

# Archiving the President's Papers

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**A**RCHIVAL and historical manuscripts constitute a long-neglected concern of both government and private sector of this country. Even Presidential papers, being records of the most powerful man in government, are not excluded from this sorry oversight.

Already, twelve have ascended to the Presidency of the country yet not one of them has conceived of a comprehensive archival plan to control the vast store of documents accumulated while in office.

By tradition, the papers of a President, even when they are mostly official records generated by his office, are his personal property to dispose of as he chooses. In the United States, for one hundred sixty-six years, there was no systematic provision for the control and preservation of Presidential papers. Every American president before FDR took the precedent established by George Washington and John Adams by taking all his correspondence and files relating to the Presidency upon leaving the White House. As a result, many valuable records documenting their presidency were irretrievably lost through unfortunate neglect or willful destruction. Some perished in flames, or were scattered among heirs, or simply given out as souvenirs or mementoes to friends and relatives.

The need for a comprehensive program for the proper preservation of Presidential

papers dawned in the mind of Franklin D. Roosevelt towards the end of his third term. Realizing the fate of the papers of his predecessors, and knowing fully well the enormous value — informational, historical, evidential, and intrinsic — of his own, he envisioned a plan that would establish a precedent for all future American presidents to follow. He decided to offer them entirely to the nation.

The U.S. Congress accepted his offer and legislated the establishment of an FDR Presidential Library to be administered by the US National Archives and Records Service. FDR donated the land in Hyde Park as a suitable site for the building, which was likewise funded by public subscription. The main idea, however, was that once the building has been erected and equipped, the National Archives shall take over the administration and maintenance of the library using federal funds.

In the Philippines, following the fine examples set by his American counterpart, Presi-

dent Manuel L. Quezon decided wisely by deeding his papers "to the Filipino people." He, however, in his dying state, forgot to provide (by means of legislation) for the establishment of a separate building to house his papers and memorabilia in the same fashion envisioned by Roosevelt for his own records. In effect, he merely willed his papers to be administered by the National Library, a government agency which has a long history of alleged inefficacy, and at the time of his donation, had no building of its own, and was continually crippled by lack of funds and competent staff.

This lack of congressional provision for the preservation of our presidential records has resulted in the irreparable loss, destruction and dispersal of many valuable documents relating to the highest office in the land.

Significant events occurring in the United States after the Nixon Administration have posed a challenge against the traditional concepts regarding

ownership of Presidential papers. The controversy over the Nixon papers, the suits and countersuits, and the "unsettled condition" of the American presidential archives system have revealed the weak legal and constitutional basis favoring the traditional view on the question of ownership. One archivist points out, "George Washington may have begun a 'tradition' of private ownership not so much because he favored such a policy, but rather because the federal government had no adequate facility for the housing of his papers."

Aroused by a deep concern over the private status given to papers of elected public officials, one U.S. Senator introduced a bill requiring every elected official (from President down) to turn over to the National Archives and Records Service within 180 days of leaving office all papers created during his tenure. All records considered as "public documents" comprise those prepared by or for the elected official which would not have been created had that official not held that public office. "Public records" or "documents" may include correspondence, memoranda, reports, studies, schedules, briefs, minutes of meetings, notes, and summaries. In addition, there are clippings, photo-files, tape recordings, films, sketches, greeting cards and objects accumulated while in office, which are mostly souvenirs and memorabilia, such as, paintings, artifacts, statuettes, trophies, plaques, medals, gifts from ordinary citizens and heads of state alike, representing a broad spectrum of people and nations.

This "presidential archives

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system" is a new concept in the Philippines because it combines a library, archives, and museum into one institution. Its library essentially should constitute the private library collection of the former President while its archives should develop from a collection of his personal papers and official files to include even his pre- and post-presidential accumulations. Its museum is

not a mere assemblage of interesting objects to entertain or educate the public. It must be developed to convey a better understanding of the presidency, and through it, of the government. The researcher would miss the color and tone of the epoch or era he is studying without the museum.

That the archives of former Presidents are among the most valuable source materials documenting the history of a nation, and its people, and, therefore, ought to be pre-

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served for posterity, cannot be overemphasized. While professional attention is now being given to the papers of Aguinaldo, Quezon, Roxas, Osmeña and Garcia at the National Library, and those of Quirino, Magsaysay, and Laurel, at their chosen repositories, still much more should be done.

The lots in which the Magsaysay, Laurel, and Roxas Memorial Foundation buildings were built, were government-owned and do-

nated through congressional legislations. This is proof of government's legal and moral obligation to care for our presidential collections as owner and custodian.

After all, should not records created at public expense, by public officials, in the course of their performance of public duties entrusted by their people, their constituencies, be public records? So, who's taking care of the presidential papers of Macapagal, Marcos and Aquino? ❁