



## No more tax-paid presidential pyramids

By: Gene Healy – April 30, 2013

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Last week, at the dedication of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, President Obama and former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter put partisanship aside and descended on the Southern Methodist University campus in Dallas to say nice things about our 43rd president, (They're all in the same racket, after all.)

At 226,560 square feet and a cost of \$250 million, the Bush Presidential Center is the biggest and most expensive yet of the 13 presidential libraries that one scholar has derisively called "America's Pyramids."

One of the key exhibits at the Bush megalith is Decision Points Theater, a virtual Situation Room wherein visitors can "consult" video advisers and make their own calls on some of the "Decider's" key decisions, like war with Iraq, the response to Hurricane Katrina, and bailing out the banks.

As Bush put it in an interview with CNN's John King, "hopefully, people will go to the Decision Points Theater and say, 'Wow, I didn't understand that' or 'I now understand it better.'"

In Decision Points Theater, if you decide not to go to war with Iraq, "43" himself comes onscreen to tell you flatly that you're wrong: "Saddam posed too big a risk to ignore. ... The world was made safer by his removal." Bush is entitled to his own spin on the decisions he made, but he should burnish his legacy on his own dime.

Though the libraries' construction is privately funded, they're managed by the National Archives and Records Administration, using federal tax dollars.

Last year, it cost the American taxpayer some \$75 million to keep them open.

Sure, that's chump change in a \$3.5 trillion federal budget -- still, we're chumps to allow it, given that modern presidential libraries are publicly subsidized propaganda vehicles -- garish shrines to the cult of the presidency.

Historian Benjamin Hufbauer, author of "Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory," writes that our presidential libraries "present an ideologically charged narrative that valorizes a presidential life, helping to incorporate it into the nation's civil religion."

In the newer libraries, exhibits "often amount to little more than extended campaign commercials in museum form, because the former president and his supporters essentially control the content."

Thus, Hufbauer notes, the Reagan Library omits any discussion of the Iran-Contra scandal, and the JFK Library "does not address in detail JFK's numerous health problems and extramarital affairs, even though they have been thoroughly documented" -- a tactful way of describing our pill-popping satyr of a 35th president.

The Presidential Records Act of 1978 gives the federal government ownership of the records each president creates in office, and those archives are an invaluable resource for historians. But to maintain them, argues scholar Richard J. Cox in "America's Pyramids: Presidents and Their Libraries," we don't need "a library for each president, each armed with its own archivists and museum curators and scattered about the country."

Instead, Cox proposes a single repository, run by the National Archives in D.C., separate from any propaganda exhibits that presidents and their supporters decide to fund privately: "Establishing a different kind of Presidential Archives will end the 'cult of personality' that seems to be in place with the current Presidential Library system."

If our ex-presidents want whitewashed shrines to their legacies, they should run them without taxpayer help. As it happens, our recent presidents have mainly left us a patrimony of mounting debt, intrusive government, and permanent war.

If you seek their monument, look around you.