolis. Stade and Sövik were Lutherans, and churches were their main area of practice. Dart, an Episcopalian, was also known for his houses and Chicago's