

*The Last Campaign: How Presidents Rewrite History, Run for Posterity & Enshrine Their Legacies* by ANTHONY CLARK. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015. 234 pp.; notes, index; paperbound, \$22.00.

*The Last Campaign* appropriately opens with Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous words at the dedication of the first ever presidential library in Hyde Park, New York 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 the men and women in the future, a Nation must . . . believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.” Although somewhat worn, Roosevelt’s words are especially fitting here, because Clark sets out to hold the current presidential library system up to the standards Roosevelt, the father of the presidential library concept, created. Are Americans today “learning from the past” in such a way “that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future”? Is the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), responsible for the nation’s presidential libraries, enabling them to do so? And what is, and ought to be, the role of presidential library foundations in the presidential library system?

Clark’s assessment of NARA’s effectiveness as a federal agency commissioned with the task to make accessible presidential records is none too positive. He argues that presidential libraries are in the first place intended and required by law to make presidential records available for research. The management and administration of presidential museums as tourist attractions or historic sites should, in his view, be a secondary concern. The creation of partisan shrines, shaping and celebrating the legacy of past presidents, and functioning as a platform from which to propel new candidates, should be far removed from anything associated with NARA. However, Clark argues, for various reasons, mainly because it allows and even welcomes the continued involvement of politically active presidential foundations, NARA fails to prevent this. The foundations were intended to fundraise for and build new presidential library buildings only, but many stick around after doing so, using “their” library for political functions and creating biased museum exhibitions. All the while they are using the library facilities, and operating, at least seemingly, under the detached and non-partisan flag of NARA. What is worse, the records, especially those in the more recent presidential libraries, will probably not be opened to the public for decades, due largely to a lack of sufficient funds for employing archivists to process them appropriately, and this delay is in the interest of presidents who think of their libraries as their last campaigns. Accordingly, many presidential libraries have years-long backlogs on FOIA requests, and federal appropriations are mainly spent on employing museum staff, educators, and public affairs employees, rather than on opening the records (23, 64).

Clark essentially argues that this is a result of the foundations’ moneyed belligerence, NARA’s too easy and unprincipled compliance with private non-profits who bring in funding, and congressional indifference. As a public historian and cultural critic of the FDR Library, I am inclined to agree, both about NARA’s uncomfortable entanglement with partisan foundations and about the presidential libraries’ inadequate job making presidential records quickly and easily accessible for research first, and historically balanced museums second. These are important points, and it is also up to public historians to address the criticisms Clark raises. In Europe we have nothing even remotely like American presidential libraries, but they seem to me

inherently inclined towards hagiography. The one case I know of well, the FDR Library, is actually surprisingly evenhanded in its treatment of Roosevelt's presidency. Yet, the basic set-up of a presidential archive and museum on his own estate, close to his life-long home and grave, easily leads to an anecdotal and sympathetic human-angle treatment of that president as a flawed but ultimately splendid man. Compared, however, to the dirt Clark, who also served as staff on the House Oversight Committee investigating NARA, digs up about the Reagan and especially the Nixon libraries, this is insignificant.

This also points to the problem with *The Last Campaign*. Clark stresses that his book is not a "polemical jeremiad" (17), yet the tenor is at times so cynical and angry that the mere tone costs him credibility. For instance, Clark comments in square brackets: "[Note to Members of Congress and NARA officials, who have been asleep at the presidential library reform switch for the last thirty-nine years]" (119). The exasperation here is problematic because it creates the sense that Clark is a strong proponent of one side in a quarrel, rather than a historian trying to provide a dispassionate perspective on a struggle between complex interests and important ideological choices. Although I am inclined to agree with Clark as a public historian and a non-American Americanist, *The Last Campaign* makes me very curious about other perspectives on this story—the perspectives of past archivists, presidential foundation directors and board members, and even the National Park Service, which seems to be more transparent in its handling of partnerships with private non-profits. I hope these alternative histories will be written, as Clark's book sets off a genuine rethinking of the role and organization of presidential libraries.

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