

Wasted Homage

The basic question raised again by the decision not to build the Kennedy museum in Cambridge as part of the Kennedy Library—which itself may also be moved somewhere else—is whether the concept of Presidential libraries does not need thorough re-examination.

In an insidious way, the associated memorabilia left behind by Presidents have taken on an inflated life of their own that has come to dominate the repository for Presidential papers, both as an architectural element and a public feature. This has brought a change in emphasis from library to museum, and a change in function from research facility to tourist attraction.

From simple beginnings, as at Hyde Park, the concept has become an exercise in Presidential oneupmanship, with the Johnson Library, a construction to rival the pyramids, as harbinger of the future. Only inflation and questions of environmental impact have succeeded in slowing down the trend.

These library-museums are privately funded and built, with no ideological or architectural holds barred, and then turned over to the Federal Government for support in perpetuity. According to the General Services Administration, which owns and administers the Presidential libraries, the law ordains that the two are forever entwined. If so, it is time that they were separated. The latest Kennedy design was a model of taste and restraint; but the Government should not be saddled with an unending series of competitive monuments.

Only Watergate stopped the accelerating deification of Presidents that the "museum" trend represents, and it may take a change in the law to get the Presidential libraries back on the track of history and scholarship. There is no lack of proper tribute in a Presidential archive. The rest is discordant and highly questionable; it is homage and money wasted.