

ALAN WEINSTEIN COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and congratulations to all those who are with us today: graduating seniors and those receiving advanced degrees, families and friends.

As archivist of the United States, I manage almost four dozen federal facilities nationwide, including a dozen presidential libraries. President Turner has invited me to deliver this commencement talk undoubtedly, in SOME measure, to explain to graduates, families and friends what all the fuss has been for the past year or so over the George W. Bush Presidential Library and adjacent PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE. Many of you will remain as alumni and supporters of this great university for the rest of your lives. So, it is worth asking at the outset: will the planned presidential library center be of benefit to S.M.U.? My short answer is yes.

But first, a more basic question: what is a “presidential library” of which Texas has three: Lyndon Johnson’s in Austin, George H.W. Bush’s in College Station, and now George W. Bush’s here IN DALLAS?

For one thing, “LIBRARY” as applied to these institutions is a classic misnomer. In truth, these are presidential ARchives, not libraries, which also contain museums and exhibits related to the particular chief executives. The National Archives’ presidential library system is now made up of 12 – soon to be 13 – one for each president from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush.

Moreover, this is the only country in the world to have opted in favor of creating and federally-operating SUCH INSTITUTIONS– under the National Archives and Records Administration (known by its acronym “NARA”). There are a few stray such “presidential libraries” elsewhere in the world, but only in the United States have they been legislated into law and practice.

Our presidential libraries now constitute a defined component in the legacy of our MODERN presidents. Put simply, the libraries themselves are normally constructed with funds provided by supporters of EACH president, after which they are funded by annual stipends provided by the U.S. Congress and managed by NARA.

ANY research center OR POLICY INSTITUTE IS closely linked to the library but privately funded. These centers have at times generated controversy, as here at S.M.U., often dying down as the particular facility proves to be properly managed and sensitive to the need to provide a genuine diversity of views and voices. Normally, the narrower and less open to broad-based dialogue a center becomes, the greater its problems.

Even most opponents of the proposed INDEPENDENT Bush POLICY INSTITUTE have acknowledged that a popular, WELL-RUN presidential library center will redound to the benefit of S.M.U. The major cost to THE UNIVERSITY will be the challenges to that community and to the Bush library community, as both evolve, to maintain the greatest measure of cooperation and civility at all times, while resisting the temptation to turn normal policy disagreements into burning, divisive public issues.

Be assured that the George W. Bush Presidential Library, like the 12 other libraries in the NATIONAL ARCHIVES system, will be operated as a non-partisan federal facility, staffed by civil service employees working under a director who will be appointed by the archivist of the United States in accordance with the laws governing the archives and the presidential libraries.

Inevitably, it will raise S.M.U.’s profile as an important research center, given the fact that the archived records of the two-term Bush administration will be held in the library. And in time, like our national headquarters in Washington, DC, and numerous other archival facilities from Massachusetts to Alaska, the Bush 43 Library will play its own distinctive role by offering research opportunities and public programs which promote the study of American history, civic participation, and civic literacy in general.

what do i mean by “civic literacy”? it is knowing how our nation began, what the founding fathers intended it to be, the rights and responsibilities of its citizens, and how each citizen can contribute to the well-being of this democracy.

you are already familiar with the history of the united states and the major milestone events and social changes that have occurred in its 232 years of existence. you are also somewhat familiar with how our political system works today—the process by which we as the governed choose those who will govern us under the law.

one of the important goals of the national archives is improving civic literacy at all levels of american society. one of the ways the archives promotes civic education is to make it easy to access and use the permanent records of the federal government—including the records of the office of the chief executive and commander-in-chief. we have literally billions of pages of records, from the declaration of independence, the constitution, and the bill of rights—along with treaties, patent applications, and census records dating back to 1790—to electronic text documents and e-mails. these records tell the story of america. they are priceless and essential to understanding our democracy. some of them also tell the stories of you and your ancestors.

let me now shift briefly from the impossible to the improbable: impossible that this admirable audience of graduates, families and friends should focus for any length of time today on the attractions and distractions of presidential libraries. and improbable that you will all think fifty years ahead and, consequently, to the sensible but oft-ignored conclusion of a once-famous and now- forgotten literary critic named John mason brown. in the mid-20th century, mr. brown opined, about such ceremonies as this one: “part of the american myth is that people who are handed the skin of a dead sheep at graduation time think that it will keep their minds alive forever.” awaiting the graduate’s discovery is what *new york times* columnist david brooks referred to in a recent column as “the bad memory century.” brooks wrote, “in the era of an aging population, many of us are suffering the normal effects of time, living in a memory-challenged community that is one step away from leaving the stove on all day.”

and so I caution all of you self-confident graduates at today’s ceremony that time remains the great adversary. it pursues all of us, lest we fail to defend against its silent ravages.

“lessons, lessons” – every proper commencement address should contain a few useful lessons. first, recognize the moral limits beyond which you cannot be pushed; in other words, the boundaries of your conscience, normally not fully discovered at your ages. one interesting exercise in this connection might be to trace back to earlier periods of american history the clearest and most abusive examples of interference with freedoms and conscience.

begin with the salem witchcraft trials of the 1690’S. move forward to the “alien and sedition acts” of the early republic, and from there to the suspension of *habeus corpus* during the civil war.

turn then to the arbitrary political arrests of the first and second world wars, the many abuses of the cold war “Mccarthy era,” and from there to the civil liberties climate in our own time. find your conscience and hold it close.

one of the pivotal connective links from earliest repressive efforts to the present time is the “pushback” each received from opponents at the time: a phenomenon that the late scholar and united states senator, daniel patrick moynihan, called the “self-corrective” forces at work within american society. these forces make difficult any and all efforts to create a thoroughly repressive climate of opinion, even during wars and pre-or post-war red scares.

you will not find similar “self-corrective” societies in great numbers in our time. there are precious few and none as obsessively self-corrective as ours.

THE STRUGGLES TO EXPAND FREEDOM AND DEFEND CONSCIENCE CAN BE documented in the billions of pages found at the national archives and its presidential libraries. A 19TH-CENTURY immigrant editor and political reformer, carl schurz, PERHAPS UNDERSTOOD BEST THE COMPLEXITY OF THIS PERSPECTIVE WHEN HE OBSERVED OF THE PERPETUAL URGENCY OF THE AMERICAN VISION, NOT AS

OFTEN MISQUOTED, “my country right or wrong.” BUT THE COMPLETE QUOTE: “MY COUNTRY RIGHT OR WRONG. when she is right, support her, but when she is wrong, correct her.”

THE FOUNDER OF THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY SYSTEM AND OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, STRUCK THE CIVIC LITERACY THEME POWERFULLY IN HIS 1941 LIBRARY DEDICATION CEREMONY WHEN HE SAID: “To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things: It must believe in the past...It must believe in the future... It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past so that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”

MORE RECENTLY, AS PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH HAS OBSERVED, “Ignorance of American history and civics weakens our sense of citizenship. To be an American is not just a matter of blood or birth. We are bound by ideals, and our children must know those ideals.”

RECOGNIZE AND WORK AT THESE IDEALS, GRADUATES, AND THE WORLD CAN BE YOURS. BUT REMEMBER THAT THIS GRADUATION IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP IN your LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP. FOR YOU AND FOR ALL OF US, THE WORK CONTINUES . . .

thank you.