Museum of the Prime Minister

International examples that can inform and inspire a Museum of the Prime Minister

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Sir Anthony Seldon
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Each museum discussed in this report offers strong lessons that can inform the creation of a British Museum of Prime Ministers (MoPM). By learning from these great museums abroad, we might finally create a great museum to Britain’s highest political office.

**Executive Summary**

For a full explanation of any of these points, please see the final section: Recommendations, and Risks.

1. **General Models**
   1.1 There is no one model that this report would recommend wholeheartedly. But, there are lessons that can be learned from all of the examples within these pages.
   1.2 There are two exhibitions that are particularly noteworthy: the Charles de Gaulle Historial and the Smithsonian’s First Ladies and The American Presidency, A Glorious Burden.
   1.3 This report also recommends against an all-encompassing Pradhanmantri Sangrahalya style museum.
   1.4 This report also recommends against the US presidential library model.
   1.5 This report recommends against a Hall of Presidents modelled presentation.
   1.6 This report recommends against an alternate focus for the museum (like Parliament or Democracy or British history).

2. **Establishment**
   2.1 From the outset, most of the museums featured in this study have had a combination of strong political and financial support.
   2.2 The MoPM will require determined and committed leadership, invested in a long haul project.
   2.3 MoPM needs to establish a clear focus in its mission statement, which can inform the interpretive plan, the museum’s activities, and the construction of the permanent exhibition.
   2.4 MoPM should create a large ‘board of historians’ who can advise on specific matters during the development of the museum. But, there needs to be a clear executive of 3 or 5, who actually make the decisions.
   2.5 Reflecting and acknowledging that division and argument are an inherent part of politics, will help the museum to avoid the charges of sycophancy and hagiography that are frequently levelled at American presidential libraries.

3. **Exhibitions, Appearance, Technology**
   3.1 There are several potential models for the layout of the displays. This will (of course) be partly dictated by the choice of location, though some of the museums discussed in this report might be considered as models - (as mentioned) the Charles de Gaulle Historial in Paris. The de Gaulle Historial has a concentric plan. In the centre is a large cinema style screen, around that is a circular corridor by which visitors navigate between galleries.
   - the Yitzhak Rabin museum, which has a Guggenheim-style ramp design.
   - the Glorious Burden exhibition at the Smithsonian. Visitors start with Inaugurations, and then progress through the galleries in a linear fashion until they reach the exit of the exhibition.
   3.2 The MoPM should have firm narrative themes in its exhibition.
   3.3 When choosing a designer, the MoPM needs to establish whether it will be an ‘experience’ focused on storytelling and immersion or a more traditional, object-focused museum.
   3.4 An audio-visual only approach is not recommended.
   3.5 The MoPM should present a tangible heritage.
   3.6 There must be an effort to find, obtain, categorise, and borrow items to display in the MoPM.
   3.7 One theme that came out of my discussions with museum professionals is that visitors often respond enthusiastically to personal objects because they humanise the subject.
   3.8 The MoPM should also seek historically significant objects.
   3.9 The MoPM should have a display about Life in Number 10 containing items that show both the official side of life and personal life.
   3.10 MoPM should consider displaying objects from depictions of the prime minister in popular culture.
   3.11 In the absence of objects, MoPM could also display letters, official documents, and speech notes.
   3.12 The MoPM should seek close cooperation with the National Archives.
   3.13 Given that the earliest manifestation of MoPM will likely be a temporary exhibition, before a move into relatively modest premises in Central London, a thematic permanent exhibition (rather than chronological) is the most sensible option.
   3.14 The MoPM should have a film that can serve as an introduction to the topic of the prime minister and the history of the office.
3.15 The MoPM might wish to consider the use of some of the following technology in the permanent exhibition.

- Audio headsets.
- An App.
- Audio-visual presentations for complicated topics.
- Use of interactive technology like interactive tables and document readers, which allow more interested visitors to explore topics, while creating no demands on the more casual visitor.
- A Decision Points Theater style exhibit asking visitors to make the same historic decisions as prime ministers.
- Augmented Reality or holographic technology.

3.16 The MoPM should not be afraid to provide a lot of information in its audio-visual displays and its app, but it should be voluntary.

3.17 While recommending the use of technology to bring history alive, this report cautions against an overreliance on technology.

3.18 The MoPM should have a particularly memorable artistic installation, object, or monument.

3.19 Alternatively, if space permits, consideration should also be given to a big item, such as a car or carriage that can serve as a memorable display item.

3.20 MoPM might wish to display reconstructed clothing or material for the early prime ministers, for whom there may be very few items available.

3.21 The museum should give serious thought to the construction of a replica of the Cabinet Room or the black door to Number 10.

3.22 The MoPM should have a temporary exhibition space and should use it for exhibitions on an eclectic mix of subjects.

3.23 Temporary exhibitions have allowed many of the museums featured in this report to tell stories and show perspectives that have sometimes not been heard. MoPM should use its temporary exhibition gallery for this purpose.

3.24 Most of the museums in this study were built for an audience of adolescents upwards.

4. Outreach

4.1 MoPM should have a strong website and should establish a database for prime ministers, similar to that of the Museum of Australian Democracy. This is a good way for the MoPM to provide a public good and contribute to the public’s understanding of history outside of the museum space.

4.2 The MoPM should take inspiration from some of the examples contained within this report and establish strong outreach programmes for school groups and children.

4.3 MoPM could also provide professional outreach to other museums.

4.4 The MoPM could consider a travelling exhibition, but should be aware that the only museum to do so in this report is the Smithsonian, which has enormous resources.

4.5 Outreach is dependent on facilities. The MoPM will need to decide whether it wants to provide such facilities.

5. Facilities

5.1 Strong consideration should be given to providing a gift shop and stocking unique Number 10 or prime minister themed items.

5.2 Other facilities, like a cafe, should be dictated by location.

6. Archive

6.1 This report recommends against the construction of an archive.

6.2 Building an archive would be expensive, time consuming, a drag on resources, and would require space within the museum that would be at a premium. It would also be of dubious utility.

7. Funding

7.1 This report provides no easy answers when it comes to the matter of funding. With two exceptions, all of the institutions discussed in this report receive strong financial support from government or state authorities.

7.2 None of the museums featured in this report cover their costs either solely or largely through admissions.

7.3 Ideally, a portion of the initial budget, perhaps 10% or even 15%, should be put aside for when the museum needs improvement or, eventually, renovation.

7.4 The heaviest costs will be during the creation and development of the museum. But there will continue to be heavy financial costs after that point.

7.5 In order to raise funds, MoPM might consider establishing a charitable foundation that can focus on fundraising or an in-house membership programme.

7.6 The MoPM should try and build a network of donors. It should use the prestige of historic prime ministers as a marketing tool for donations. It should also consider sponsored exhibitions and sponsored exhibition spaces.

7.7 With two exceptions (Ford’s Theatre and the Smithsonian), all of the museums in this report charged for entry for amounts between £3-25.

8. Relationship with existing political figures

8.1 The MoPM would benefit from the involvement of former prime ministers. It would boost the museum’s profile, potentially help the museum acquire items, and would add authority to the museum’s audio-visual presentations.

8.2 Additionally, MoPM should also reach out to the families of some of the more distant prime ministers.
The names of British Prime Ministers are woven into the fabric of our history – Walpole, Pitt, Disraeli, Gladstone, Lloyd George, Churchill, Attlee, Thatcher.

The office of Prime Minister is a legacy that Britain has given to the world.

And yet, there is no museum dedicated to this great office nor to the collection of people who have served in it. One of humanity’s greatest stories – of history, freedom, democracy, power, and politics – goes completely untold. Our former leaders fade away and the remnants of their careers are simply scattered to the winds.

But it does not have to be like this. So many other countries in the world have established museums and exhibitions to celebrate their former leaders.

The report that follows provides dozens of lessons for how we can create a Museum of Prime Ministers. Within the pages that follow, you will find descriptions of some of the finest museums celebrating presidents and prime ministers throughout the world.

In all of the countries featured in this report, there is pride in their former leaders, and an inspirational commitment to preserve and remember history.

When you read this report, I encourage you to think about how we can and should do this here in the United Kingdom. How do we turn aspiration into action? How can we build a worthwhile and appropriate museum to our Prime Ministers?

I hope you will consider joining us in this exciting project.

Dr. Robert D. Kilgour
Co-Founder & Chairman
Museum of the Prime Minister

Sir Anthony Seldon | Founder and Creator

Sir Anthony Seldon is a widely-respected authority on all matters relating to Number 10 and Britain’s prime ministers. His first book on a prime minister, Churchill’s Indian Summer, was published forty years ago. He has since written or edited more than 40 books, including definitive insider accounts of six of the last prime ministers.

Sir Anthony was the honorary historian of Number 10 Downing Street, chair of the National Archives Trust, and has interviewed virtually all senior figures who have worked in Number 10 in the last fifty years.

His most recent books are – The Path of Peace: Walking the Western Front Way (2022) and Johnson at 10: The Inside Story (2023).

Jonathan Meakin | Researcher and Project Historian

Jonathan was educated at Royal Holloway, University of London and at the University of St Andrews. He is a professional researcher and has worked on many publications including The Cabinet Office, 1916-2016 and The Impossible Office: A History of the British Prime Minister.

He has also worked as a researcher on political and historical topics. He has worked at historical sites in Britain and as a volunteer in the United States.

Dr. Robert D. Kilgour | Co-Founder and Chairman

Robert is a Scottish entrepreneur, investor and philanthropist. Robert is currently chair of Renaissance Care which operates 17 care homes throughout Scotland with 1,300 staff and he also sits on several boards across a range of fields including insurance, corporate finance and technology.

In 2017, Robert founded and currently chairs SBUK, a group of 500 Scottish businesses campaigning for Scotland to remain part of the UK. In June 2023, he received an honorary doctorate from Stirling University for his ‘outstanding contribution to entrepreneurship and philanthropy’ and he also recently founded the Social Care Foundation to promote and encourage reform of social care.
Introduction: Why is it time for a Museum of Prime Ministers?

What is the purpose of this report?

“Public museums and galleries have been created, generation after generation, for diverse reasons... Common to them, however, is the belief that museums and galleries are an important carrier of a society or group’s collective memory, and that they are crucial to advancing our understanding of ourselves, others and the world around us.”

Museum and Gallery Studies, Rhiannon Mason, Alistair Robinson, and Emma Coffield

According to the Museums Association, there are 2,500 museums in the United Kingdom. They include the Churchill War Rooms and the Lloyd George Memorial Museum. There are also museums to pencils, dog collars, lavmowers, cuckoo clocks, and defunct police forces. There is no modern museum dedicated to the country’s collective prime ministers.

Despite this diversity of fame and subject, there is no museum to the most famous British political office in history, that of Prime Minister, nor to the most famous political address in the world, 10 Downing Street.

There is no part of Britain untouched by the decisions of the Prime Minister. Downing Street, historically, has been the most powerful street in the history of the planet. It is time for a museum dedicated to the office of Prime Minister. This will be an institution that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of the most important political position in the UK. There can be no doubt that there is interest in our political history, if enthusiastically and inventively presented.

Visitors to a Museum of Prime Ministers will explore the achievements, failures, and decisions of Prime Ministers past and present. For the first time in London, there would be a museum to the great political controversies of British history. It could also tell the story of Downing Street itself, allowing tourists the opportunity to ‘visit’ a place that, thus far, they can only glimpse through the railings. Finally, it could bring to life items related to Prime Ministers that have no real place in current museum collections, and thus languish in storerooms.

Such a museum could also provide other benefits. It could run programmes to inspire leadership, democracy, and civil responsibility.

“A common past, preserved through institutions, traditions, and symbols, is a crucial instrument – perhaps the crucial instrument – in the construction of collective identities in the present... Belief in a shared past opens the possibility for commitments to collective missions in the future.”

Theorizing Historical Consciousness, Professor Peter Seixas

It could forge professional links to smaller museums. It could build an authoritative website to Prime Ministers and provide resources to teachers and educators. Above all, it would be a place for Britain’s political history.

With the exception of the Churchill War Rooms in London, there is no modern museum dedicated to any former British Prime Minister in the UK. However, there are many such museums around the world. For example, the United States of America has a well-developed network of presidential libraries, while India has recently opened the high tech Pradhanmantri Sangrahalya dedicated to Indian Prime Ministers. These institutions offer a wide range of useful lessons from which a MoPM might benefit.


3 Of these, 1,800 are ‘accredited’, having ‘achieved a nationally approved standard in management, collections care and delivery of information and visitor services’.


During the summer of 2022, I was asked to undertake this study to learn lessons from museums dedicated to heads of government in other countries. In the months since, I have travelled to three continents, visiting nine museums, which I will present as case studies in this report. Additionally, I have also included an additional three case studies that are particularly relevant to this topic. I have addressed the presidential library system in the United States as an institution, as well as detailing the individual examples.

Over the pages that follow, I will discuss the ways that other countries have commemorated their political leaders, what their museums do, and how they function. I will draw lessons that might best inform a MoPM.

Each section looks at Origins, Visitor Experience, Institutional Information, Outreach, Reception, Analysis & Lessons.

Throughout, the case studies, I have focused on particular parts of the museum (such as main exhibitions); or, in the case of the Museum of Australian Democracy, on their specific work around the presentation of Prime Ministers. The section on the Hall of Presidents looks only at the attraction itself and does not provide detail about the wider Walt Disney Corporation, which would not be relevant or useful for the purposes of this study.

As will be seen, there is no single museum model that is a perfect fit for MoPM. It is not surprising that museums created in a particular culture, context, and nation, cannot simply be transplanted to Britain. However, there are excellent lessons to be found in these museums that should influence and encourage MoPM’s development. Ultimately, the purpose of this report is to spur inspiration and bring to life some of the possibilities and opportunities that MoPM might realise.

The main question to be answered by this report is: What are the potential models for the MoPM?

Other questions that I have asked of the institutions discussed are:
- Why was the museum established?
- How was the museum established?
- What are the different ways that political leaders have been commemorated in museums?
- What objects are displayed?
- How have collections been created?
- What level of interactivity do these displays have?
- What technology is used?
- What do these museums look like and how are the displays organised?
- What sort of outreach do these museums provide (online and on site)?
- What sort of archives and research centres do these museums maintain?
- How do these museums receive funding?
- What sort of support organisations/charities do these museums have?
- How were these museums received by the press and critical commentators?
- What controversies and challenges have these museums faced?
- How do different museums approach difficult figures and historical controversies?
- Do these museums have temporary exhibitions and, if so, which topics do they cover?
- What sort of relationships do the museums have with the political figures they commemorate?
- What links do these museums have with their national or state governments?

With Thanks

Tremendous thanks for this report must go to Robert Kilgour, whose generosity made this research possible. Without him, there would be no report, and no lessons to absorb. The MoPM will hopefully have many friends as it goes forward, but Robert must be considered the first and the founder.

Throughout this project, I have been impressed by the passion, commitment, and dedication of museum professionals in four continents. I hope that readers take the opportunity to visit any or all of the museums featured in this report. Every museum featured within these pages offers a fine opportunity to learn about their subject.

I would like to thank those who gave up their valuable time to help me over the course of this study (The positions given are those from the summer of 2022.).

At the Museum of Australian Democracy, my thanks to Campbell Rhodes (Copyright and Research Co-Ordinator), Laina Hall (Senior Historian and Content Head), and Toni Dam (Manager of the Museum Experience).

At the Yitzhak Rabin Center my thanks to Dr Nurit Cohen (the Director of the Educational Department).

At the Clinton Center, my thanks to Christine Mow (Curator and Deputy Director), Jay Barth (Director), and Dana Simmons (Supervisory Archivist).

At the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, my thanks to Amy Hamilton (Curator).

At Mount Vernon, my thanks to Jessie MacLeod (Assistant Curator).

At Ford’s Theatre, my thanks to Jake Flack (Deputy Director of Education).

At the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, my thanks to Christopher Wills (Communication Director).

In addition, my thanks to Gwen Strachan and Tanya Applewhite for organising my travel arrangements.

Finally, thanks to Sir Anthony Seldon (Founder and Creator), who is the driving force of this project.

The views and opinions expressed within this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any of the museums or institutions discussed. Any mistakes are those of the author alone.

Jonathan Meakin, Researcher and Project Historian, September 2023
Case Studies

The case studies in this section were selected as a sample to see how different countries commemorate historic leaders. All of these museums offer good lessons and examples for a potential Museum of Prime Ministers (MoPM).

These examples were selected after reviewing museums dedicated to political personalities around the world. Some, like the Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Museum have a unique narrative, others like the William J. Clinton and George W. Bush Presidential Libraries were chosen because they are the latest iterations of the US presidential library model.

Criteria for the selection:
- commemorated democratic leaders (in George Washington's case, proto-democratic).
- They have been established (or renovated) in the last two decades.
- They are located in, or near, a major city.*

With the exceptions of Mount Vernon, the Museum of Australian Democracy, and Ford's Theatre, I tried to avoid sites located in preserved buildings. Such sites have a mission related to the preservation of specific historic architecture, and therefore offer few lessons for this project. MoPM is very unlikely to occupy a notable site, and even if it did (for example, an old government building), the preservation of that site would be a unique mission that would not be informed by this project.

Lessons are not limited to the case studies that were visited. I have also looked at other examples from which to draw lessons. I did not visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, Museum of Australian Democracy, or the Disney Hall of Presidents, but have featured them in this report anyway.

Throughout this report, you will see references to 2018 and 2019. These were the last ‘normal’ years of museum life. Therefore, I have tried to use these to demonstrate success before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic. Needless to say, all of these institutions have been heavily impacted by the pandemic. In most cases, both visitor numbers and income have declined sharply, and have not yet fully recovered. Hopefully, in time, the pandemic years will be seen as anomalies, and visitation will recover.

Finally, it is important to understand that Museums are living institutions and are constantly changing. The museums in this report are described as they were in the summer and autumn of 2022, but all will have had updates, renovations, and modifications since then.

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.”

Museums Association (UK), 1988

*The Disney Hall of Presidents does not necessarily meet all of these criteria, nor is it, strictly speaking, a museum. But it is a notably famous site, and therefore worth consideration in this report. As I will clarify, the Hall of Presidents would not meet the Museum Association’s definition of a museum.
TripAdvisor and Google Review ratings
(January 2023)
All scores are measured out of 5.

William J. Clinton Presidential Library & Museum
4.5
2,598 reviews
Excellent 1,551
Very good 708
Average 267
Poor 47
Terrible 25

George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum
4.5
3,850 reviews
Excellent 2,689
Very good 863
Average 227
Poor 47
Terrible 24

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum
5
4,547 reviews
Excellent 4,009
Very good 404
Average 102
Poor 20
Terrible 12

Ford's Theatre
4.5
4,335 reviews
Excellent 2,907
Very good 1,069
Average 265
Poor 69
Terrible 25

Mount Vernon
4.5
4,768 reviews
Excellent 3,466
Very good 926
Average 267
Poor 77
Terrible 32

Yitzhak Rabin Center
4.5
637 reviews
Excellent 476
Very good 137
Average 14
Poor 3
Terrible 7

L’Historial Charles de Gaulle
4.7
24 reviews (Google)

Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya
4.8
1,374 reviews (Google)

The Museum of Australian Democracy
4.5
1,322 reviews
Excellent 910
Very good 334
Average 66
Poor 6
Terrible 6

4.5
5,024 reviews
Excellent 2,978
Very good 1,300
Average 539
Poor 168
Terrible 39
The United States of America has more major museums to its former leaders than any other country in the world.

There is a museum or historic site associated with every historic US president before 2009. Such sites include birthplaces, houses, and memorials. Some presidents, like Abraham Lincoln, have multiple sites dedicated to their memory. As a consequence, there are a considerable variety of different museum models that can be discussed.

The most famous single museum model that the US offers is that of the presidential library. These are also sometimes called ‘presidential centers’.

I have selected three such sites to assess for this project. There are:
- The William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in Dallas, Texas.

The US presidential library system is the single most developed infrastructure for remembering former political leaders in the world. There are two kinds of presidential library.

There are thirteen National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) administered presidential libraries in the US. There is a presidential library for every president between Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush. These are the ‘official’ presidential libraries and have extensive archives overseen by the Office of Presidential Libraries at NARA. Though they are called presidential libraries, they all contain a museum, which is also overseen by NARA. These are effectively state museums and archives because NARA is an agency of the United States government.

Additionally, there twenty non-NARA presidential libraries as well. These represent a selection of pre-1929 presidents, including Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley, with a Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library due to open in North Dakota in 2025. Barack Obama’s Presidential Center is under construction, and (as detailed) will represent a departure from the NARA administered libraries of his predecessors. These institutions are funded by a number of different sources, including non-profit fundraising, charitable donations, and state funds.

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”

The thirteen formal presidential libraries share a number of common attributes:

- **NARA.** Once the museum has opened, NARA archivists work in the archive and NARA run the museum with the exception of the George W. Bush Presidential Library, where, from January 2023, the museum is run by the foundation.

- **They are all ‘public-private partnerships’**. Built with private money, they become ‘public’ institutions when they open and when NARA becomes involved.

- **The support of a foundation.** They are all supported by a support organisation, usually called a presidential foundation, though sometimes called an Institute or Center. The foundations vary in activity. Some are purely library and museum support organisations. Others, particularly those of more recent presidents, provide youth programmes, events, and policy papers.

- **An archive.** The presidential libraries were originally established as archives first, and the museum function developed with time. Each of the NARA presidential libraries contains tens of thousands of documents related to that particular president. General public researchers can begin visiting libraries and assessing documents within five years of their opening.

- **With the exception of John F. Kennedy, who died in office, the president themselves have usually been a key figure in the establishment of their library and museum.** Preparations for a presidential library are usually quite advanced by the end of a president’s second term, if they remain in office that long.

- **With the exceptions of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, all of the presidents since Hoover have chosen to be interred or buried at their presidential libraries.**

- **They all have a museum, and these display interesting items from the presidents they represent.** Some of these items are very notable and have become symbols of these museums. Famously, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California displays a Boeing 707 Airliner that was used as Air Force One during his presidency. It often forms a backdrop for events that take place there.

- **The presidential museums are in locations all over the USA.** Frequently, they are one of the top tourist attractions in the local area. Often, they are used to host public events and function as important places for their local communities.

The picture opposite shows the locations of the thirteen open presidential libraries. Presidents choose a location that best suits them. The two locations visited as part of this study, the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and the George W. Bush Presidential Library have purple markers.

**History**

Until the 1970s, White House records were considered the personal property of the president themselves. At the end of a presidency the papers were often destroyed, scattered, or split between libraries, universities, and historical collections.

The first presidential library was established in 1956, dedicated to the 19th Century President Rutherford B. Hayes (as the ‘Rutherford B. Hayes Center Library’). However, this is not, and has never been, an official presidential library. It receives no Federal funds and is, instead supported by a foundation and the state of Ohio.

In 1939, Franklin D. Roosevelt donated his personal and presidential papers to the Federal government. A part of his estate in New York was dedicated to a library. A small part of this library became a museum, displaying selected items from his presidency. This established a tradition, and since then, every president has established a presidential library and museum.

Congress formalised the process with the Presidential Libraries Act in 1955. This act encourages former presidents to donate their historical papers to the government for the purposes of preservation. It established a system of privately erected, but federally maintained, facilities that preserve the papers of US presidents. Consequently, the archivists of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) were available to catalogue and preserve presidential records.

The 1972–74 Watergate scandal caused a shift in official responsibilities. Due to fears that Watergate documents would become President Richard Nixon’s property, Congress passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974. Subsequently, the law was tightened with the Presidential Records Act of 1978, which specified that all presidential papers were considered to be public records.

The 1970s legislation established the modern model of the ‘public–private partnership’ presidential library. The museum and library would be constructed with private funds, but when it opened, NARA would step in to administer the archives and oversee the museum.
The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the main records keeping and archival organisation of the United States. The organisation is led by the Archivist of the United States, and they are appointed by the President of the United States. The main National Archives building is in Washington, DC (though there are other major office facilities for the organisation in nearby Maryland). The rotunda of the National Archives building is where the founding documents of the United States - the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of the Rights, and the Constitution - are displayed.

It is important to understand the role of the NARA in the presidential library system. Enormous parts of every presidential library are archives, including storage areas for folders, boxes of gifts given to the president and first lady, cold rooms for footage and photos, and computers for electronic files. The amount of digital records that the NARA cares for has risen exponentially over the decades. The George H. W. Bush museum had 20 GB of electronic records (enough to be held easily on a medium range desktop computer). The Obama presidency had an estimated 250TB (enough to fill 500 desktop computers).

As soon as a presidency ends, the NARA begins the process of cataloguing and archiving the records of that presidency. They are then taken to a holding location before they are transferred to the presidential library where they will stay indefinitely. With the end of the Trump presidency in January 2021, the NARA dutifully began the process of cataloguing and archiving the records of that presidency. The foundation raises the money, oversees the construction, and creates the museum (usually with the direct input of the president themselves and some input from NARA). Only when the museum opens does NARA step in to run the archives and museum spaces, with a joint use agreement signed between the head of the foundation and the Archivist of the United States.

Other spaces within the presidential library, however, will remain under the control of the foundation, and will be used for the foundation’s purposes. Many of the presidential libraries have large spaces that can be used for events and are available for conferences or even social functions like weddings.

Though presidential libraries tend to be somewhat biased in favour of the president at first, in time NARA is able to renovate either parts of exhibitions or the entire exhibition. This process will update the museums with modern scholarship and changing historical interpretations. The renovated presidential libraries often have a more ‘balanced’ view of that past.

For example, the original Watergate exhibit at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library was renovated in 2011 to remove the original bias and present a better representation of events. More recently, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library received a $25 million renovation over 2019-22, which updated the museum, better reflecting controversies over the use of nuclear weapons, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Korean War. A renovation of the Eisenhower museum adopted the policy of “What would Ike say”, and sought to bring out Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower’s words and perspectives as much as possible.

A NARA-led renovation in 2012 updated the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library to better present the events of the Vietnam War. Another renovation at the Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library from 2010-13 discussed controversial topics, like the treatment of Jewish refugees in the years leading up to the Holocaust, and the internment of Japanese-American civilians during the Second World War. The Kennedy, Ford, Carter, and Reagan libraries have all made extensive changes to their galleries in the last two decades.

Referring to the renovated museums, David Ferrero, the Archivist of the United States said that “These efforts have brought refreshed exhibits, new technology, and creative interactive experiences that allow visitors to better understand the context of each President’s life, and times.”

“As cultural and educational institutions, the Libraries make unique and vital contributions to communities across the nation.”

Tim Naftali, the former director of the Nixon Presidential Library, wrote that the renovations of exhibitions by NARA were aimed at ‘examining aspects of a presidential legacy – the good, the bad, and the ugly’. In the specific case of FDR, he wrote that ‘the goal wasn’t to tarnish Roosevelt... it was to give a fuller sense of the man, his times, and his misuse of power’. Presidential libraries represent 16% of NARA’s budget (see funding section), but account for 63% of National Archive visitors. Overall, the thirteen presidential libraries attracted 1.9 million visitors in 2019.
Presidential Foundations

Before looking at the case studies it is worth a quick explanation of presidential foundations. These are non-profit organisations that support the presidential libraries and act to further the legacy of the president to which they are devoted.

The first task of these organisations is to raise funding to build the presidential library. Once a site is selected, it is the presidential foundation that contracts the architect and the exhibit designer.

Some of these organisations are very active, especially if their president has left office recently. The Clinton Foundation, for example, has a wide range of humanitarian activities. The Ronald Reagan Foundation and Institute sponsors polling and hosts policy related events (including the Reagan Institute Strategy Group and the Westminster 2.0 Working Group) with the aim of promoting the political principles that Reagan championed.

Other presidential foundations are more focused on supporting their Presidential Library, rather than participating in public debate. These tend to represent more distantly historic presidencies, like those of Gerald Ford or Harry S. Truman. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation lists its objective as supporting the Harry S. Truman. The Lyndon Baines Johnson presidencies, like those of Gerald Ford or Harry S. Truman. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation lists its objective as supporting the presidential library system.

In its Financial Year 2023 Financial Justification, NARA request $449.5 million in discretionary appropriations. Of that, $97.6 million was for the ten presidential libraries and act to further the legacy of the president to which they are devoted.

Currently, Presidential Libraries are funded from several sources:

• Direct US government funding, approved by Congress, for NARA.
• Funds generated from the museum itself (admissions, gift shops etc).
• Donations, gift funds, trust fund revenue.
• Endowments. Provided by the foundation at the outset to cover operating and maintenance costs.
• Fundraising from the presidential foundation. In its Financial Year 2023 Financial Justification, NARA request $449.5 million in discretionary appropriations. Of that, $97.6 million was for the presidential library system.

The first presidential library for which this applied was the George H. W. Bush Library. The foundation provided a $4.4 million endowment. Then, the Clinton foundation provided a $7.2 million endowment. Finally, the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum provided a $9.7 million endowment. These endowments were based on the cost of the usable square footage transferred to NARA’s control.

The Presidential Libraries Act of 1986 reformed the financial system. In order to save taxpayer money, it required an endowment of 20% of the initial construction costs of the museum to be transferred to the Federal government to fund the facility’s running costs. The foundations that built the first Bush Library, the Clinton Library and the George W. Bush Library provided endowments of 20 percent of the cost of the library. This endowment would be larger if the facility was bigger than 70,000 square feet.

In 2008, the Presidential Historical Records Preservation Act of 2008 was passed by Congress. This increased the size of the endowment to 60 percent of the cost of the library itself.

Funding

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

International Council of Museums (ICOM), 2022


Changes to the Presidential Library Model, 2017–22

The matter has arisen again in the construction of the Obama Presidential Library in Chicago. In May 2017, the Obama Foundation announced that the endowment of 60% of the museum’s construction costs was too much, pushing the overall cost to nearly a billion dollars. Consequently, they decided that the site would host a museum, a ‘working center for citizenship’, and a number of other attractions, but would not host a library. Robbin Cohen, the executive director of the Obama Foundation, stated that the ‘financial requirements’ were a key factor in the decision.36

NARA will therefore play no role in the Obama Presidential Center and it will not be an official presidential library. Instead, the Obama Foundation will pay to digitise the entire 30 million pages of Obama’s administration and present them online.37

The move was criticised by some, who worried about the interpretation of history. Others were more positive. The author Anthony Clark, who has written on presidential libraries, referred to the decision as a “an unambiguous good for the American taxpayer”, by removing from present them online.35

However, the current model of the NARA led presidential libraries will likely change in the future, with forthcoming presidential libraries much more likely to be overseen by the foundation, rather than NARA.

Additionally, on 16 November 2022, the NARA reached an agreement with the George W. Bush Foundation to change their relationship as well. This agreement transferred the museum and volunteer programme to the Foundation at the beginning of 2023 (further details on this agreement are in the George W. Bush Presidential Library section). However, NARA will continue to operate the archives.

Despite this change, NARA was clear that ‘no changes to the museums from the Hoover through Clinton administrations are being contemplated: But, the NARA statement did say that the new arrangement ‘also reflects NARA’s intent, with regard to museum operations, for the administrations of George W. Bush forward’.38

Therefore, the current model of the NARA led presidential libraries will likely change in the future, with forthcoming presidential libraries much more likely to be overseen by the foundation, rather than NARA.

As cultural and educational institutions, the Libraries make unique and vital contributions to communities across the nation. They have unparalleled research collections which, when combined with a public museum and public programs, provide researchers, students, and the general public a rich opportunity for understanding individual Presidents, the historical context of the times in which they lived and served, and the nature of the American Presidency. The Libraries also provide forums where scholars and citizens across the nation interact, ponder, and discuss the highest actions of our Federal Government, and consider issues both domestic and global in scope.’ NARA

The museums have been praised. Jodi Kanter wrote that they are ‘performative’ spaces, offering both “romance about individual achievement” and a “particular version of the American story in order to dramatize particular ideas about who the president is and what he does.”40

Former Archivist of the United States, David Ferreiro stated that Presidential Libraries are the ‘jewels in [the] National Archives’ crown’.41

Moreover, presidential libraries tend to be popular local museums. The Clinton museum is the third most popular attraction in Little Rock, according to TripAdvisor.42 While presidential museums may display bias at first, they can evolve over time to be more objective, particularly with the NARA’s influence.

Controversies and Criticisms

According to NARA, in their 2009 report to Congress:

As publicly financed information centers, these libraries are viewed by many Americans, of all political persuasions, as dependable sources of information. It is important to understand that these libraries are imperfect and each library’s reworking with a complex past has taken years—usually after the passing of not only the president and first lady but also their key advisers. But, over time, they have the capacity to become more objective and less selective. Tim Naftali

Tim Naftali, a former presidential library director, is a prominent defender of the presidential library system.

©MoPM

The libraries have also displayed innovation, experimenting with exhibitions, technology, outreach, and renovations, to ensure that they continue to provide a public service.44

For example, during the Covid pandemic, the Reagan library quickly created a series of online events, reaching unprecedented numbers of people.45

By quickly developing or honing creative digital strategies to replace “analog” programs our visitors once enjoyed in-person and on-site, we found we were able to ultimately reach interested audiences 10 times or even 100 times greater than we had seen before. Our routine of hosting two on-stage conversations each month with visiting dignitaries, lawmakers, media personalities, authors, and entertainers was soon replaced by two or three virtual events every week.46

John Huebusch, Reagan Library.

It will be no surprise, however, that the presidential library system has been the subject of criticism. There are five major criticisms of the presidential library and museum system, most of which are far more concerned with the museum part than the archival one:

They are hagiographical and distort history. Critics of the presidential library system often attack the way that museums allegedly whitewash history, presenting a hagiographic version of the recent past. Consequently, more awkward and difficult facets of presidencies go unmentioned, or are glossed over. Critics note that there is little mention of controversies like Iran-Contra at the Reagan museum or the Monica Lewinsky affair at the Clinton museum. For many years, the Nixon museum presented Watergate as merely a plot against Nixon, something that has become attached to the presidency: “We had seen before. Our routine of hosting two on-stage conversations each month with visiting dignitaries, lawmakers, media personalities, authors, and entertainers was soon replaced by two or three virtual events every week.”50

Anthony Clark noticed an inverse relationship between presidential libraries and respect. “We once held the office of president, as well as its occupant, in high regard. As we have lowered our opinions of both, presidential libraries, consequently, have grown larger and more powerful—and, not incidentally, less truthful.”54

Expensive. More practical criticisms have centred on the expense of presidential museums. The museums cost the US taxpayer around $100 million every year.

Anthony Clark has been one of the biggest critics of the presidential library system. In his book, The Last Campaign, he wrote that presidential libraries give former presidents the best of both worlds, allowing them control over displays, while being able to call upon the government’s stamp of approval, and the (free, to them) services of government archivists, curators, exhibit specialists, technicians, and others.59

Wasteful. Professor Jonathan Zimmerman argued in the Tampa Bay Times that multiple presidential libraries are a wasteful way of distributing presidential records, and sometimes rely on dubious funding. He argued in favour of a single institution for the archives.

Scott Reeder wrote in Shaw Local that “These facilities have increasingly become tabernacles glorifying presidencies rather than merely places of scholarship.”50 Similarly, David Dayen wrote in Salon in August 2005: “… the record shows that history suffers when presidents build fortresses around their accomplishments and use well-funded public relations strategies to obscure the facts.”58

But why should each president get his own library? Multiple libraries are wasteful, costing taxpayers millions of dollars every year. And they’re undemocratic, because they allow our presidents — not the people who elected them — to define their legacies.

If all presidential records were located in one place — say, a Center for Presidential Research — we wouldn’t have to operate 13 of them. More Americans would be able to visit the facility. And most of all, we would all participate in telling the story of our presidency: Jonathan Zimmerman.54

Low visitation. Other critics have argued that the problem with presidential museums is that the government effectively subsidises museums that are not well visited. Attendance tends to decline with time. The most visited presidential museum (Ronald Reagan’s at Simi Valley, California) attracted some 370,000-400,000 a year before the pandemic. More commonly, visitation fluctuates between around 50,000 per year and 200,000.51

To compare, the most popular National Historical Parks in the US include Colonial (incorporating Jamestown and Yorktown) and Gettysburg battlefield, attracting around 3 million and 1.7 million visitors per year.54 The Smithsonian National Museum of American History received 2.8 million visitors in 2019.

The average visitor number of visitors to a National Park historic site was roughly 500,000 in 2019 (though with very considerable variation).55 Though, such comparisons might be a little unfair; one should take into account the location of presidential libraries, which tend to be more regional than the most visited US museums which are in major cities like Washington DC or New York.

Libraries have a damaging political impact. Philip Kennicott argued in the Washington Post in January 2021, that the larger scam that has become attached to the presidency: the use of presidential libraries and museums to entrench perpetual fundraising and hagiography as a permanent part of every post-presidential career.56

Perhaps the starkest example of this was in relation to the Clinton Center, when there were controversies over funding, with the ex-wife of a pardoned businessman making a substantial donation to the library.57 The library refused to release a list of donors, arguing that such a release would be flagrantly violative of the First Amendment and we would resist it.58

Additionally, the foundations, once established, retain an ‘everlasting life’ as political organisations, whose activities, according to historian Rick Perlstein, ‘often conflict with NARA’s legislative requirements’.59
William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum

Subject: William (Bill) J. Clinton, President of the United States, 1993-2001

Opened: 2004

Location: Little Rock, Arkansas, USA


Designer: Ralph Appelbaum Associates

Cost: $165m

Ticket price: Adults $12 for, $10 concession, Youth $7 (free for young children, military, university students and school groups).

Ratings: 4.4 Google reviews, 4.5/5 TripAdvisor, #3 top attraction in Little Rock on TripAdvisor

Origins

Planning for the Clinton library began in 1997 before Bill Clinton left office. Ultimately, however, Bill Clinton himself was deeply involved in the design of the museum and was effectively ‘the first curator’. Ralph Applebaum, the official designer of the exhibit referred to Clinton as ‘the curator in chief’. It was opened in 2004, in a ceremony attended by four US presidents. Clinton said at the dedication that “While this library will expose the past through the documents and explain the policies, as you might imagine, we won’t stop thinking about tomorrow. The mission of this library and foundation indeed will be largely devoted to the future.”

Clinton said that he wanted the museum to teach people ‘what it’s like to be president’, he added:

“When people come here, I hope they will see, whether they agreed or disagreed with what I did, that people in public life... embrace certain policies and those policies have consequences in the lives of people.” Bill Clinton.

The exhibits at the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum tell the story of President Clinton’s life and the Clinton Presidency.”

31
Visitor Experience

The museum is located in a spectacular glass building overlooking the Arkansas River, designed to resemble a ‘bridge to the 21st Century’. Richard Olcott and James S. Polshek, the design partners, stated that their design was a ‘crystalline bridge… between monumentality and physical and intellectual accessibility’. The archives are located in a building on the other side of the museum from the photo on the opposite page.

The Center is enormous. It contains the museum and archives, as well as a large Clinton Presidential Park around the building, the preserved Choctaw Station (the home of the Clinton Public Policy Institute and the Clinton Foundation), and the 1899 Rock Island Railroad Bridge across the river. There is also a restaurant, ‘42 Bar and Table’, located in the Center’s main building.

The Center’s grounds also feature exhibitions, including the recent Cool Globes: Hot Ideas for a Cooler Planet, which features large globe art sculptures ‘designed to raise awareness of solutions to climate change’. A mobile app guides visitors around the globes.

Upon entering the museum, after buying a ticket, the visitor’s attention is drawn to a limousine that Clinton used during his time as President. It is a big, lobby item and the first thing that the visitors see in the museum. After that, visitors view a 12-minute film, narrated by Clinton himself. This provides an introduction to his life, his connection with Little Rock, and to his presidency. The film also gives a short summary of Clinton’s achievements, with clips from Clinton’s State of the Union speeches, and his retrospective take on his presidency. Finally, Clinton speaks about the goodness of the American people and his faith in America.

An app, downloadable on Android and iPhone stores is narrated by Clinton himself and provides a personal perspective on the items in the galleries. This app provides:

- A map of the museum.
- A guided tour of the museum. Every section consists of a short introduction and then a minute or two of narration by Bill Clinton. There is approximately an hour of content, and the tour dates from 2006.
- A tour of ‘Bill Clinton’s Arkansas’. This points to sites in the state that Clinton aficionados can visit. These include his birthplace, his boyhood home, the Arkansas State Capitol, the Old State House, and the building that was the 1992 election campaign headquarters. The app has a short description of each location and photographs.
- Quizzes and games for children.

One of the first rooms that the visitor encounters is a fully accessible recreation of the Cabinet Room in the White House.

Screens in the table introduce the presidency, describing the many cabinet positions and who filled them during the Clinton administration. A menu screen allows visitors to explore some of the decisions Clinton made, including over the budget crisis of 1995-6, welfare reform, and the Kosovo War of 1999.

Short biographies of cabinet members are provided, while a timeline allows the viewer to navigate between the different periods of the crisis. The viewer can choose to view speeches or interviews with key staffers (for example, James Steinberg, the Deputy National Security Adviser, provides context in an interview given for the museum in 2004).
The activities of the Clinton government are presented in fourteen alcoves, with titles such as ‘Restoring the Economy’, ‘Building a Global Community’, ‘Preparing for New Threats’, ‘Protecting the Earth’, and ‘Making Communities Safer’. The alcoves are numbered, but there is no obligation to follow the numbering.

The alcoves are packed with documents, signage, photographs, graphs, and screens. Many of the items on display in the main part of the museum are gifts or ceremonial items. These became property of the state when they were given to Clinton and make up a large part of the collection. There are three types of item in the Clinton museum: NARA’s collection; Clinton family items (on deposit or courtesy storage); loan items.

Striking items on display include:

- The saxophone Clinton famously played at his inaugural ball (a loan item).
- A chessboard displaying the key figures of the Northern Ireland peace process.
- A matryoshka nesting doll of five presidents.
- A football jersey with ‘Clinton 42’ on the back, gifted by the Titans football players.

A central timeline demonstrates the key events of the Clinton years. These are topped by a quote from Clinton (for example, from his 1993 inaugural address) and feature photographs taken during that year. On the right-hand side of the panels is a summary of the year.

The timeline itself highlights milestones in the Clinton administrations. For example, the 1998 timeline has large panels on ‘President Begins Historic Tour of Africa’, ‘Good Friday Agreement Signed in Northern Ireland’, and ‘President Vows to Save Social Security’. The central timeline has Clinton’s schedules from those years provided in folders, allowing visitors to find out exactly what was happening on every day of Clinton’s administration.

After the Cabinet Room, the visitor proceeds into the permanent galleries. The key design elements of the Clinton museum can be found in this photograph (right). In the centre is a 110-foot timeline, with summaries of each year of the Clinton administration, and around it are the alcoves dedicated to aspects of policy. On the upper floor, there are displays on Life in the White House, Clinton’s early life, and his years as governor. As can be seen, it is a very open and accessible layout, allowing visitors to find their own way around.

The striking design is modelled on the library at Trinity College Dublin. The pillars of the museum display some of the records of the archive, approximately 3%, giving an indication of the enormous size of the Clinton Library’s documentation.11
On the other side of the year panels, interactive screens allow visitors to watch speeches and news reports from those years. Cases display selected documents, including correspondence with the musician Elton John in 1993 and the actor Paul Newman in 1996.

The museum makes very extensive use of documents. Documents are displayed throughout the exhibition. Facsimiles of Clinton's letters, drafts of speeches, talking points, treaties, and pieces of legislation are found in all of the displays.

Some of these items are very interesting, including Clinton's handwritten annotations to drafts of the Good Friday Agreement and the handwritten notes that Clinton's defence attorney, Dale Bumpers, gave during the impeachment hearing ('DON'T – FOR GOD'S SAKE HEIGHTEN THE ALIENATION').

The upper floor is split into four parts. There is a display of pre-presidency items (including Clinton's youth and early political career), a display on Life in the White House, a temporary exhibition space, and a recreation of the Oval Office. This cabinet shows campaign memorabilia and photographs.

Other personal items include Clinton's report card for 'Billy Blythe': his name changed to Clinton when his mother remarried in 1950) and some childhood drawings.

A large part of the upper floor is dedicated to 'Life in the White House': This includes a look at 'State Events'. This is a table laid out as if it were for NATO's 50th anniversary dinner at the White House in 1999. Displays nearby depict photographs of the event, invitations, and menus.

Items displayed in Life in the White House include a 'Crystal Tree of Light' which stood in the White House Foyer over Christmas 1999, a gown worn by Hillary Clinton, and state gifts, including Samurai swords, vases, paintings, and sculptures.

Another cabinet looks at 'Making This House a Home', and it includes photographs that show a more personal side to the Clinton family. Most of the items in this section are gifts that were given by the American people to the Clintons. As a result, these items are more identifiable Americana, including signed baseballs and footballs, patriotic art, and cowboy boots. There is also the display of saxophones pictured.

The final part of the Clinton museum is a replica of the Oval Office, 'identical in every detail' (according to the app) to how it appeared during Clinton's presidency. Visitors can pose for a photograph behind the Resolute Desk. This version of the Oval Office contains real items from Clinton's 1990s office.

In the app, Clinton described the Oval Office as the 'best place in the world to work'. He then tells an anecdote about an adviser informing him that only presidents that like the Oval Office and enjoy working there are re-elected.

Reconstructed parts of the White House are common features of presidential libraries. Almost all of them have a version of the Oval Office (or that particular president's main workspace). Some of the libraries have other replica rooms on display as well. The Nixon library has the East Room and the George H. W. Bush library has the Situation Room.
A tour of the presidential library reveals the scale of the archival parts of the building.

The exhibition space was not open in August 2022. However, the Clinton museum runs a temporary exhibition programme with a wide range of topics. This photograph shows a mock-up of a couch similar to that of the television show Friends. It relates to a recent exhibition called “… Like It’s 1999: American Popular Culture in the 1990s”. It exhibited items from the museum’s collection related to American culture during the 1990s. During his presidency, Clinton was gifted thousands of items, and many of these relate to 1990s popular culture. Consequently, the Clinton museum is a repository of 1990s culture, and one of the few museums to collect items from that era. The museum also borrowed items from movie studios, private lenders, and other museums.

The most recent exhibition was called ‘Women’s Voices, Women’s Votes, Women’s Rights’. The exhibition explored the history of the women’s suffrage movement. Other exhibitions have looked at the Louisiana Purchase, presidential pets, Coca Cola, and the career of the band the Beatles.

A tour of the presidential library reveals the scale of the archival parts of the building.

The library has hundreds of thousands of boxes of documents. The library employs several archivists with different responsibilities, including paper, audio-visual, and photographic. The storage areas are a sea of boxes and files. There are enormous facilities for physical objects, papers, and even cold storage facilities for fragile film footage.

In total, the Clinton Presidential Library contains 602 tons of archival documents, 78 million pages of official records, 20 million emails, 2.6 million photographs, 12,400 videotapes, and over 5,900 audio recordings.

Even today, the archivists are still regularly contacted by people who met Clinton during his presidency, and who would like to request the official photograph that was taken at the time.

Outreach

The Clinton museum has a very strong online presence. The website is a key part of NARA’s work. The website of the presidential library also links to the Clinton Digital Library, which is a virtual research room and digital repository that provides free and open access to the digitized collections of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library & Museum to everyone, anywhere in the world.

It provides digital research guides on key topics during the Clinton era, such as the Dissolution of Yugoslavia, Health Care Reform, and ‘The Exclusive Fraternity: Bill Clinton’s Relationship with Former Presidents’. All of these pages provide a summary, photographs, speeches, and key documents from the Clinton White House.

This website makes key documents from the Clinton era available online, including Clinton’s daily schedules. It also makes a large number of other documents available online from other aspects of the Clinton White House’s work.

There are also online exhibitions. For example, a recent one is about President Clinton’s trip to Africa in 1998. The page has pictures of items related to the trip from the museum’s collections, digitised documents, and a link to an archived webpage from the Clinton era White House website.
The Clinton library also has a YouTube channel, where it displays speeches and visual material from the Clinton years.84

Additionally, the NARA website has an ‘Advise the President’ series, which is a ‘ready-to-use tool that provides teachers with an opportunity to bring historic Presidential decisions into the classroom.’ One of these documents relates to Clinton and asks ‘What Should the United States Do About the Kosovo Crisis?’85

The Clinton Foundation is based on the site, and it is the main public relations organisation for the Clinton family. It carries out a range of charitable activities. It also runs outreach programmes like ‘Days of Action’, which facilitates volunteering after natural disasters, and the Global Initiative University programme, a dynamic community of students committed to developing innovative solutions to the world’s most pressing challenges.86

NARA work with the Clinton Foundation, and the onsite School of Public Policy, to deliver some of the educational and community outreach. A lot of the outreach work is linked to the building itself, such as tours and programmes about the Clinton era. There is also educational work that the NARA does across the country and in all NARA presidential libraries (related to items like the Constitution and Bill of Rights).87

The Foundation’s work tends to focus more on civic engagement and helping people to develop skills that allow them to be effective in civil life. Because they are a partisan political organisation, they can be slightly more ‘edgy’ in their approaches to teaching and topics. They can run programmes aimed at instilling and shaping values. By contrast, NARA is a US government organisation, and is therefore committed to political balance and objectivity. Consequently, NARA educational programmes are more about history, how government works, the constitution, and archival topics.88

Institutional Information

As mentioned, the Clinton museum is a presidential library and therefore receives funding from the US government (for the museum and archives), and is supported by the Clinton Foundation. It is governed by the policies of the NARA, but these are not comprehensive, and the director and senior leadership do have some latitude to make their own decisions.

The funding and management of the museum is a ‘public-private partnership’, with funds coming from both the Federal government and the Foundation’s fundraising and endowment.

The NARA representatives and the foundation work together to ensure the running of the presidential library. Ultimately, this means that there is a balancing act between the requirements of NARA and the Foundation’s influence.

There is a great deal of ongoing negotiation and conversation with the Clinton Foundation. There are shared spaces, NARA spaces, and some spaces controlled by the foundation. Therefore, even on quite mundane issues like cleaning, there needs to be a lot of negotiation.89

Reception

According to Suzi Parker, writing in the Christian Science Monitor, ‘The goal all along has been to transform the city into a tourist haven with an emphasis on Clintonland’.90 In this respect, the library has been rewarded with local success, and has been credited with spurring redevelopment.91 The 2009 NARA report to Congress stated that ‘the Clinton Library helped provide the catalyst for the re-birth of downtown Little Rock’.92

It is one of the most popular presidential libraries. In its opening years, it regularly received 300-400,000 visitors per year. By 2019 that figure was 577,900, which is fairly high for a presidential library93

Parker wrote that ‘Like the presidency it will portray, like the man himself, Bill Clinton’s new presidential library is a mix of substance and flash, dusted with scandal, wrapped in drama.’94 The museum has been criticised for not being entirely forthcoming with details of his scandals. Critics noted that the section on scandals was quite brief, compared to other displays.95 ‘Where is Monica Lewinsky?’, asked Roland Watson of the Times.96

In the early years, people went to court to try and prevent the Clinton library from being built. There were even protestors outside during the early months. After a while, a lot of further attacks came with Hillary Clinton’s continuing political career.

For a long time, controversy centred on the Lewinsky affair, with plenty of mocking requests for the location of Lewinsky’s blue dress. Even today, the Clinton presidential library faces online vitriol directed at the Clintons.

86 ‘Nausheen Husain and Alex Bordens, ‘10 ways to keep up attendance at a presidential library’.
89 ‘What Should the United States Do About the Kosovo Crisis?’ National Archives and Records Administration, 26 November 2018.
94 ‘What Should the United States Do About the Kosovo Crisis?’ National Archives and Records Administration, 26 November 2018.
95 ‘What Should the United States Do About the Kosovo Crisis?’ National Archives and Records Administration, 26 November 2018.
Analysis and Lessons

The Clinton Presidential Library is a good example of a successful presidential library. It presents its topic well and in a coherent way. The museum’s narrative about the achievements of the Clinton administration is very clear, while the museum is very clearly shaped by Clinton himself. It has had a significant impact on the local area and has generally been credited with leading the transformation of downtown Little Rock.

Few presidential libraries better illustrate the role of NARA. NARA is a crucial part of the presidential library system. The Clinton library has enormous facilities for documents, photographs, and film, as well as space for researchers. The dual function of the Center, as museum and archive, is fundamentally important to understanding the presidential library system. Any Museum of Prime Ministers should really think twice before attempting to construct a large archive. Without the support of the National Archives, such an endeavour would be wasteful, and largely pointless.

Whereas the Clinton museum was very high tech at the time of its creation, it is rather less so today. The interactive displays in the museum feel quite clunky and are very much of their time.

Some of the displays suffer from the problems of being too close to the events they discuss. The alcove dedicated to ‘Making Communities Safer’ presents Clinton’s crime policy as a success, while, in hindsight, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 cannot be presented as an unqualified success, given the enormous increase in prison incarceration that was a direct consequence. Clinton himself later expressed regret over how onerous the bill was.35

The Lewinsky affair, which heavily damaged Clinton’s public image, is framed in the context of Republican efforts to undermine Clinton’s presidency, and a glass panel discusses ‘The Politics of Persecution’. The nature of the affair is referred to euphemistically only as ‘the relationship’.36 This has been a point of controversy around the museum because many critics felt that it did not properly address the scandal.

One of the advantages of NARA’s curatorial role is that inevitably these areas of the museum will be reconfigured in a way that better reflects scholarship. After 20 or 30 years, there will be a much more complete perspective. With hindsight, the intended and unintended consequences of political decision-making are far better understood.

The museum also demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of the involvement of a principal political figure. Clinton helped design the museum itself and he narrates the audio guide, creating a very personal feel for the library. The app is excellent. Clinton’s tour of the museum provides a memorable personal perspective on what is, ultimately, his museum. It also provides points of interest outside the museum as well. But, as mentioned, there are issues with the museum’s tone and partisanship. With time, the influence of the Clinton Foundation and Clinton himself will wane. But in the short to medium term, it is important to acknowledge that working with political figures will entail certain costs.

In many respects, the presidential library model is not a good model for MoPM. MoPM is unlikely to be able to call upon the sort of resources (financial and spatial) that are available to US presidential libraries.

• US presidential libraries have the ability to shape their own design and architecture. MoPM would most likely have to rely on existing facilities.

• US presidential libraries can also call upon the assistance of wealthy foundations, which tend to be political organisations and programme leaders in their own right.

The museum makes wide use of objects and paper artefacts to present the history of the Clinton administration. MoPM should aim to cooperate with the National Archives to find documents that can shine a light on prime ministers and facsimiles of which might be displayed in the museum.

The museum runs a range of interesting temporary exhibitions, few of which are directly related to Clinton’s presidency. MoPM should consider having temporary exhibition space and then running a wide selection of exhibitions on subjects that, while politically related, might allow the museum a wider remit than just prime ministers.

The use of recreated parts of the White House, including the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room, are another memorable feature of the museum.

Origins

Work on the George W. Bush Presidential Library began even before Bush was sworn in as president. After Bush's victory in the 2000 election, Southern Methodist University was reportedly already considering a bid. The Bush White House began discussing the project after Bush's re-election in 2004. Many sites were discussed, including Waco, Arlington (Texas), Austin, and Dallas. Ultimately, SMU in Dallas was selected in 2008.

The George W. Bush Presidential Foundation raised over $300 million for the construction of the centre and as an endowment for the library. The building was designed by the Manhattan Construction Company, which also designed the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library. The museum was dedicated on 25 April 2013.

NARA was involved in the creation of the permanent exhibitions. Unlike Clinton, Bush took a more ‘hands off’ approach to the creation of the exhibitions. He did not want a glorified retrospective and wanted the museum to ‘let the record speak’.

Visitor Experience

The museum is housed in an impressive neoclassical inspired building on the Southern Methodist University Campus in Dallas, Texas. The building itself provides a museum (with permanent and temporary galleries), archival area (underground), courtyard café, restaurant (called Café 43), gift shop, and space for the foundation. Additionally, within the building is a large auditorium and seminar rooms that are used by the Bush Institute. Around the building is a 15-acre urban park, which features native Texas wildflowers and plants, as well as butterfly and bird habitats.

A large space called the ‘Freedom Hall’ has an audio-visual display showing people and landscapes.

Alcove style displays in the entrance hall show gifts received by Bush during his presidency. According to staff, visitors enjoy seeing items in this part of the museum because they are often either particularly spectacular (containing gold or other precious metals) or a window onto the particular culture from which they came.

As with the Clinton Library, once the presidential library opened, the museum and archives became Federal property, and the National Archive and Records Administration moved in. Some areas of the site remain under the administration of the foundation.
The first exhibition space that deals directly with Bush's presidency looks at the early months. January-September 2001. It is split into three parts: Empower Growth, Education Reform, and Faith-Based and Community Initiative. An interactive screen shows how families, businesses and individuals benefited from the early tax cuts of the Bush administration. Interactive wheels also showed how Bush's tax cuts had an impact. The section on education reform has a mock playground and a display of books. The sharpie Bush used to sign the legislation is displayed. Another display, 'Tee Ball of the South Lawn', is of the 'President's Baseball Collection', showing a selection of baseballs and a baseball bat. Programmes are displayed from the baseball games that took place for children on the South Lawn of the White House during Bush's presidency.

Another cabinet displays Laura Bush's inaugural ball gown, as well as tickets and speech cards from the inaugural events. From there, visitors proceed into a new space, starkly different from the one before. This part of the exhibition is called 'A Nation Under Attack'. On circular concrete walls, television screens play news footage of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. In the middle is a twisted section of the World Trade Center's internal metal columns. This is one of the most moving and affecting places in the museum. The museum docents inform guests that it is a memorial (rather than a museum object) and, as such, they are allowed to touch the damaged metal.

On the walls, around the screens, are the names of people who were killed in the attacks. This is a visually striking, and dramatic, part of the museum, symbolising the decisive change in Bush's government that took place due to the 9/11 attacks.

The following part of the exhibition deals with the aftermath and the response to the attacks. A booth allows visitors to share their memories. A White House emergency guide, a folded American flag, newspaper and document facsimiles, and a US military telephone that Bush used on 9/11 are displayed in the cabinets. One of the most iconic items within the museum is also displayed here; the bullhorn that he used to deliver his famous remarks on the World Trade Center site on 14 September.

A timeline explores Bush's response to the attacks over the days that followed. An interactive daily diary explores Bush's schedule for the weeks that followed, with highlighted lines providing further information, photographs, and video clips. A board proclaims that 'This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing.' Other items include newspaper reports, letters from children, Bush's address to the Joint Session of Congress, notes, and the baseball that Bush threw at the 2001 World Series at Yankee Stadium in New York, seven weeks after the attacks.

The next section of museum 'Defending Freedom' deals with the Global War on Terror, the response to the 9/11 attacks, and foreign policy. It largely corresponds to Bush's first term. A large map shows terrorist attacks and the administration's response. An accompanying timeline marks milestones during the campaign. This area has interactive timelines, as well as audio-visual displays and conventional displays of items.
At the end of this part of the exhibition, a theatre style room plays extracts from Bush’s less serious speeches.

All of the sections within these displays are structured around decisions that Bush took, themselves subdivided into different sections: Understanding Situation, Define Strategy, Take Action, Evaluate Results, Advance Strategy, and Adapt for Future.

Display cases show items from the Iraq and Afghan wars. These include a firearm that was in Saddam Hussein’s possession when he was captured, a newspaper from the Iraq War, cards from the famous most-wanted Iraqis playing card set. There is a traditional Afghan rug gifted to Bush, a ballot paper from one of the elections, and Bush’s ‘Let Freedom Ring’ note from when he was informed that Iraq had been returned to sovereignty.

The next part of the museum is dedicated to Life in the White House. It is effectively an interlude between the policy focused parts of the museum. The museum galleries before this point mostly deal with Bush’s first term, while the policy-focused galleries after the Life in the White House gallery largely deal with Bush’s second term.

Like the Clinton museum, the Bush museum contains a reproduction of the Oval Office (with a condensed version of the Rose Garden outside, kept in verdant green, despite the unforgiving Texas climate). This is the only full-sized reproduction of the Oval Office in a presidential library that visitors can walk into and explore (other such displays are roped off, allowing visitors to look, but not walk into). Visitors can also sit at the Resolute Desk. According to staff, this is a popular part of the museum.

The photograph (left) shows the main part of the Life in the White House gallery. In the foreground, there are statues of the Bush dogs. Below the statues are touchscreens that allow children to play games, including one where they play as the Bush dogs looking for food.

©MoPM

As can be seen from the photographs, there is a lot of space in the museum exhibitions halls for visitors, and they are welcome to choose their own route around the exhibits.

Visible in the foreground of the photograph on the previous page is an interactive table, ‘Defending Freedom’, which takes the visitors through the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. These offer the viewer the ability to explore the stages of these conflicts, providing key documents, photographs, footage, maps, and historical context. The items can be reshaped and manipulated on the table itself, allowing visitors to make them larger.

©MoPM

There are also interactive screens which allow visitors to ‘ask questions’ to White House staffers, read letters that were sent to Bush, and watch footage of White House events, like state visits.

The cabinets in the background display a number of White House themed topics, including ‘The White House as House of State’, the ‘White House as a Museum’, and Air Force One. The latter displays Bush’s fleece jacket, and items related to the famous airliner. Another display shows various sports items gifted to Bush.

This display, ‘The White House as House of State’, features a white tie evening outfit worn by Bush and an evening gown worn by Laura Bush during the state visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 2007. There is also a display of White House tableware and a table set out as if for one of these events. Visitors can read a menu on display at the front of the case or watch footage of state occasions on the screen.

At the end of this part of the exhibition, a theatre style room plays extracts from Bush’s less serious speeches, such as the White House Press Association Dinner. It also shows extracts from interviews with Bush’s daughters, Jenna and Barbara.

At this point, the visitor returns to the main exhibition galleries about Bush’s Presidency. This part of the museum largely focuses on Bush’s second term. A display of photographs is topped by a quote from Bush: ‘Freedom is the Right and Hope of all Humanity’. A display entitled ‘Acting with Compassion’ discusses Bush’s programme for Aids and HIV relief in Africa.
This section largely looks at the Bush administration’s policies in the developing world, and particularly the campaigns to prevent and treat diseases in Africa. A large map, made up of faces, is titled ‘Building a More Hopeful World’.

‘Shining a Light’ discusses some of Laura Bush’s trips and visits. There is a display of gifts that she received. An interactive display allows visitors to see her route, and a ‘momento’ from each trip is displayed in the case.

A large display titled ‘Leading on the Issues’ shows some of the paperwork that Bush dealt with. It also discusses some of the items that are in the museum’s archive. The archive contains:
- Approximately 43,000 gifts given to the President and First Lady.
- Almost 70 million pages of textual materials.
- About 30,000 audio-visual recordings.
- Just over 3.8 million photographs.
- 227 cubic feet of photo negatives.
- 209 million email messages.

The Decisions Points Theater is one of the most memorable and effective parts of the museum. It puts the visitor in Bush’s position and asks audience members to face the decisions that he took. The theatre contains a large screen at the front of the room, while every seat has an interactive screen in front of it. The visitors are then asked to choose from a selection of major events from the Bush administration: The Threat of Saddam Hussein roleplay, the Iraq Surge, and the Global Financial Crash of 2008.

When a selection is made, the audience then receives a short introduction briefing by former White House Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card and Joshua B. Bolten. Then, they have four minutes to select ‘advisers’. Each choice brings them two advisers to hear from, each giving a different view of the matter. For the Threat of Saddam Hussein roleplay, the advisers include CIA, Congress, Defense Department, Iraqi Academics, United Nations, and the White House. One adviser will advocate for a certain policy, while the other advocates against it. Viewers can indicate on a slider whether they agree with the perspective or not. Every few minutes, a news report style ‘breaking news’ screen pauses the interactive section, providing further context and increasing the pressure.

Visitors can indicate which option they are inclined to choose throughout the presentation, and a tracker can be seen on the screen. At the end, visitors vote on up to three options. For the Iraq Surge, the three options were ‘Train More Iraqi Troops’, ‘Pull Back’, and ‘Increase American Troops’. For the Financial Crisis, the choice was ‘Allow Institutions to Fail’ or ‘Use Federal Tax Dollars’.

After voting, the visitors receive the result and are also told how frequently other guests have made that same decision. At the end, Bush himself provides a short explanation for the decision that he took as president.

After the Decisions Points Theater, another display looks at ‘Protecting the Environment’. It lists the various achievements of the Bush administration in terms of protected ocean environments. An interactive display allows visitors to explore ocean and wildlife protection.

The rest of the Bush administration is dealt with quite swiftly, with several small displays entitled ‘Crisis Management’ and ‘Looking to the Horizon’. These look at Hurricane Katrina, the Financial Crisis, Immigration, Social Security, and Medicare. There are no display cases and objects. The sparse displays likely indicate, for the final three topics, a certain reluctance on the part of the designers to deal with more complicated topics so close to the end of the museum (and ones for which the Bush record was quite mixed).

A final display case contains items from Bush’s post-presidency life, including a shovel used for the Bush Presidential Library’s ground-breaking, cycling jersey, and a baseball cap. At the end of the permanent exhibition, a short film plays, in which George and Laura Bush reflect on his life after the presidency.

Like the Clinton museum, the Bush museum has a good sized exhibition space. During the summer of 2022, there was a colourful temporary exhibition, put on by the Foundation, entitled ‘Liberty & Laughter: The Lighter Side of the White House.’ This exhibition looked at the use of humour by presidents, as well as political satire, mockery, and the depiction of the presidency in popular culture.
Outreach

Like the Clinton museum, the Bush museum has a strong online presence. The website is a key part of NARA’s public records mission. There is a large website for the Bush administration and there are plans to digitise many of the Bush presidential records. The website includes the archived White House website, photographs, and Bush’s radio addresses.17 There is also an ‘artifacts gallery’ page, showing some of the interesting items in the museum.18

The Bush Museum has a very strong outreach programme, run by both NARA and the Foundation.

• The Presidential Hats Programme: Students examine evidence from the National Archives to determine the powers of the President using clues and deductive reasoning. Students rotate among seven stations, each equipped with a symbolic hat. The hat at each station represents a different role of the American President.19

• The Situation Room Experience: (Aimed at High School students) Students who will form teams to assume the roles of the Executive Office of the President and the President’s Cabinet in order to manage a constitutional crisis. Participating students must work together in a high stakes environment to examine a multitude of critical sources and make important decisions about developing events.20

The Situation Room Experience is only offered in three locations: the George W. Bush Presidential Library, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, and at Washington’s Mount Vernon (where it is changed to a purely historical experience called Washington’s Cabinet).21 This programme is available to both students and as a team building exercise for professionals.22

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• Camp 43: Each spring, the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum accepts applications from high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors for its 3-day summer camp. Focusing on the importance of leadership and the decision-making process, the experience includes group activities, discussions, and presentations from prominent and successful community and government leaders.23

• Student Lecture Series: The Student Lecture Series is an intern mentoring program for high school and college students. Interns conduct research based on a chosen topic related to the Museum’s permanent exhibit. This research topic can be a study of U.S. history, the American Presidency, or important issues of public policy. The research project concludes with a student-led lecture. Students present their research to their peers, the public, and to Presidential Library and Museum staff and docents in a classroom or lecture hall setting.24

• The museum also offers a Civics for All programme for school children featuring ‘Live, interactive distance learning programs are available for groups of 10 or more students free of charge: This course discusses topics including voting rights, the First Amendment, and the Constitution.25

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6 Sid. Ibid.
Institutional Information

There has been a recent change in the status of the George W. Bush presidential library.

On 16 November 2022, the Archivist of the United States announced that ‘the museum’ as well as the volunteer program will officially transfer from NARA to the Foundation on 1 January 2023. The agreement includes plans to digitise the Presidential records of the George W. Bush administration to make these materials discoverable and usable by the broadest possible audience.20

A memorandum of understanding established that:

- the Foundation will solicit historian and NARA input into major changes to the permanent exhibition galleries;
- NARA and the Foundation will establish signage that will distinguish between NARA and Foundation spaces;
- NARA will use Trust Funds to digitize the archival collections of the library to enable public access; and
- the next Archivist of the United States will provide input on the implementation of the new requirements.20

The NARA cited ‘long-term budget challenges’ as necessitating an evaluation of how services are provided and to assess the sustainability of current structures as the reason for the changes.20

Because it was run by NARA, like the other presidential libraries mentioned in this briefing, the museum was, until 2023, largely funded by the US taxpayer. This situation has now changed with the privatisation of the museum agreed in November 2022.26

The Bush Foundation itself raised $32.4 million dollars in 2021, largely from supporters and from the ‘endowment contribution to operations’. The Center itself ran at a ‘net loss’ in 2021, though that was attributed to ‘pandemic-related issues’.24

The Foundation has a museum membership programme, with membership ($50), dual membership ($85), family ($150), associate ($500), and patron ($1,000) tiers available. All offer a selection of benefits, including complimentary admission to both the Bush museum and other presidential libraries, invitations to exhibit openings, and discounts from the shop.22

Finally, the museum offers a ‘43 Club’ ($150) aimed at ‘young professionals...living in Dallas’. Membership of the 43 Club is much like the other membership tiers, but is more business oriented, offering ‘the opportunity to attend premium events, including thought-provoking discussions, social gatherings, and networking events’.24 For example, on 20 October 2022, the organisation hosted ‘Make the Ask: A conversation on how to effectively fundraise and communicate your organization’s mission’.26

The Bush Presidential Center is the home of the George W. Bush Institute, a ‘nonpartisan, public policy’ think tank that promotes Bush’s priorities.46 The institute has also worked on humanitarian projects, like supporting vaccination drives in developing countries.20

At the end of 2022, before the privatisation changes, there were 40 NARA employees working at the museum, plus student workers and interns, contractors, and more than 325 volunteers and docents.44

Volunteer docents can be found throughout the museum. They are there to guide visitors, provide impromptu tours, and often have stories about the exhibition or the local area that they will share. These docents volunteer for at least one 4.5-hour shift per week, and the website specifies that verbal communication and customer service skills are helpful, as are Spanish-English bilingual skills. In return, docents receive complimentary admission to both the Bush library and other presidential libraries, and invitations to events and exhibition openings.20

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Christopher Hawthorne, in the LA Times, compared the museum to Bush’s decision-focused memoir (Decision Points), reflecting on the ‘stripped down and unadorned’ architecture. The building, like the Bush presidency, aims to stay resolute even at the expense of some nuance. Perhaps the emblematic line of that presidency, after all, came in early 2002, not long after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when Bush said, “You’re either with us or against us; you’re either evil or you’re good.” Christopher Hawthorne

Critic of presidential libraries, Anthony Clark argued that it would, with time, struggle to attract visitors. He predicted that, given the history of low visitation at presidential museums, the new Bush Library will soon look a lot more like a Hooverville (a 1930s shanty-town) than the Shining City on the Hill.

Tim Naftali was much more critical, arguing that the museum was ‘obviously biased - and even downright misleading’ in some ways.

In explaining the outcome of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the museum asserts: ‘No stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction are found, although Iraq’s WMD-related program activities are still a threat,’ obfuscating the reality that Saddam Hussein’s WMD program was designed, colourful, and visually interesting. The galleries are detailed without being overwhelming. By choosing to focus on a limited number of topics, rather than a more complete approach, the museum achieves its aims very well. While it has a level of detail that would not be recommended for the MoPM, it is a logical and clear example.

There is a good sense of narrative. The museum’s galleries focus their attention on the strategic priorities and the major decisions of George W. Bush’s presidency. Not every topic of the Bush era is heavily covered, with several major events during Bush’s second term being dealt with very briefly. Although critics noted certain absences, the museum is more comprehensible for being less comprehensive.

There is a good selection of items, including some very famous and iconic ones, like the bullhorn used at Ground Zero and ‘hanging chads’ from the 2000 election. Other notable items include challenge coins given to Bush by families of soldiers killed in action, the gun that belonged to Saddam Hussein, and Bush’s handwritten notes from 9/11.

More personal items that are very popular with guests include the first lady’s dresses and gowns. There should certainly be a ‘Life in Downing Street’ gallery in MoPM about living in Number 10.

The museum uses technology very well, interactive timelines in the 9/11 exhibit illustrate Bush’s schedule from those weeks very effectively. The interactive schedule/letter readers, timelines, and particularly the interactive table are all good examples of straightforward, informative technology. The advantage of these displays is that they allow the visitor to explore the topic in a way that suits them. The enthusiast can spend as long they like, immersing themselves in detail, while more casual visitors can skip the displays. MoPM could use these devices in a comparable way.

The Decision Points Theater is particularly successful in conveying the reality of modern presidential decision making, with lots of perspectives and a constantly shifting news environment. MoPM could have a similar experience, looking at a handful of famous British political decisions (and there are hundreds to choose from). The museum could even change the decisions regularly, so that repeat visitors can enjoy a new experience each time.

The Bush Library has a wide range of public programmes. A MoPM should give serious thought to a similar ‘Situation Room’ type experience that could be offered to secondary school children. A Prime Ministerial Hats style programme could be offered to younger children.

The temporary exhibition on presidential humour was colourful and entertaining. MoPM should certainly consider creating a temporary exhibition space and hosting similar such exhibitions.

The Bush museum has two particularly memorable aspects. The first is technological: the huge audio-visual display in the ‘Freedom Hall’, which shows numerous scenes, including of wildlife and outdoor areas, is a great introduction to the museum. The second noteworthy part of the museum is the 9/11 memorial space. This is a jarring and desolate place that conveys the shocking and terrible nature of the attacks.

Analysis & Lessons

The Bush Presidential Library is the most recent incarnation of the presidential library and provides a good insight into the modern institution.

Many of the observations related to the Clinton museum hold true:

- The presidential library model is not a good model for the MoPM.
- The sheer resources of the NARA, as well as the money and space available to US presidential libraries, afford opportunities that cannot be reconciled with the British context.
- Having some help from living prime ministers, especially for interviews, audio-visual material, and for getting hold of items, would probably be useful in helping to create the personal connection.

Writing in the Christian Science Monitor, Husna Haq, who was otherwise quite critical, praised the Decision Points Theater, saying that ‘given the sensitivity of the issues explored, this little device is brilliant.’

In 2022, the decision of the Bush Foundation and the National Archives to privatise the museum was also controversial.

A petition signed by 230 museum and archive professionals was sent to the US Congress. It argued that the new arrangement ‘greatly increases the risk that the public at large will be afforded a biased view of history.’ They also sought clarification of how the Bush Foundation would run educational and volunteer programmes, as well as specific details of how it would consult with NARA on the museum exhibits going forward.

Controversies aside, the Bush museum is well designed, colourful, and visually interesting. The galleries are detailed without being overwhelming. By choosing to focus on a limited number of topics, rather than a more complete approach, the museum achieves its aims very well. While it has a level of detail that would not be recommended for the MoPM, it is a logical and clear example.

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The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

Opened: 2005
Location: Springfield, Illinois, USA
Visitors: 240,000 in 2019 (5 million visitors since opening)

Subject: Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, 1861-65

“\To inspire civic engagement through the diverse lens of Illinois history and sharing with the world the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln."

Origins

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) is not a formal presidential library like the two examples that precede it in this text. NARA is not involved in the functioning of this museum.¹

Instead, the ALPLM is a state museum, it houses the Illinois State Historical Library, and is an agency of the Illinois state government. It opened in 2005, 140 years after Lincoln’s death.

The reason that this museum is included in this study is because the designers chose a slightly more unconventional approach to its creation. Moreover, it is an excellent example of a non-NARA presidential library.

Lincoln himself lived for many years in Illinois and is buried in Springfield cemetery. In 1955, the General Assembly adopted the slogan ‘Land of Lincoln’, and it appears on the state’s welcoming road signs. Yet, by the 1990s, there was no major museum to Lincoln in Springfield, with the state’s extensive Lincoln collections being kept in a basement of the Centennial Building.²

The vision for the museum came from Julie Cellini, the chair of the Illinois State Historic Preservation Agency, who, during the 1980s, sought a public display area for the state library’s Lincoln items.³ Her campaign would culminate in the opening of the ALPLM in 2005. She later reflected that ‘it took 20 years’.⁴

In 1998, Governor Jim Edgar asked the General Assembly for $4.9 million for the construction of the museum. At that point, the likely cost of the museum was projected to be about $40 million (and which was soon raised to $60 million). It was planned that an entirely new building would be constructed for the museum and a new home would be provided for the state archives.⁵

Cellini and the project’s authors sought to create a different kind of museum. During the research process for the exhibitions, Cellini and other Illinois representatives travelled to other presidential libraries on a fact finding expedition. She later commented that presidential libraries tended to be built as monuments first, with the museums as an afterthought.⁶

She also contacted Disney who ‘sent people to look over Springfield, they did ideas for us, they met with our staff, they opened our eyes to possibilities.’ Cellini decided to push for a unique museum.⁷

Cellini had hoped for Disney’s involvement and the Hall of Presidents was one of her inspirations.⁸ Ultimately, Disney were not involved. It is possible that they were influenced by the recent cancellation of Disney’s America, which was intended to be a history themed park in Northern Virginia, plans for which had unravelled due to local opposition and the criticism of historians.⁹ However, according to Cellini, they suggested a number of companies that the Lincoln museum might work with to deliver the exhibits.¹⁰

After a selection process, BRC Imagination Arts were selected to design the exhibitions. Cellini later said that the aim was ‘something that we needed to do not just for Illinois, but for a worldwide audience’.

A panel of Lincoln historians was put together, which included a small number of high school teachers. Though the initial meetings of the panel seemed to have been rather chaotic, the historians provided useful feedback on the exhibits. Particularly important, according to BRC founder Bob Rogers, was the involvement of the high school teachers, who identified specific aspects of the displays that would appeal to schoolchildren. Historian Richard Norton Smith was appointed executive director and was hired to push back against historical criticisms and create support for the museum.

BRC refers to the Lincoln Presidential Library as the ‘first truly experiential museum in the world’. Rogers described the design process as ‘Emotional before intellectual. Visual before verbal’. He told the historians ‘Do not tell me what is new. Tell me what is never old’. He argued that the focus should be on what is ‘true and meaningful always’ rather than the newest thesis.

Rogers later characterised museum goers as three categories: ‘Streakers’, who will visit the Louvre museum in 45 minutes; ‘strollers’, who will stroll through the museum and account for some 85% of guests; and ‘studiers’ who are deeply interested in the topic and read every exhibit related artifacts are stored on site.

The old Springfield Union Station is also part of the site. It is occasionally used for temporary exhibitions, like one on the Transcontinental Railroad in 2019, but is currently closed to the public.

In the central lobby of the museum, there are life-sized models of Lincoln and his family, as well as a reconstruction of the facade of the 19th Century White House.

The Museum has several parts, two of which are described as ‘journeys’ and which form the permanent exhibition. All of these parts of the museum are accessed from the central plaza.

There were seven sources for the money used. The museum received $5 million in federal funding. Predominantly, the museum was funded by the State of Illinois. Ultimately, the cost was around $155 million.

The museum opened in 2005. President George W. Bush gave the dedication.

**Visitor Experience**

The ALPLM sits on a large site in Springfield, Illinois. There are several parts to the site, including the museum (with 100,000 square foot area), library, Springfield Union Station, and the Union Square Park.

It is important to recognise that the ALPLM is also a library and a separate building contains the Illinois State Library. The library alone has a 99,800 square foot area and 52,000 Lincoln related artifacts are stored on site.

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Shortly after entering the White House Years galleries, the visitor enters ‘The Whispering Gallery’.

Dioramas show scenes from Lincoln’s early life, including the famous log cabin where he was born and his Springfield law office. Another shows the auction of enslaved people, with a family being divided, and the sort of scene that influenced Lincoln’s early politics. Another depicts Lincoln debating with Stephen Douglas during the 1859 Senate election campaign. The museum uses audio effects to recreate the sense of an ongoing debate.

Some of the rooms are deliberately cooler or warmer and are lit differently depending on what they portray. A room that depicts Mary Lincoln after the death of her son is kept dark and cool, while the sound of rain drops pattering on a window is played.

The 1860 election was a complicated one, with four candidates, and the winner receiving less than 40% of the vote. The country teetered on the brink of war.

A room about the Campaign of 1860 has modern TV monitors and presents the platforms of the different candidates with modern style campaign commercials. The show is hosted by an NBC correspondent.

On nine control room monitors, campaign ads using period settings and authentic campaign strategies are analyzed. There are commercials for each of the four candidates – Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, John Breckinridge, and John Bell – with their actual campaign platforms spun into the political terminology and soundbites of today. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Shorty after entering the White House Years galleries, the visitor enters ‘The Whispering Gallery’. At this stage of the story, Lincoln had only been elected with 39% of the vote and the country was heading to war. The walls are filled with vicious cartoons and the air is filled with voices reading anti-Lincoln quotes. The doors, walls, and windows are all distorted. It is designed to provoke a nightmarish sense of political paranoia.

When visiting other presidential libraries, Cellini noticed that people were usually interested in the ‘Life in the White House’ style exhibitions. Above all, the first lady’s dresses always attracted a great deal of interest. This inspired the exhibit pictured, ‘What Are They Wearing at the White House?’, which features replicas of Mary Lincoln’s dresses and those of other 1860s Washington women.

According to the museum, each dress was meticulously researched, right down to the buttons, belts, and undergarments. In recent years, the captioning has been updated to better reflect the varied lives of the women of that era.

Throughout the museum, there are heavily detailed reconstructions of moments of Lincoln’s life. One depicts Lincoln reading the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet for the first time and the members of cabinet responding with ‘various attitudes of outrage or distress.’

Cellini observed that presidential libraries almost always had reconstructions of the White House, including the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room, however these spaces rarely had anything happening in them. Therefore, she wanted a different kind of exhibit, one that gave the impression of an active, busy room.

An ‘illusion corridor’ shows a gauntlet of dream-like images of people yelling, as if each of the visitors were Lincoln, telling them what should be done about the emancipation controversy.

‘At the end of this hallway is seen the figure of Lincoln standing over a table, pen in hand, weighing his options in releasing the Emancipation Proclamation. Arrayed along the walls behind him are a dozen different printed versions as they were eventually presented around the country.

The whole purpose of the display is to emphasise the weight of the decision and the complexity of public opinion.

The room that deals with the Civil War itself is quite small, containing photographs of the battlefields, uniforms, some stories of men who fought, and ‘The Civil War in Four Minutes’ film. This film shows the frontlines of the American Civil War, explosions represent battles, while an odometer shows the escalating number of casualties on both sides.

Though the modern YouTube video has made such a presentation fairly commonplace, in 2005 this was a genuinely bold way to present the military history of the American
Civil War. The frontlines and death tolls were meticulously researched, with 47 pages of analysis available to read.34

Additionally, the museum has two major presentations, both of which have now been shown over 60,000 times.35

The first is called ‘Ghosts in the Library’. A live actor, standing in an archive setting, talks about history, connections to the past, and why archives matter. It starts with the question ‘Why save all this old stuff?’ The performance contains computer generated visual projection, holograms, scenery and lighting effects. Ghostly images of Civil War soldiers in battle, and of Abraham Lincoln appear and disappear. A quill rises from the desk, and writes in Lincoln’s handwriting. At one point of the presentation, the library transforms into the aftermath of a bloody Civil War battle.

The host explains that we save original objects from history because they connect us to the people and events of history and more them real. They help tell us who we are as a country and as a people. History also whispers a hint of who we will become.’ Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.36

The performance is 9 minutes long. By 2019, it had been seen by more than 4.1 million people.

The other presentation is a film called ‘Lincoln’s Eyes’. A live actor, delivering the Gettysburg Address with the help of a teleprompter. ‘39

In 2019, the Annual Report described how: ‘the most exciting discovery was a Bible that belonged to Lincoln in his final year of life. The Bible was donated to the ALPLM by the descendants of a person who had received it from Mrs. Lincoln.”37

Other items that have recently entered the museum’s collections include a desk that Lincoln used to write his first inaugural speech, and a bust of Lincoln that was owned by Lincoln himself.38

The ALPLM also has a temporary exhibition space (The Illinois Gallery). Over the years, the exhibition space has hosted several exhibitions, including:

• From Illinois to the White House: This exhibition explored the lives of Illinois presidents. It included the last axe Lincoln used, the table where Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S Grant, a Grammy won by Barack Obama, and Ronald Reagan’s notecards from his “Tear Down This Wall” speech. The exhibit also featured the state’s original constitution from 1818. Visitors could play a presidential trivia game, take their pictures with the four presidents or try delivering the Gettysburg Address with the help of a teleprompter.39

• In This Great Struggle: This exhibition was about the Second World War and the contribution of Illinoisans during it. A series of interviews by the presidential library’s Oral History Program make up the heart of the exhibit. They were accompanied by selections from the library’s vast collection of war posters, along with weapons, flags and other artifacts borrowed from other institutions.40

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• The State of Sound: A World of Music from Illinois ran from April 2021 through January 2022 in a gallery designed to look like the ‘backstage of a concert venue, complete with loading docks, rigging ropes, and the bangs and clacks of workers preparing for a show’. The exhibition showed a number of items related to Illinois’ musical heritage, including a trumpet played by Miles Davis.41

Additionally, the museum regularly hosts events, including panel discussions on Illinois history, dramatic plays, and lectures with ‘authors, experts, and history-makers’.42

‘Visitors had a diverse array of special events to enjoy throughout the year. Simon Tam mixed music with the story of a legal battle that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Tam’s performance took place at the museum’s main theater, where he performed his song with a band. ‘The exhibition showed a number of items related to Illinois’ musical heritage, including a trumpet played by Miles Davis.”41

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Outreach

The Lincoln Presidential Library maintains the Papers of Abraham Lincoln website. This makes available high-resolution copies of Lincoln’s documents and provides explanatory annotations. Some 25,000 people accessed the site in 2022. That year, 300 documents were added to the site. The ALPLM has also announced plans to digitise Lincoln-related images and post them online. The ‘Picturing Lincoln’ project will create digital versions of 7,896 individual items, from posters to photographs to stickers. A part of the ALPLM’s website also provides 3D models of items in their collections.

The museum’s website also offers a selection of teaching plans and lesson guides on topics related to Lincoln and Illinois history for grades 4-10 until 12 (ages 17/18). The museum’s website also offers a selection of teaching plans and lesson guides on topics related to Lincoln and Illinois history for grades 4-10 until 12 (ages 17/18).

Additionally, the ALPLM clearly hosts large numbers of local school events. The museum provides a detailed guide to teachers who are accompanying school visits providing them with information and what to expect. Some of the school visits are focused on historical topics like Lincoln and the Civil War, while others are more focused on the idea of a museum.

The ALPLM also offers a number of ‘enhancements’ for school visits:

• Tour groups can visit the museum and then participate in a 30-minute “Q&A” session with one of our historians.
• It also offers ‘Hands-on’ history sessions devoted to ‘Civil War technology’ like railways, telegraphs, and naval warfare. These sessions blend technological and scientific understanding with historical events.
• Another programme that the ALPLM offers involves the ‘Thinking Like a Historian’ programme which looks at how historians explore records, ask questions, and interrogate evidence. The museum offers a ‘History Lab’ containing resources, which students then use to collect evidence and answer questions. Two topics are offered: ‘After the Battle: The Civil War Soldier Experience’ and ‘March for Equality: The 1963 March on Washington’.
• The museum also offers Little Lincoln’s Fireside Tales for young children (aged up to 5), which celebrates reading ‘through arts and crafts, hands-on activities, and thoughtfully selected picture books.’

Dr Erin Bishop, who led Education Services at the Illinois History Preservation Agency over 2005-09, remarked on the success of some of the less conventional museum exhibits like ‘The Campaign of 1860’.

‘The perfect example is the Campaign of 1860, with the modern TV monitors. We took a lot of heat from that. (But) the idea came from teachers and it is distilling these really complex issues down to soundbites. Teachers love it. They also love ‘The Civil War in Four Minutes’. They don’t have the luxury of spending a week on the Civil War. But they don’t want to skip it.’ Dr Erin Bishop

Institutional Information

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum is a department of the Illinois State Government and receives the majority of its funding from that source.

The General Assembly appropriated a total of $20.9 million to the ALPLM in FY18 and $22 million in FY19. The ALPLM was given $2.5 million from the Tourism Promotion Fund in FY19. The ALPLM recorded cash receipts of $2,012,285, for Fiscal Year 2018 and cash receipts of $2,192,671, for Fiscal Year 2019. Illinois State Audit

The ALPLM has its own membership programme called ‘Team Lincoln’. Membership is available for $58, and provides a range of benefits, including unlimited free admission, discounts in the shop, members-only events, and discounted guest passes.

For much of its life, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum was supported by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation. The foundation raised around $42 million for the museum.

The Foundation also purchased an important collection of Lincoln related objects called the Taper Collection, consisting of some 1,500 objects. These objects went on display in the museum’s ‘Treasures gallery’. The foundation took out a large loan to pay for it.

Prize amongst the collection was a hat, purported to be one of only three known Abraham Lincoln stovepipe hats in existence.
As a consequence of the split, the Taper collection Lincoln properties were removed from the museum in November 2022, with the expiration of the loan agreement.50

‘[ALPLM] will be deeply impacted by the whim of the State of Illinois’ often precarious budgets. They now also lack a strong ally to help them successfully fund expensive building improvements and exhibit redesigns.’

Dave Taylor, Lincoln Conspirators website61

The museum has a volunteer programme, with approximately 500 volunteers helping at the museum in 2022.52

Reception

The museum is one of the most visited presidential libraries in the US. It regularly welcomed up to 250,000 guests a year in the pre-pandemic era, and 148,000 visitors in 2022.51 On TripAdvisor, it is rated the number one attraction in Springfield, Illinois.

Keith Erikson, writing in the Indiana Magazine of History, called it a ‘sophisticated, twenty-first century rendition of Lincoln’s world’.

Author Andrew Ferguson wrote about how visitors responded ‘Treasures Gallery’.

“I spent an hour at a time in the Treasures Gallery watching visitors come and go. Not often, but often enough to notice, a man or a woman fresh from the high-tech fantasy of the previous galleries would suddenly confront the plain reality of these objects and be brought to tears. As a rule, visitors lingered in this gallery of relics longer than in any other’.

Andrew Ferguson60

Not all were quite so positive. Historian Dr John Y. Simon called it ‘deplorable’ and criticised ‘sober Grants and rubber Lincoln’. He referred to it as a ‘theme park’ and condemned a ‘Disneyesque version of Lincoln’s life, a tasteless travesty’.58

Blair Kamin of the Chicago Tribune wrote that the museum was ‘Disneyfied’ and ‘better at provoking emotion than provoking thought’. He went on to say that ‘the genuine artifact is supplanted by the “authentic reproduction”’.

Lacking authenticity, the scenes are as synthetic as the mannequins…” Though, he conceded that some parts were ‘imaginative’ including ‘the Civil War in 4 minutes’ and the slave auction diorama. He concluded that “This is a deeply flawed model for bringing the past into the present and future.”59

Analysis

The ALPLM is a very different sort of museum to most of those featured in this study. Though the option to create a conventional museum was available to them, the designers chose an ‘immersive’ museum that was far more focused on storytelling than traditional displays of objects.

In order to do this, they used devices like the diorama displays, the ‘Whispering Gallery’, and the television campaign studio. The galleries are designed to evoke feelings and use a range of architectural, audio, and visual devices to achieve this. The displays may seem slightly dated now, but it was a high tech museum when it opened in 2005.

The ALPLM provides a useful counterpart to many of the more conventional museums featured in this study. The designers of the MoPM should consider such examples if the aim is for an ‘immersive’ experience.

The ALPLM could have chosen to ‘play it safe’ and build a conventional museum. Naturally, their innovative choices have attracted a good deal of controversy, as any bold plan will. Despite the criticism, the museum has been well received by visitors, was the fastest US presidential library to reach two million visitors after opening (by 2009), and continues to have very solid visitation numbers.60 Though the ALPLM is not a perfect model for MoPM, it does provide a good lesson about the potential advantages of taking risks with technology and design.

The saga of the foundation is a cautionary tale. It is also a parable of the downsides of seeking items for figures from the more distant past, for whom there are fewer (or no) memorable items.

The ALPLM has been influential. Ford’s Theatre, though possessing a much smaller space, also incorporated immersive type designs, evolving 1860s Washington DC in their galleries as well. BRC Imagination Arts has also made a name for themselves, and, notably, worked on the 2011 renovation of the Museum of Lincoln (which is now one of the most visited English museums outside of London).65

One model for a MoPM could be a similar ‘immersive’ type experience (rather than that of a more ‘conventional’ museum). This could be achieved via films, and perhaps technology providing an updated version of the Lincoln museum’s dioramas. For the earlier prime ministers, for whom few or no items are available, MoPM might consider recreations of clothing or other such objects, to display.

It is a good example of a museum to a historic figure built long after the death of that figure. In this respect, the museum’s creators were fortunate to have access to Illinois’ extensive Lincoln collections, which formed the basis for the museum’s collections. Lincoln was also a historic figure, and therefore items were collected when they were known to be associated with him.

Despite the ALPLM’s success in attracting visitors, it only raises a small part of its income from ticket revenue and paying customers. It remains a state funded museum.
Ford’s Theatre

Ford’s Theatre is the site of the assassination of US President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865.* The reason it is included in this study is because it contains a small display about Lincoln’s government to contextualise the site.

Ford’s Theatre originally opened in 1861, becoming a popular fixture of Washington DC’s Civil War-era theatre life. It was visited several times by President Abraham Lincoln. On 14 April 1865, Lincoln was shot at Ford’s Theatre by actor John Wilkes Booth. Lincoln was taken across the road to the Petersen House, but died shortly afterwards.

After that, Ford’s Theatre closed, and despite an attempt to reopen, it would remain closed, eventually being reappropriated by the War Department. A medical museum was opened on another floor of the building between 1866 and 1877. The whole building served as offices for the pensions section of the War Department. It was the scene of another tragedy in 1893, when the structurally unsound office interior floors collapsed, killing 22 people. Undeterred, the War Department rebuilt, and continued to keep records there for the next four decades.³

Despite the nearby presence of two major memorials to Lincoln in Washington DC (and the larger Lincoln Memorial planned) by the late 19th Century there was no equivalent site to nearby Mount Vernon, where people could learn about the life of George Washington.

In 1892, the Memorial Association of the District of Columbia was established to preserve the Peterson House. Having acquired some 3,000 items related to Lincoln from an Illinois collector, a small museum was opened in the Peterson House as the ‘House Where Lincoln Died’ in 1893.⁴ Eventually, the Federal government purchased both the Peterson House and its collections, moving them to Ford’s Theatre in 1926.* In 1933 the National Park Service took control of the theatre and the Petersen House.

Between 1932 and 1958, the sites were a Lincoln museum in the theatre and the historic house. In 1964, due to the Civil War Centennial, Congress approved funds for a restoration of Ford’s Theatre. However, the plan was for the building to remain simply a museum - preserving the appearance of the theatre on the night of Lincoln’s death.

Theatre producer Frankie Childers Hewitt hated the plan. In response, she founded the Ford’s Theatre Society. Her aim was that Ford’s Theatre would become a working theatre once again. Politically well connected, Hewitt was able to mobilise support for her plans and realised these hopes. From 1968, Ford’s Theatre reopened as both a theatre and a museum.⁵ The Ford’s Theatre Society would oversee the operation of the theatre, and the National Park Service would own the site and preserve the historic areas.

Since 1968, the museum and historic site has been modernised several times, first in 1988, then over 2007-10. Over the years, the focus of the museum has oscillated between one on Lincoln’s government and the assassination. The 1960s renovation emphasised the historical period, and the 1980s renovation emphasised the assassination history.⁶

In 2009, the National Parks Service acquired an adjacent building, allowing for the construction of a larger and updated lobby. In addition, in 2010, the Ford’s Theatre Society purchased a building next to the Peterson House, which enabled them to provide more museum space.⁷

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**Notes:**
- Ford’s Theatre is spelled in the English manner.
- “Ford’s Theatre” explores the legacy of President Abraham Lincoln and celebrates the American experience through theater and education.”
The exhibition is arranged as a "Drama in Four Acts".

The museum has a section on life in the White House, showing portraits of the significant characters in Lincoln's life, including Mary Lincoln's friends and the presidential staff. There is also a table with items from Lincoln's presidency, such as an inkwell and pair of gloves.

The display about the Gettysburg address pictured on the following page is a fairly typical one for this museum. Context around the speech is provided and a cabinet displays related items. Another panel provides the full text of the speech. Audio of all living presidents in 2009 reading the address plays. There used to be a screen showing them reading it, but that has been replaced by a board showing Lincoln delivering the speech.

Visitor Experience

Visitors enter the historic Ford's Theatre building, and then proceed down to a basement where the main part of the exhibition is located.

The other part of the site, consisting of the Peterson House and the Ford's Theatre Center for Education and Leadership is on the opposite side of the street.

The exhibition is arranged as a "Drama in Four Acts": Lincoln's government and the Civil War; the assassination; the aftermath; Lincoln's legacy.

After receiving a ticket, visitors enter the museum down a staircase and through a mocked up railway car, symbolising Lincoln's entry into Washington DC as President in 1861. The tam o' shanter and long coat are a reference to a rumour that spread at the time that Lincoln had entered the city incognito. The risk to Lincoln's life at that point was considered very real, and the country was on the edge of war. This display immerses the visitor in Civil War era Washington.

The visitor then enters the largest exhibition space, covering Lincoln's presidency, the Civil War, and the lead up to the assassination. One of the key themes purposes of the exhibition space is to evoke Washington DC and Ford's Theatre during the Civil War era.

The early part of display looks at the formation of the government, and the initial chaos of Lincoln's early weeks in the White House. A cabinet displays Lincoln's cabinet, with short biographies of the key members of his government.

The statues pictured represent office seekers in the early months of 1861, invoking the crowds that filled the White House in the opening months of a presidency.

A display (pictured opposite) represents the damaged Fort Sumter and the beginning of the American Civil War. A short film made in collaboration with the History Channel discusses the events of the outbreak of conflict.

Elsewhere, a short film called 'We cannot Escape Our History' discusses Lincoln's relationship with the abolitionist Frederick Douglass. This was another film made in collaboration with the History Channel. Nearby, a display looks at Lincoln's evolving views on slavery.

The 2007-09 renovation replaced the dated displays, which had focused strongly on the assassination, with an in-depth look at Lincoln's government and the Civil War.

The historian Richard Norton Smith advised the design, and it was overseen by Paul R. Tetreault, the director of the Theatre. The displays were designed by Split Rock Studios, who focused on telling a powerful story about the Civil War and the assassination.

What makes Ford's Theatre unique is that it contains a full display about Abraham Lincoln and his government, providing insights into the political personality, the city of Washington DC, and the era in which he lived. Though the assassination is important, it is not the only focus.

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Towards the end of this part of the exhibition, is the Surratt Boarding House exhibit. The outside is designed to look like the house where the conspirators plotted the Lincoln assassination. Within are located displays of the weapons and possessions of the conspirators.

Most of the exhibition deals with Lincoln’s presidency and the period 1860-65. A small part looks at the activities of the Booth conspirators in the Surratt Boarding House and then contains items relevant to the assassination. Though the exhibit is small, it conveys a lot of information.

The Ford’s Theatre permanent exhibition includes some stunning items, including the weapon that Booth used to murder Lincoln. A display case shows the coat that Lincoln wore to Ford’s Theatre, his gloves, and the damaged theatre box door (amongst other items). They are displayed just before the visitor walks up to see the theatre itself.

Other memorable items include:
- A toy sword owned by Lincoln’s son, Tad.
- A US Sanitary Commission quilt featuring 56 signatures from key figures of the era, including Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and former President Millard Fillmore.
- A display case shows the coat that Lincoln wore to Ford’s Theatre, his gloves, and the weapon that Booth used to murder Lincoln.

These items were largely acquired from a collector during the 1890s, who had been in charge of Washington’s Lincoln Museum, and from the collections of the War Department (which impounded many of the items as evidence after the assassination, ensuring their preservation).

Ford’s Theatre preserves not only the site of Lincoln’s assassination and death, but is also a working theatre. The theatre is restored to look exactly as it did in 1865. As visitors approach the theatre itself, timelines on the walls reveal the movements of Lincoln and Booth on 14 April 1865. The visitor then enters the theatre itself. A National Park Service employee is often on site to discuss the details of the assassination.

Visitors then leave the theatre and cross the street to the Peterson House. There they visit the room where Lincoln was taken after being shot and where he died (where, once again, NPS guides provide information for visitors). Then, the visitor takes a lift to an upper floor of the Ford’s Theatre Center for Education and Leadership. Here, the displays resume, with a mock-up of the funeral train in which Lincoln left Washington DC and travelled back to Springfield, Illinois. Items displayed here include tassels and other objects from the funeral cortege.

After this, the exhibition charts both the direction of the funeral train, and the attempted escape of the Booth conspirators.

The fourth and final part of the permanent exhibition looks at the legacy of Lincoln. It features items such as dolls, comics, games, pamphlets, and books that demonstrate how Lincoln became an American icon in the decades that followed. Life sized statues of Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin D. Roosevelt are situated besides displays that discuss how they, and other presidents, interpreted Lincoln’s legacy. Another part of the room looks at the construction of the Lincoln memorial.

As visitors leave the Ford’s Theatre Center for Education and Leadership, they take a spiral staircase to the street below. In the centre of the staircase is a 34 foot, three storey tower of books about Abraham Lincoln. This is a striking monument to Lincoln, and a symbol of both Ford’s Theatre and Washington DC. According to Ford’s Theatre, the tower features 205 real titles, most of which are currently in print. To get permissions, more than 50 publishers were contacted. The titles repeat throughout the tower, and the tower totals approximately 6,800 books.

Ford’s Theatre has space for temporary exhibitions. During the 150th anniversary of the assassination, they hosted ‘Silent Witnesses: Artifacts of the Lincoln Assassination’. Items displayed included a wooden violin and drumsticks from the musicians who played the performance that night, fragments of bloodstained clothing, and a playbill for the evening. It took place in the Center for Education and Leadership.

This exhibition was a partnership with the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. The Smithsonian displayed the carriage that Lincoln and his guests took to the theatre that night, within their own museum building as part of the Ford’s Theatre exhibition. Today, an online version of the exhibition can still be viewed on Google Arts & Culture.

They have also hosted other exhibitions in the past. For example, in 2013, there was an exhibition called ‘Not Alone: The Power of Response’. This consisted of the display of sympathetic letters sent to the bereaved parents of Matthew Shepard, a gay man who was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998.

Ford’s Theatre’s activities are informed by a strong interpretive plan. This provides ‘messages and takeaways that a museum of historic sites wants visitors to understand’.
The interpretive plan was created by the historian Kate Haley Goldman, who led four workshops and two surveys in 2018. The aim was to refine the themes for the ‘four different audiences’. Student visitors, out-of-town tourists, theatregoers, Washington-area locals.26

Ford’s Theatre’s Foundational Truths document guides its activities. It states that:

1. The Civil War and John Wilkes Booth’s assassination of Abraham Lincoln were motivated by the desire to perpetuate an economic, political and social system of white racial superiority, of which slavery was an integral part.
2. Political violence happened at Ford’s Theatre. Such acts are serious and have long-ranging implications for all aspects of society.
3. Lincoln was an extraordinary leader, and, like all of us, was a fallible, complex human being, whose legacy continues to evolve.27

Additionally, there are five interpretive themes. These were related to:

1. The nature of the conspiracy to kill Lincoln (and the political and racial motivations behind it).
2. Lincoln’s presidency, his achievements, and the political void left by his death.
3. The importance of theatre and stories.
4. The theatre is one of the only historic civil war sites left in Washington DC.
5. Memorialization can be a powerful agent of healing and inspiration.

These inform the outcomes:

- Understanding how white supremacy continues to shape our country and politics today.
- Disapproval of Booth’s actions.
- Advocating for peaceful participation in the democratic process. Ford’s Theatre.28

These themes guide the museum’s outreach and activities. They provide broad objectives for the institution.

Outreach

Ford’s Theatre rebuilt their website in 2016. It is a good example of an effective digital strategy.22 After a process of workshop based consultation, they decided that there was no need to recreate the facts of Lincoln’s life online, and instead, the website would ‘focus on his assassination’.23

Two inspirations were the Riga Ghetto museum website and a Guardian/Film Canada collaboration called Seven Deadly Sins. They were also inspired by Kate Haley Goldman’s report on digital storytelling which listed the five ‘superpowers’ of digital age storytelling: a sense of presence or immersion, multiple voices and diversity, telling more complex stories, moving from listener to participant, timeline shift.24

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These inform the outcomes:

- Knowing about the assassination, and how it was an act of racially motivated violence.
- Connect the assassination to similar events.
- Consider the consequences of such violence.
- …Continued
As part of their website rebuild, they did not include a collection catalogue. This was because researchers were not their primary audience. Instead, they prioritised two groups: the “historically curious” (those who are interested in history broadly but not so much looking for the minutiae an enthusiast might be seeking, and not working in history for a job) and students.22

Ford’s Theatre also understood the limitations of a website: “Except for virtual tours, the web is not a technology capable of producing a sense of presence or immersion.”

The page on Lincoln’s assassination has several sections:

- Events of the Assassination: allowing users to click on different numbers on an old photograph of the theatre, retelling the events.
- Eyewitness testimonies.
- A painting of the aftermath, with further information contained within the image.
- Examine the evidence. Users can learn more about the various objects in the museum’s collections related to the assassination (including the assassination weapon, Lincoln’s clothing, the doctor’s tools etc)31

The website also includes pages detailing hundreds of written and published contemporary responses to Lincoln’s assassination, including speeches, letters, and newspaper reports.32 Other pages provide an in-depth look at different items in the museum’s collections.33

Ford’s Theatre has a very impressive variety of educational and leadership programmes34. There are teaching resources for leadership, oratory, and historical lessons.35 There are tours for schools and oratory projects.36 The theatre offers a one act play, One Destiny, for schools, about the assassination.37 A programme called ‘Stand Up, Be Heard’ has helped students from high schools work collaboratively to create podcasts38. The theatre also provides transport and free tickets for several thousand students to visit every year.

Often classes teach Lincoln’s legacy by connecting it to the modern city. Many of the visitors are from local schools and the theatre’s programmes often use local knowledge to communicate the history, for example many students will be aware of places near them that are named after old Civil War forts. Making a connection between modern and Civil War era Washington is one of the key parts of the Theatre’s mission. They also connect the Civil War themes to present-day events, and discussions on matters like racism and injustice.39

The Theatre offers walking tours for teachers about Civil War Washington and the memorialisation of the Civil War.40 There are also sessions for teaching and learning about post-war reconstruction and historical memory.41

One dramatic example of the Theatre’s outreach was a major commemorative ceremony on the 150th anniversary of the Lincoln assassination. This featured music, a candlelit vigil, actors in period dress, and dramatic retellings of the event. The event was broadcast live by the US public service broadcaster C-Span.42

Institutional Information

Ford’s Theatre is effectively a collaborative arrangement between the National Park Service, which owns the building and provides historic interpretation, and the Ford’s Theatre Society, a non-profit organisation that runs the theatre, the leadership centre, and that exists to support the historic site. The Ford’s Theatre Society and the National Park Service hold weekly meetings to coordinate programming and visits.
National Park Service

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. The National Park Service Mission Statement.

The National Park Service (NPS) is a US government agency that oversees the National Parks system. It was established in 1872 and is a part of the US Department of the Interior. It has 223 individual units covering more than 85 million acres in all 50 states. These include historic buildings, battlefields, historic sites, parkways (roadways), scenic trails, seashores, rivers, reserves, and nature reserves. In 2021, nearly 300 million visits were made to NPS sites.46

The NPS has around 20,000 employees. It is also heavily supported by volunteers (with some 279,000 in 2019, which fell to 110,000 in 2020).47 The presence of a National Park also provides a regional economic boost that sometimes employs many more.

It is chiefly funded by the US government, though does receive money from park entrance fees, philanthropy, and charity. The most recently proposed budget for the NPS is $3.6 billion.48

Because it is federally funded, the Ford's Theatre exhibitions were closed to visitors during the US government shutdowns of 2013 and 2018-19.49

Ford's Theatre Society

The Ford's Theatre Society supports Ford's Theatre. It runs the theatre itself and the on-stage activities. It also runs an enormous variety of outreach activities and programmes. Most of the outreach of Ford's Theatre is overseen by the Ford's Theatre Society.50

The Ford's Theatre Society is 'a private non-profit that does not use any federal funding or federal employees for their programming'.51

On expenses, 84% of the funding was from 'contributions', and 14% from programme services. For 2018-19, it raised $17,896,308 in revenue, and spent $15,634,777 on expenses. In 2019, 60% of its revenue came from 'contributions' (above all, grants and donations), and 37% from programme services. This represented a slight change from the two previous years, in which contributions and programme services income had been roughly equal (48.4% to 48.6% in 2018, and 46.9% to 47% in 2019).52 To repeat, the NPS side of Ford's Theatre is Federally funded and maintained.

Reception

Ford's Theatre is centrally located in Washington DC, and, in the pre pandemic years, attracted very strong visitation. From 2010-15 (the years of the Civil War 150th anniversary), Ford's Theatre attracted an average of 668,247 per year.53 Approximately a third of these people were schoolchildren.54

Over 2016-19, attendance fell slightly to an average of 625,207, probably due to the end of the Civil War 150th anniversary. In 2020, there were 6,058 visitors, and 101,166 in 2021, reflecting the influence of the pandemic. The reception to the Ford’s Theatre exhibition has been generally positive.

Now, with these exhibitions, Lincoln has found a home in a place best known for his death...there may be no better survey of Lincoln than the one offered here. The emphasis is not on artifacts... But the exhibition succeeds because of a careful narrative, well-chosen images and informative touch screens. The new completes the old. Edward Rothstein.55

Ibid.
However, he did wonder if the lessons the educational centre drew from Lincoln’s life were quite as universal and relevant to modern times as Ford’s Theatre Society taught.

**Analysis & Lessons**

The Ford’s Theatre museum is part of the historic site. As the site is one of the most iconic in American history, it would attract visitors in almost any situation. However, the museum has worked well to tell the story of Lincoln’s government and the assassination. It is well organised, tells a complicated story in limited space, and has a clear narrative informed by a solid interpretive plan. A MoPM should seek to develop a strong interpretive plan and should have a clear guiding mission.

Ford’s Theatre does an excellent job of memorialisng an important date in American history. They often organise events for the anniversary of Lincoln’s death. Perhaps a MoPM could also organise events around famous dates and anniversaries in British history. Events might include:

- The Fall of Lord North in 1782.
- The Regency Crisis, 1788-89.
- The assassination of Spencer Perceval in 1812.
- The Repeal of the Corn Laws, 1846.
- The beginning of the First and Second World Wars.
- The fall of Lloyd George in 1922.
- The Cabinet Crisis in 1940.
- The Suez Crisis in 1956.
- The fall of Margaret Thatcher in 1990.

**Why couldn’t a more profound examination of Lincoln be at the heart of the educational program instead of platitudes?** As Ford’s Theatre has shown when answering to the better angels of its nature, Lincoln transcends contemporary homilies about activism and leadership. So, in balance, does Ford’s Theatre. Edward Rothstein

Recently, Brian T. Allen, writing in the conservative National Review called Ford’s Theatre a ‘a vast pool of pathos and history’. He praised the ‘scholars and educators who organized the exhibition decided to err on the side of the public’s rustiness when it comes to Civil War history while, as wisely, avoiding a rehash battle by battle.’

Historically, there have been controversies related to Ford’s Theatre. Particularly, the display of weapons associated with the assassination. Such controversies accompany many such objects associated with violence. The Kennedy assassination museum at the Book Depository at Dealey Plaza does not, for example, display the exact weapon that was used during the assassination, but it does display a rifle of the same type.

For many decades, the curators at Ford’s Theatre chose to keep the weapon (and other weapons used by the conspirators) locked away. It was only displayed from 1942. Even now, the permanent display discusses the ethics of having the pistol on display with a board entitled ‘To Display or Not Display.’

Ford’s Theatre is fortunate to have some extremely impressive and memorable items to display. A MoPM should be ambitious and also seek an impressive display.

Ford’s Theatre carries out a good deal of self-criticism in order to ensure that its programmes and website are useful to the end user. MoPM should be similarly self-critical in its approach to its outreach and its public displays. Something that is beautiful in theory does not necessarily work so well in practice. One piece of advice I was given while there was to ensure that anything MoPM does should be grounded in local research and a clear understanding of what the intended audience really wants.

**Events might include:**

- The assassination of Spencer Perceval in 1812.
- The Repeal of the Corn Laws, 1846.
- The beginning of the First and Second World Wars.
- The fall of Lloyd George in 1922.
- The Cabinet Crisis in 1940.
- The Suez Crisis in 1956.
- The fall of Margaret Thatcher in 1990.

The book tower that the visitors see as they leave is one of the most memorable features of the museum. MoPM should seek a similar eye-catching design.

Ford’s Theatre is also fortunate to have a passionate and committed institution in the shape of the Ford’s Theatre Society that can raise funds, run the theatre, and lead public programmes.

Ford’s Theatre has strong outreach programmes, and a real sense of a community service. MoPM would probably be best advised to run similar educational programmes that branch out from just the history of the prime ministers. Instead, it could look at democracy, leadership, or government more broadly as themes for school groups. A London link to some of the education services might help, for example ‘historic Whitehall’.
George Washington’s Mount Vernon

Subject: George Washington, President of the United States, 1789-1797

Opened: 2006 (museum), 1860 (main estate)

Location: Mount Vernon, Virginia

Annual visitors: 1 million + (2019)


Cost: c. $60m

Ticket price: $28 adult (12+), $15 Youth, Free for children under 5

Ratings: 4.7 Google reviews, 4.5/5 TripAdvisor

#1 Trip from Washington DC, TripAdvisor

“...the mission of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association is to preserve, restore, and manage the estate of George Washington to the highest standards and to educate visitors and people throughout the world about the life and legacies of George Washington, so that his example of character and leadership will continue to inform and inspire future generations.”

Origins

This section of the briefing is shorter. Mount Vernon is unlike the other heritage sites featured in this report for a number of reasons: Above all, it is dedicated to the preservation of George Washington’s Mount Vernon estate, and consequently the museum is not a standalone institution, but exists to support that wider mission.

Mount Vernon is also much older than any other institution in this report, being founded during the 1850s and opening its doors to visitors in 1860. Unlike the other museums in this report, which are all located in major cities, Mount Vernon is in a suburban location.

Mount Vernon is run by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association.

During the 1850s, Ann Pamela Cunningham organised the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, which raised $200,000 and purchased the Mount Vernon estate in 1868. Cunningham had been struck by Mount Vernon’s dilapidation, and sought to restore and preserve the site. The home, gardens, family graves, and outbuildings were soon opened to visitors to constitute what is considered America’s first historical tourist attraction (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Through a Civil War (with armies passing close by, two world wars, financial depressions and recessions, Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association have continued their mission of preserving the house and gardens. In 2020, Mount Vernon was closed for 99 days due to Covid, the single longest closure since the Civil War.

For the purposes of this report, the focus is on the museum. The modern version of the museum dates from 2006 and was made possible by two major grants from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation (after whom it is named). It exists to provide the history of George Washington’s life and times. Though the centre is showing its age, this is one of America’s leading historic sites, and there are some very noteworthy features of the museum.

Visitor Experience

Mount Vernon is on a 500-acre site in Northern Virginia just outside Washington, DC. Contained within that site are:

- The historic Mount Vernon house, gardens, and historic farm area, including the tomb of George and Martha Washington. This is the main attraction of the site.
- The Ford Orientation Center which visitors enter at the beginning, and which shows an introductory film about the site.
- Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center. The museum contains a large gallery for the permanent exhibition and also a smaller gallery that is used for temporary exhibitions.
- A building containing the gift shop, food court (with a variety of foods and drinks available), and restaurant (which offers fine dining, and hosts private events).
- The Robert H. and Clarice Smith Auditorium which plays films and is for events.
- Administrative buildings and extensive parking. Additionally, a distance off site, there is a distillery and gristmill.

5 ©MoPM
One exciting audio-visual display at Mount Vernon is ‘Be Washington: It’s Your Time to Lead’. Unlike the Decision Points Theater, Be Washington relies much more heavily on actors in reconstructions. An introduction sets the scene, showing maps, graphics, and then dramatisations of Washington and key decisionmakers. After that, visitors are able to choose between 7-8 different advisers to listen to their perspective (and are able to indicate which decision they are inclined towards throughout).

Every so often, a ‘Dispatch’ will update the situation (in a comparable way to the Breaking News announcements in the Decision Points Theater).

At the end, visitors decide. Finally, the narrator explains which decision Washington himself made, and compares the results to those that visitors have selected more generally.

There are four scenarios to choose from:
- The Battle of Second Trenton (1777): Whether to advance into enemy held territory, hold favourable ground, or retreat and conserve forces?
- The Newburgh Conspiracy (1783): How to respond to discontent within the army towards the Continental Congress at the end of the War of Independence?
- The Genet Affair (1793): Should the United States support revolutionary France (as ambassador Genet vigorously argued) or remain neutral?
- The Whiskey Rebellion (1794): How should Washington respond to a rural anti-tax rebellion that threatens to unravel the emerging nation?

The interactive exhibit asks visitors to understand the influences and pressures that confront decisionmakers.17

Nearby, a selection of films in the Robert H. and Clarice Smith Auditorium includes The Winter Patriots, Yorktown: Now or Never, Revolutionary War, A More Perfect Union, Saving Mount Vernon, and Mount Vernon in Virginia. These films are all impressively produced, using a mix of graphics, dramatic scenes, and animations.15

Some of these films, like A More Perfect Union deal with topics that are quite complicated but tell the story simply and coherently.16 All of the movies are roughly the same length: 21-27 minutes long.

One exciting audio-visual display at Mount Vernon is ‘Be Washington: It’s Your Time to Lead’. It is one of Mount Vernon’s newest additions. It asks visitors to place themselves in Washington’s shoes as he makes some of the defining decisions of his life.

It is a very similar model to the Decision Points Theater in the George W. Bush Presidential Library (which was the direct inspiration). Visitors sit at interactive desks in a mock-up of a colonial era room. There is a large screen at the front of the room. There are four scenarios (each lasting about 20 minutes to complete).

One of the most famous items in the permanent exhibit is Washington’s false teeth (he suffered severely from dental problems and had several sets of teeth made). This is definitely one of the ‘must see’ items and is a real highlight of the collections.

A neighbouring gallery (the Elizabeth and Stanley Deforest Scott gallery) is a 1,100-square foot space used for temporary exhibitions.18 In August 2022, this was being used as a three-part exhibition on the history of Mount Vernon:
- The first part discussed the pre-Washington history of the site.
- The second looked at Washington’s time there (including the family portraits above).
- The third part looked at post-Washington history (including the work of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, restoration efforts, and the various events that have happened there since).

16 ibid.
17 ‘All of the scenarios can be viewed and played online at https://play.bewashington.org/’. ©MoPM. One exciting audio-visual display at Mount Vernon is ‘Be Washington: It’s Your Time to Lead’.

©MoPM

©MoPM

©MoPM

©MoPM
It is effectively a presidential library for George Washington.

Outreach

Mount Vernon has a strong digital presence, with extensive information for guests, and online resources for teachers and students. The website had over eight million visitors in 2019.27 Interesting features of Mount Vernon's website include:

- All of the 110 Rules of Civility, a book that influenced Washington as a young man.28 Other books from Washington's library are also available on the website.
- Access to all of the Be Washington scenarios, which allows its use by teachers.24
- Play Agent 711 is an app for visitors, designed to appeal to children aged 11+. It is spy themed and encourages children to 'go undercover and test your spycraft skills while exploring the grounds of Mount Vernon' with this free app.26
- An online digital encyclopaedia about Washington.22

• The Great Experiment: George Washington and the New Nation
• Slavery in George Washington's World
• Martha Washington and the Women of the 18th Century
• First in Business: Washington, Mount Vernon, and the New Nation
• George Washington at War: From Soldier to Commander in Chief
• Leadership and Legacy: Lessons from George Washington
• The Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of American History

The library has embarked on a project to reconstruct Washington's collection of books, and they often spend six or seven figure sums in order to obtain rare books when they become available. In 2012, Mount Vernon purchased a copy of Acts of Congress that had been owned by Washington for $9.8 million.20 Mount Vernon has made the book fully available online.21

The library has embarked on a project to reconstruct Washington's collection of books, and they often spend six or seven figure sums in order to obtain rare books when they become available. In 2012, Mount Vernon purchased a copy of Acts of Congress that had been owned by Washington for $9.8 million.20 Mount Vernon has made the book fully available online.21

Mount Vernon has a Teacher Institute, which offers a range of residential programmes for teachers including:

• First in Business: Washington, Mount Vernon, and the New Nation
• George Washington at War: From Soldier to Commander in Chief
• Leadership and Legacy: Lessons from George Washington
• Martha Washington and the Women of the 18th Century
• Slavery in George Washington's World
• The Great Experiment: George Washington and the Founding of the U.S. Government
• The Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of American History

There is also a Mount Vernon Leadership Fellows programme, mentoring a small number of students from several key universities.

Through their studies and guest lectures, the students gained a deeper understanding of strategic leadership, tactical leadership and institution building, strategic execution, and character-based decision making, the very key skills that made George Washington a successful leader. The students applied these new lessons to their capstone project and discovered how they can better their communities through the teachings of George Washington. Mount Vernon7

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1 George Washington's Constitution, Minutes, record #1, National Archives, National Archives (July 2013). 22 'Annual Report 2019'.
18 'MoPM'.
19 'Rules of Civility, Mount Vernon Ladies Association'.
22 'Mt. Vernon Leadership Fellows Institute Project'.
27 'Rules of Civility, Mount Vernon Ladies Association'.
28 'Mount Vernon Ladies Association'.
Institutional Information

Mount Vernon is proudly self-sufficient. According to the 2019 Annual Report: 'The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association does not accept government funding'.

Mount Vernon has an extremely strong network of donors. It receives a great deal of corporate and individual generosity. Reminders of the generosity of donors are visible throughout the site, with many parts of the museum named after specific donors.

In 2019, Mount Vernon reported $71.2m in income. Of this, $14.4m was from admissions, $22.9m was from restricted contributions (money that had to be used in a certain way), and $9.5m was from unrestricted contributions (money that could be used for any purpose). Mount Vernon also reported $16.3m in product and food sales. They listed their spending as $52m.

Mount Vernon has a major volunteering programme. In 2019, 300 volunteers contributed 25,517 hours.

Reception

As mentioned, Mount Vernon is one of the most popular heritage sites in the US. It regularly welcomes over a million guests a year. It is thought that over the 155 years of its existence, Mount Vernon has been visited by over 85 million people.

Most of the reviews of Mount Vernon relate to bygone exhibitions or are about the current incarnation of the museum. There is no need to dwell on those here.

Analysis & Lessons

Mount Vernon is principally a site about Washington’s home. The permanent exhibition is important but is not the primary attraction.

The centre itself is a little dated and will likely undergo a renovation in the near future. Historical scholarship and perceptions of history have moved on from when it was constructed.

The audio-visual elements of Mount Vernon’s permanent exhibition are very impressive. The 4d theatre and the auditorium films have been well received and explain complicated topics well. Films explore the constitutional manoeuvrings of the early republic very effectively. The Be Washington exhibit is a clever way to use technology to tell the story and demonstrate the issues that historical decisionmakers faced.

Mount Vernon proudly receives no government funding, and in that respect, is rare amongst the museums featured in this report. It is able to use the prestige and respect for George Washington to inspire generosity from donor organisations and individuals. A MoPM should consider using the prestige of any and all Prime Ministers to establish a donor network. Corporate sponsorships for exhibitions is not unheard of in the UK and should definitely be an option for MoPM.

Mount Vernon offers a good example of an institution with strong outreach programmes and an effective digital presence. It even makes parts of its exhibition (Be Washington) available online, so that schools and individuals can learn about Washington even if they are unable to visit in person. They use their website to make texts, like the recently acquired Acts of Congress, available online. Perhaps the MoPM website could make similar such resources available.

The temporary exhibition space is also a well-designed and coherent area that showcases some of the most interesting items in Mount Vernon’s collections. It has also allowed Mount Vernon to confront issues like slavery in a more comprehensive way than the main exhibition. A temporary exhibition space allows for flexibility in this way.

©MoPM

The centre itself is a little dated and will likely undergo a renovation in the near future.

90 About Mount Vernon
The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden & The First Ladies

“Devoted to the scientific, cultural, social, technological, and political development of the United States, the museum traces the American experience from colonial times to the present. The American History Museum’s collection contains more than three million historical objects—including the famed Star-Spangled Banner—and documents that explore the evolution of the American identity.” Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

Origins

The Smithsonian exhibition dedicated to the presidency has two parts. The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden deals with the presidency itself, and the neighbouring First Ladies exhibition looks at the first ladies.

The Smithsonian is America’s largest and most developed single museum institution. It was founded on a bequest from an eccentric English donor named James Smithson who left his fortune to the creation of an institution in his name in 1829. John Quincy Adams, who later championed the creation of the Smithsonian, privately wondered if Smithson had been insane. After much political haggling, the Smithsonian Institution was created from the bequest in 1846.

For the first decades of its existence, the Smithsonian focused on research, acquiring documents that explore the American identity. After all, in the words of writer Rose Gouverneur Hoes, “The First Ladies” exhibition opened in 2011. Since then, the Smithsonian has featured dresses worn by every first lady and hostess since George Washington. This exhibition spearheaded by these two women was the first female-focused display in the Smithsonian Museum.

Over the 1950s-90s, the displays were featured in rooms mocked up to look like the interior of the White House. The current iteration of the exhibition opened in 2011. Glorious Burden was planned during the late 1990s. Its progress was sped along by prospective donor Kenneth Behring who both Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small and Sasha Archibald, ‘A Difficult Bequest: A History of the Smithsonian’, Los Angeles Review of Books, 1 July 2014, <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/issue/71-2/sasha-archibald-difficult-bequest-history-smithsonian/>. The exhibition be open in time for the January 2001 presidential inauguration.


The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden & The First Ladies

©MoPM
The 'Glorious Burden' exhibition opened as a permanent exhibition in late 2000.

Lawrence Small wrote in October 2000 that the purpose of the exhibition was to 'show the office as at once incomparably grand and irrevocably human.'

‘In the end, Presidents must fall back on their own humanity and their imperfect knowledge to make decisions on which the fortunes of the world may turn. It’s then that character - sure instincts, a steady inner moral compass, a capacity for prudent risk, a predisposition to courage and compassion - will tell. Perhaps our successful Presidents had intellect on their side (or to the side, in the ranks of advisers), and surely they had luck, but above all they had character to get them through the urgent hours.’ Lawrence Small

Richard Norton Smith, one of the exhibition’s designers, wrote that:

‘It is only human nature to personalise the past… Over the years I have observed that most visitors to presidential libraries come seeking a personal encounter with the president or first lady. They hope to live vicariously for an hour or two in the shoes of a commander in chief, to attend a state dinner, to spend a weekend at Camp David, to address a campaign rally, or to ride on Air Force One. The fact that Gerald Ford, was the product of a broken home, never meeting his birth father until he was 17, may strike a more responsive chord among today’s young people than his role in the Helsinki Accords or SALT II.’ Richard Norton Smith

The exhibition that can be viewed today has changed somewhat since 2000.

Visitors are no longer greeted by George Washington’s military uniform at the entrance (it has now been dispatched to the exhibit on America’s wars), nor is there an extensive display of television and film items at the end, as there once was. A section that contained cartoons and caricatures of the president has vanished largely without trace. The museum itself was renovated in 2006-8, with the exhibition changing to its current format afterwards.

The Smithsonian borrowed a number of items from outside the museum’s collections, including from the National Archives and the Secret Service. Many of these items have now been returned. For example, a firearm that was used in a 1975 assassination attempt on Gerald Ford, the uniform cloak that Franklin D. Roosevelt wore at the Yalta conference, and a bible used by Eisenhower at his inauguration are no longer on display. However, sections like The Duties of the Presidency appear almost unchanged to how they were twenty years ago.
The First Ladies

As visitors approach The First Ladies exhibition, they see a screen in front of them, which plays a selection of clips of first ladies talking about the role.

The sign that introduces the exhibition says ‘First Ladies are unofficial but important members of presidential administrations. For more than 200 years we have judged their clothes, their parties, their projects and their roles in the White House. Each one remakes this undefined and challenging position to suit her own interests, the needs of the administration, and the public’s changing expectations of women in general and first ladies in particular.’

The First Ladies exhibition is split into three parts, one looking at clothing, the second is a display of tableware, and the third is ‘Changing Times, Changing First Ladies’.

Within the exhibition itself, screens show clips from inaugural balls underneath a quote from the Washington Post from January 1997: ‘For one evening, the inaugural ball gown is the most important dress in the country.’

There is a collection of clothing (mostly inaugural gowns). The exhibition features the inaugural gowns of Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, Michelle Obama, and, the most recent, Melania Trump. The exhibition also features clothing worn by Dolley Madison, Lucy Hayes, Frances Cleveland, Edith Wilson, Grace Coolidge, and Jacqueline Kennedy.

Traditionally, the first lady of the United States donates her inaugural ball gown to the Smithsonian. Therefore, the exhibition is regularly updated to include new dresses.

Curator Lisa Kathleen Graddy told Vogue that “People have always had an opinion about [the first lady’s clothes], and that’s something we’ve tried to address in the exhibition”.20

On the other side of the gallery there is a display of tableware associated with the first ladies and a timeline above. It is a tradition that the first lady chooses the design of the tableware that is used during the administration.21

After the displays of inaugural gowns and tableware, there is a gallery dedicated to ‘Changing Times, Changing First Ladies’. This area focuses more deeply on a selection of first ladies (Dolley Madison, Mary Lincoln, Edith Roosevelt, and Lady Bird Johnson). These feature a portrait, a selection of personal items, and then a bigger case with clothing.

In the Dolley Madison section, the larger cabinet displays a dress ‘typical of the style’ worn when Madison was first lady, and another owned by Madison during her later life. In the background is a picture of the burned White House after the War of 1812.

The signs discuss the role of Dolley Madison in the administration: ‘she was the goodwill ambassador of the Madison administration. A popular figure in fiercely partisan Washington society, she used her skills as a hostess to win support for the president and to mute opposition.’

Within the exhibition itself, screens show clips from inaugural balls underneath a quote from the Washington Post.

A timeline is also in the first room. It features every president (right up to 2023) and is a good way to symbolically represent every holder of the office at the beginning of the exhibition.

According to the official website, Glorious Burden is arranged thematically, with four parts: Foundations, Inaugurations, Life and Death in the White House, Communicating the Presidency. However, this structure only partly resembles today’s exhibition, which has a short section on ‘Creating the Presidency’, and then considerable sections on the powers of the presidency, constraints on the office, and post-presidential life.

The ‘Creating the Presidency’ section looks at the Constitutional Convention and explains the importance of the presidency of George Washington. The objects displayed there include George Washington’s portable writing case, his telescope, and an armchair that was used in the presidential mansion (initially in New York). The signage explains why George Washington became the first president.

A cabinet shows items from past inaugurations, including a coat and hat worn by Grover Cleveland. Other items include postcards, souvenirs, celebratory buttons, and pins. A sign explains the inaugural oath as ‘an important symbol of our government’s continuity and permanence.’
The Smithsonian has been collecting items since the 19th Century, and consequently has extremely rich collections from which to draw.

The curators actively collect items related to modern presidential events (for example, reaching out to participants and political organisations after election campaigns). The Smithsonian’s reputation as ‘America’s attic’ also means that it is frequently the first destination for those seeking to donate items.

The next room in the exhibition is about the president’s duties. Seven duties are given: Chief Diplomat, Ceremonial Head of State, Commander in Chief, Chief Executive, Manager of the Economy, Party Leader, and National Leader. In the centre of the room is a Seal of the President of the United States, and presidential branded items, including a plate, some cigarette lighters, a Christmas card, pen and notepaper.

An interactive screen in one corner of the room surveys visitors’ opinions, asking what they think the most important roles are, and who they think was the most effective president.

On the other side of the room, an interactive lectern is positioned, allowing visitors to be the president on the screens above, and facilitating souvenir photographs.

The display cases in this part of the museum are packed with items from the Smithsonian’s collections, each connected with a function of the presidency.

These include:

- A letter seal used by President James K. Polk during the 1840s.
- A microphone used by Franklin Roosevelt for his ‘fireside chats’ during the 1930s.
- Theodore Roosevelt’s leather trousers from his time in the American West during the 1880s.
- A pocket compass owned by the explorer William Clark who was commissioned by Thomas Jefferson in 1803 to explore the American west.
- A guard uniform from Richard Nixon’s short lived White House Secret Service Uniformed Division.
- A newspaper from the Hiroshima bombing in 1945.
- The briefcase containing the equipment necessary to authorise the use of America’s nuclear weapons (from the Clinton years).
- The military uniform of Dwight Eisenhower.
- A towel used as a flag of truce on the day the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia surrendered to US forces led by Ulysses S. Grant in 1865.
- A stuffed teddy bear, inspired by ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt.
- A campaign bandana depicting General William Henry Harrison during the war of 1812, prepared for his election campaign of 1840.
- A score sheet from a game of cards between Bill Clinton and two staffers played on the Marine One helicopter in 1998, and the box of cards.
- A 1919 brooch given to Edith Wilson (Woodrow Wilson’s wife) from the people of Paris.
- A bread board from one of Herbert Hoover’s campaigns in 1928 reading ‘Vote for Hoover and Your Board will Never Lack a Loaf’.
- Original casts of Abraham Lincoln’s hands made on 20 May 1860, two days after the Republican Convention, with his right hand badly swollen from all of the handshaking.
- Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1960 State of the Union address, with hand marked changes.

The signage in this section provides further context to the presidency explaining how the items illuminate aspects of the various duties. For example, the stamp used by Polk explains that ‘the size and role of the federal government were so modest in the mid-1800s that during the hot Washington summers Polk let his cabinet secretaries return home while he ran their departments. He personally answered the mail, filled out forms, signed commissions, and issued purchase orders.’

Theodore Roosevelt’s leather trousers date from the period before he was in office, when he had lived in the west. The sign explains that Roosevelt ‘revelled in being a cowboy’ and ‘the experience gave him a love and appreciation of nature that made him a champion of the conservation movement’, leading to the creation of 125m acres of public land during his presidency.
There were two sections of the displays that were not open in August 2022.

- Constraints
The section on constraints looks at the different influences on a presidency, including the Supreme Court, Congress, and impeachment. Amongst the interesting items displayed here is a cabinet damaged by Nixon’s ‘plumbers’ in 1971 (described by the Smithsonian as ‘The World’s Most Famous Filing Cabinet’).23

- The White House as Symbol and House
This part of the exhibition looked at personal and family life in the White House. Items displayed here include Warren Harding’s silk pyjamas, a dollhouse made for the Cleveland children during the 1890s, and charred timber, found during the 1950s restoration, thought to date from the burning of the White House in 1814.24

The next section of the exhibition is about ‘assassination and mourning’. It contains one of the most famous and iconic items in the Smithsonian’s collection; the hat that Abraham Lincoln wore before he was assassinated at Ford’s Theatre in April 1865 (preserved by the War Department, it was given to the Smithsonian in 1887).

Signs inside and outside the exhibition point to the location of this item, and for many visitors it is a ‘must see’. Even today, Lincoln is associated with the top hat. According to historical writer Stephen L. Carter ‘no other president is so firmly connected in our imaginations with an item of haberdashery’.25

Specific cabinets present items related to the four presidents to have been assassinated in office, and the other four to die of natural causes. A screen displays images of the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 (with audio provided by the directional speaker above). Items on display include a drum played at his funeral, signs indicating closure due to the death of the president, and a funeral service.

Another cabinet is dedicated to ‘Protecting the President: The US Secret Service’. It contains a machine gun, pistol, Secret Service badges, and a radio.

The penultimate gallery is on popular culture. The original reviews of the exhibition made much of the fact that Harrison Ford’s suit from Air Force One (1997) was displayed. However, this item no longer appears in the exhibition.

Indeed, this gallery is now the least memorable part of the exhibition. The section on modern movie and television interpretations of the presidency is just a collection of posters. The sign ‘The Presidency in Movies and Television’ refers to The West Wing (last episode 2006) as having aired ‘recently’.

A cabinet displays popular culture items associated with the presidency, including a Lyndon Johnson dartboard, a voodoo Ronald Reagan doll (a reference to the criticism that he advocated ‘voodoo economics’), and a teddy bear (after ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt).

A nearby wall shows a selection of road signs from places named after presidents. A sign remarks that ‘Almost every city in the United States has a street named for a former president. These signs… demonstrate how Americans interact daily with representations of the presidency.’ Before 2006, this was a more notable part of the exhibition, with the road signs covering walls on either side of the visitor as they walked into a section about political caricatures.26

Indeed, this gallery is now the least memorable part of the exhibition.

The final part of the exhibition looks at life after the presidency. Items displayed here include a painting of George Washington in retirement, a chair from his final bedroom, and a surveying compass he used at Mount Vernon. These are also highlights of the Smithsonian’s collections. Moreover, they link to the selection of Washington’s items displayed at the beginning of the exhibition, symbolically closing it. It emphasises the fact that Washington was the first president and that his departure from power after two terms was a defining legacy.

Another cabinet displays items from post presidency lives, including a pendant from Teddy Roosevelt’s unsuccessful 1912 campaign and Eisenhower’s golf clubs.

Outreach

Over 2000-2006, the Smithsonian also had a travelling version of 'Glorious Burden'. It toured nine locations in Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Washington state, Pennsylvania, Texas, Minnesota, and Oregon (including the Truman, Ford, and Lyndon Johnson presidential libraries). The travelling exhibition displayed over 300 items from the Smithsonian, including some of those now displayed in the permanent exhibition such as Lincoln’s inkwell, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s microphone, and George Washington’s compass.

At the end, a short film plays, in which former presidents (in around 2009) discuss their regrets, what they liked about the office, and their retirement. Compared to some of the new exhibitions, such as ‘American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith’ (opened in 2019), ‘Glorious Burden’ does seem dated. ‘Great Leap Forward’ makes far greater use of light, colour, and text, and the displays are much more inventively designed than those in Glorious Burden. The technology in ‘Great Leap’ is far more modern.

Though the Smithsonian has an enormous website, and a very large social media operation, it does not seem to involve the Glorious Burden much in their online activities, or their outreach more generally.

Digital—The Smithsonian home page offers a wide range of information, from planning a visit to exploring the collections online. The Smithsonian had 178 million unique visitors to its websites in 2020, and has more than 30 mobile apps, digital magazines and more than 17 million images and records on the Collections Search Center site. Across its most frequently used social-media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, the Smithsonian had more than 18 million followers and nearly 375 million YouTube views in 2020. ‘Smithsonian’.

The travelling exhibition displayed over 300 items from the Smithsonian.

Admission to all Smithsonian museums in Washington is free and there is, therefore, no income from ticket sales. Nobody pays to see the Glorious Burden or First Ladies exhibitions.

The main expenses in 2020-21, were listed as 49% ‘salaries and benefits’, 27% ‘other operating expenses’, 8% business expenses, and 16% capital expenses. Over 2020-21, the Smithsonian raised $242 million (72%) of donated money from individuals, $54 million from corporations (16%), $32 million from foundations (10%), and $8.5 million (2%) from ‘other’ sources. The value of the Smithsonian’s endowment is over $2 billion. The Smithsonian is a trust instrument of the United States of America, and a part of the ‘Federal Establishment’. It is immune from US state and local level regulation, and local taxes do not apply to its activities (absent a specific federal statute). The Smithsonian has over 6,300 employees and more than 5,000 volunteers.

In a ‘normal’ year like 2018-19, the Smithsonian received 53% of its funding from federal appropriation, 20% from contributions and grants, 12% from business activities, 5.5% from endowment payout, and 5% from other sources. Over 2020-21, the Smithsonian was 62% federally funded ($1 billion).

In 2021, the Smithsonian’s operating budget was $1.58 billion, with $1.06 billion from Federal appropriations, and $516 million raised from private sources.

In addition to the federal contribution, the Smithsonian has trust or non-federal funds, which include contributions from private sources (endowments; donations from individuals, corporations and foundations; and memberships) and revenues from the Smithsonian Enterprises operation (magazines, mail-order catalogue, product development, entertainment, shops, restaurants and concessions). ‘Smithsonian’. The Smithsonian Institution is the world’s largest museum, education and research complex, with 19 museums and the National Zoological Park. ‘Smithsonian’.

Institutional Information

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These museums include the National Air and Space Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Its museums line both sides of the National Mall in Washington DC. Overall, the Smithsonian has some 400 buildings. It also has scientific research centres, an observatory, an art archive, a conservation institute, and ‘the most comprehensive museum library system in the world’.37

An affiliate programme allows it to share its artefacts with other museums across the United States. It has a travelling department, which allows it to put on mobile exhibitions.

Congress vested responsibility for the administration of the Smithsonian in a 17-member board of regents.43 Vice President Kamala Harris sits on the board (ex officio). Supreme Court Justice John Roberts also sits on the board. Additionally, the Smithsonian board features Republican politicians Senator John Boozman, Representative Adrian Smith, as well as former Secretary of the Air Force Barbara Barrett. Democrats on the board include Representative Doris Matsui, Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard, Senator Patrick Leahy, and Senator Catherine Cortez Masto. The wide nature of the board assures bipartisan support for the institution.44

A study of visitors to the First Ladies exhibition in 2011 found that:

A large majority of visitors interviewed were US residents (84%), including four percent of individuals from the Metropolitan Washington DC region. Visitors from outside the United States make up the remainder (16%).

Three in four visitors were women (74%). In other studies of visitors to the Museum, the ratio of women to men was even or slightly in favor of women. Not surprisingly, based on the contents, visitors to First Ladies at the Smithsonian consisted predominantly of women. Of those eligible to be interviewed, the average age was 43 and the median age was 44. Visitors can be divided into three approximately equal age clusters: ages 12 to 35 (36%), ages 36 to 55 (33%) and over the age of 55 (31%). Smithsonian.46

The ‘Glorious Burden’ exhibition was well received upon opening in 2000. However, there was some criticism that the exhibition lacked clear narrative themes.

Druin Burch wrote in The Lancet called it ‘an intriguing and confusing mix of the kitsch, the colourful, and the truly world class’. The reporter contrasted the range of items from ‘the thought provoking to the trivial’.47

Jacqueline Trescott, writing in the Washington Post praised the ‘deliciously odd things in the show’ including the filing cabinet damaged by the ‘ Plumbers’, Judge William Rehnquist’s robe from Clinton’s impeachment trial, and the damaged eyeglass case from an attempted assassination of Theodore Roosevelt.48

Michael O’Sullivan praised the ‘heavily interactive and multimedia content’ of the exhibition in the Washington Post. Although, he conceded that the ‘technological focus tends to place greater emphasis on the 20th century presidents than on those who served before TV and newsreels came into being’.50

Other writers were much more critical. Eric Rozeman wrote in May 2007 (at the time of the museum’s closure for renovation) that the museum lacked a ‘chronological sense of American history’, providing ‘fragmentary displays, disjointed presentations and pop culture detritus’. He named the Glorious Burden as a good example of the NMAH’s problems, writing that the display was damaged by its ‘awkward’ layouts.50

The ‘Glorious Burden’ exhibition was well received upon opening in 2000.
The Smithsonian collects material on presidencies whilst those presidencies are ongoing.

Barbara Franco criticised the exhibition for its lack of a clear narrative.

‘I came away from the exhibition with [my] expectations sadly unfulfilled. While there are wonderful artifacts and interesting information, the exhibition as a whole fails to maintain a consistent focus, to develop meaningful themes that explore conflict, or to encourage dialogue with visitors.’ Barbara Franco.

**Analysis & Lessons**

Glorious Burden is over twenty years old. Today, it appears somewhat dated compared to how it must have looked in 2001. Moreover, several memorable items, like George Washington’s uniform and Harrison Ford’s Air Force One suit have long since departed. Other exhibitions in the museum are much more modern and inventive. However, it provides a good model for what a small exhibition (perhaps based in another institution), or a MoPM permanent gallery might look like. It is a good example of an exhibition that is broadly celebratory and positive in tone.

Glorious Burden remains a huge achievement. Nowhere else is there such a huge variety of presidential objects on display. Some of the items are very significant indeed and connect the visitors to important moments in American history. At its best, the exhibition uses items to tell broader stories, for example the stamp being used to discuss the light touch nature of mid-19th Century US government. Certainly, the room on the duties of the presidency does a good job of illustrating the many roles that a president is required to fulfill.

Given that the history of the British premiership is now 300 years, a similar thematic approach might be sensible. Related topics, like elections and party leadership, the powers of the prime minister, the prime minister at home, the prime minister abroad, popular culture, and post-presidency life, might form an excellent basis for the permanent galleries (rather than a chronological approach).

Glorious Burden does not dwell in deeper analysis. There are few references to really significant presidential decisions, and it would be difficult for somebody without any knowledge of American history to really understand the exhibition.

One of the main criticisms of ‘Glorious Burden’ was that it did not try to tell broader stories with the items that it had. Much is displayed within cases, and there are good captions, but little context. Given that the MoPM would necessarily start with fewer items, there might be opportunities to tell bigger stories with less.

The Smithsonian collects material on presidencies whilst those presidencies are ongoing. ‘The curator will talk to political insiders, casual observers and activists of all stripes to find and collect objects for the Smithsonian museum’s permanent collection.’ The MoPM should consider growing its collections in a comparable way.

The Smithsonian’s collection is an embarrassment of riches. The displays of ‘Glorious Burden’ are packed with fascinating items. Some of these items are forgettable, but others, like Lincoln’s hat, Grant’s carriage, the famous ‘nuclear briefcase’ or Washington’s chair, are highlights of the exhibition (and of the entire Smithsonian collections). A MoPM really must make efforts to obtain items that people will remember.

The First Ladies exhibition is much more up to date than Glorious Burden. The Changing First Ladies part of the exhibition also has a clearer focus. It offers another potential exhibition structure; general sections, and then a specific focus on a few very important figures. Such a structure could also work for an exhibition on prime ministers, with a focus on the general, and then a limited focus on a few prominent figures (candidates might include Robert Walpole, Pitt the Younger, William Gladstone, Lloyd George, Clement Attlee, and Margaret Thatcher).

The First Ladies exhibition is a good blend of the old (including dresses and tableware from 19th Century) and the modern (Melania Trump’s inaugural dress). The ongoing collection of items guarantees regular publicity. The MoPM might not be able to provide such a large exhibit, but surely it could obtain fashionable items and dresses from prime ministers or prime ministers’ wives.

The First Ladies exhibition was probably the busiest I attended over the course of this study. Even the Smithsonian describes it as ‘one of the most popular attractions at the Smithsonian Institution’.

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This profile will look at the visitor experience and history of the Hall of Presidents attraction. It is not necessary to look at The Walt Disney Company more widely.

The Disney Hall of Presidents is an attraction located at the Magic Kingdom Park in Orlando in Florida. It is an indoor show and multimedia presentation featuring animatronic figures of all 45 US presidents.¹

At the time of writing, a day ticket for the ages of 10+ costs $109, with add-on options to visit other Disney parks for an additional $85.² Obviously, the ticket provides full entry to the park itself and the Hall of Presidents is but one part (albeit a rather more sedate one than the Barnstormer or Big Thunder Mountain Railroad).

With the opening of the Magic Kingdom Park in Florida in 1971, the Hall of Presidents was finally realised (after Walt Disney’s death in 1966). Later, another Audio-Animatronic show called ‘The American Adventure’ opened at Walt Disney’s Epcot theme park in Bay Lake, Florida.

According to Disney, ‘The Hall of Presidents has brought to life the heritage of the United States and shared the symbolic importance and uniqueness of the office of the President. Almost 50 years later, the story of liberty’s leaders continues to be told and retold to new generations as Walt Disney originally envisioned.’³

Located in Liberty Square, The Hall of Presidents is a multimedia presentation based on United States history. At the centre of the story are the presidents, all of whom are showcased in the form of lifelike ‘Audio-Animatronics’ figures.⁴

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Origins

Walt Disney was the originator of the Hall of Presidents. During the creation of Disneyland’s Park in California during the early 1950s, he described an idea for ‘the 34 presidents of the United States... assembled in a common conclave for the first time in history... (with) the figure of Abraham Lincoln [rising] to deliver an address.’⁵ However, the technology of the day did not permit such a spectacle.

In 1964, Disney pioneered an ‘Audio-Animatronic’ version of Abraham Lincoln speaking at the World’s Fair in New York. This proved that a reliable ‘Audio-Animatronic’ attraction could be delivered. A version of the World’s Fair show, ‘Great Moments with Mr Lincoln’ subsequently opened at the Anaheim, California Disneyland in 1965.

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The Hall of Presidents is housed in a building that is modelled on Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. Visitors wait in an area with a few cases containing items related to presidents (‘American Presidents: Public Lives’ and ‘First Ladies in Focus’).

The contents of the display cases vary over time and it would appear that these are objects loaned from other institutions. Over the years, these items have included Gerald Ford’s ski boots, Richard Nixon’s childhood essays, George W. Bush’s boots, James K. Polk’s ink well, and Teddy Roosevelt’s riding gear. Several of the cabinets deal with the process of creating the advanced ‘Audio-Animatronics’ used in the show (including sculpting, clothing, props, and accessories).

Once the doors open, visitors walk into the 700-seat main auditorium and the show starts. It takes the form of a 22-minute summary of American history. It begins with some words from the Abraham Lincoln animatronic, and the show pauses for that same animatronic to read the words of the inaugural address, but with no additional personal message.

Over the years, the stage has been updated to add modern presidents, and the film has been changed to provide a (slightly) more nuanced version of history. During the 1990s, it was rewritten with the help of the historian Eric Foner: ‘the new script, narrated by poet Maya Angelou, focused more attention on slavery, injustice, and ‘that ‘We the People’ must mean all the people.’

The pre 2017 version of the script, narrated by Morgan Freeman, was more detailed. It featured a section on 1830s president Andrew Jackson, which is absent from the new one. A longer role was given to JFK, who is now reduced to one line. There was also a section at the end about the role of the president in times of tragedy (with extracts from LBJ’s speech after Kennedy’s death, Reagan’s speech after the Challenger disaster, and Bush’s ‘bullhorn’ speech after 9/11).

Not all of the presidents are in the film. No president between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, or between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt is even mentioned. However, all the Presidents after Franklin D. Roosevelt (except for George H. W. Bush) are heard during the film. Short clips play from famous speeches by Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush.

There is an animatronic representing every US president on stage. At the end, the name of every president is read by the voiceover, and the spotlight moves to their animatronic. In the background there is an image of the White House (which slowly updates to represent the appearance of the building that the presidents mentioned would have known). Finally, George Washington recites a speech, and the current president recites the oath of office.

Traditionally, US Presidents have recorded some remarks especially for the Hall of Presidents. The Biden animatronic reads the words of the inaugural address, but with no additional personal message.

Regardless of who speaks, the inspirational, patriotic tone is a constant. For that reason, foreign visitors rate the show lower than Americans do. Touringplans.com

The Hall of Presidents benefits from a traditional version of American history. Though this has been challenged over the years, it is fair to say that this narrative is still the predominant one and will be familiar to most Americans.

More sensitive topics, like Reconstruction after the Civil War, the removal of Native American tribes (and the betrayal of agreements negotiated with those tribes), the First World War, post-Second World War conflicts, and Watergate are left out.

Reception

Disney’s Hall of Presidents might well be the most visited attraction mentioned in this briefing. Disney’s Magic Kingdom theme park received 12.7 million visitors in 2021 and 20.9 million in 2019. It is safe to assume that a considerable number of people have visited the attraction though exact numbers are not available.

It is an iconic site in American popular culture. The Walt Disney Company has regularly been called ‘The World’s Greatest Storyteller’ and there is a good reason for this. References to the Hall of Presidents are instantly recognisable in The Simpsons or the Bioshock games. Certainly, Disney can create a powerful and recognisable brand.

One of the main criticisms of the Hall of Presidents is for its tone of uncritical respect. Bethanne Bemis, who has written about Disney and American national narratives, has, for example, referred to it a ‘hagiographical homage’.

While these examples may seem to be too inconvenient to mention. The American Adventure at Epcot does reflect the controversies around slavery, civil rights, and the treatment of Native Americans, despite a broadly positive, patriotic presentation.

The feature occasionally attracts controversy, with a Change.com petition circulating after Donald Trump’s election victory in 2016 urging Disney to avoid providing a speaking role to the new president. The petition attracted 15,000 signatures but did not change Disney’s policy of having the new president provide lines.

The Hall of Presidents seems to have regularly been the scene of spontaneous shouted protests at Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, depending on their popularity.

Traditionally, US Presidents have recorded some remarks especially for the Hall of Presidents.
Walt Disney intended for the Hall of Presidents to educate children about some of their nation’s history. But over the years some of it has come to function as a space for the public to express their opinion of the current administration and sometimes render a verdict on previous ones. Bethanie Bemis.16

Nor is such controversy new. In 1976 journalist Joseph Lelyveld wrote of “a sharp intake of breath or a snicker when the spotlight picks out the Richard Nixon robot.”17

This situation highlights a sort of strange dichotomy: on one hand, people visit the Disney Parks to escape reality. We want to visit a place that will make our daily struggles feel like a distant memory. On the other hand, political figures have been featured in the Disney Parks for a long time. Attractions Magazine

The animatronics are well known, and certainly in its early years, the Hall was popular. An estimated 20 million people visited during the first four years.20

However, it does not seem to attract that sort of attention in modern times. Julie Tremaine wrote in the San Francisco Gate that reviews of the Hall often cite the air conditioning ‘as the best part’ and that it was ‘the best spot in the park for a nap.’21

Previous reviews noted that the Disney website touringplans.com rated the Hall of Presidents 77th overall, but that system appears to have been replaced by a simple star system that gives it 3 out of 5.

Mike Wallace, in his book Mickey Mouse History, wrote that the Hall of Presidents represents ‘Original Walt’s 1950s-style approach to history’ and compares it unfavourably to Epcot’s American Adventure which opened in 1982.22 He wrote that the attraction’s outlook was ‘old fashioned’ during the 1990s and noted that guests often laughed when Richard Nixon’s name was read.24

It’s hard to believe that if Disney World, the ultimate, magical, controversy-free zone, was being built today, that they’d include an attraction so tethered to the real world. Maybe it made more sense when Walt Disney himself dreamed it up in the early 1960s, but even by 1971, when the Hall of Presidents debuted as one of the park’s original attractions, Nixon was in office and Watergate was less than a year away. Christopher Spata, Tampa Bay Times, 201822

The Hall of Presidents would not meet the Museum Association’s criteria for being a museum. Fundamentally, it is a short, well-produced film at a theme park. The objects within the building are not a key focus, instead the attention of visitors is drawn to the film and the novelty of the Audio-Animatronic figures.

The Hall of Presidents provides no exhibitions beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area, it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area), it does no research (beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area). It is an open question as to how popular the Hall of Presidents actually is.

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Lessons & Analysis

Aspects of the Hall of Presidents do provide lessons for MoPM.

The Hall of Presidents provides a good example of a short introductory film, with a strong, patriotic narrative and a good summary of American presidential history. It provides a good model for what a short, broadly uplifting introductory film about British prime ministers might look like.

The Hall of President’s film is also quite a good guide to how a MoPM might divide its attention; by focusing on a small number of transformative prime ministers and ignoring the rest.

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The Hall of Presidents provides no exhibitions beyond the film and selection of items in the waiting area, it does no research (beyond that required for updating the film and new president), it has no outreach, and it has few items. The items that it does have are only kept to briefly entertain visitors before they enter the auditorium.

MoPM

The Hall of Presidents therefore cannot really serve as a good general model for MoPM.

It is an open question as to how popular the Hall of Presidents actually is. Disney do not release figures for individual attractions. Even if they did, access to the Hall of Presidents is available with a general ticket to the entire park. There is no way of knowing how well it would perform as a standalone institution.

A museum associated with a Hall of Presidents style of presentation might rapidly lose credibility in the eyes of commentators and scholars. ‘Disneyfication’25 tends to be frowned upon by most people and institutions that deal with history.


24 Wallace, Mickey Mouse History, p. 139.

25 ‘Disneyfication’ tends to be frowned upon by most people and institutions that deal with history.
"The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya" is a tribute to every Prime Minister of India since Independence, and a narrative record of how each one has contributed to the development of our nation over the last 75 years. It is a history of collective effort, and powerful evidence of the creative success of India's democracy.”

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is the only major museum in the world dedicated to the prime ministers of a country. Opened in 2022, it has benefited from the support of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and indeed it can be seen as his personal project.

In his Red Fort Speech of 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about the historical contributions of all of India's post-independence prime ministers. He said that that their legacy ought to be better commemorated. He went on to say that: ‘I want to express my feelings of respect and gratitude to all those previous governments and ex-prime ministers who have endeavoured to take our present day India to such heights and who have added to the country’s glory’.5

As part of his premiership, Modi has invested heavily in India’s museums. This drive has been described by the Minister of Culture G. Kishan Reddy as a ‘transformational... concerted effort in re-imaging museums’.6 Old museums have been renovated and new museums constructed. In this spirit, plans were formed for a new museum dedicated to the country’s post-independence leaders.

The original planning document set out the intention of constructing “a premier institution focusing on collecting, documenting, researching, and disseminating information about the lives and contributions of the prime ministers of India.”7 Attention soon focused on the Teen Murti Bhavan in New Delhi, a colonial era mansion once used as the prime minister’s office during the tenure of Jawaharlal Nehru. India’s longest serving prime minister. Upon his death, it became the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). The NMML was, by the 2010s, showing its age, and the decision was taken to construct a new museum building in the grounds.

The status of the original Nehru museum was a key point of controversy. What would the relationship be between the two institutions? Would it remain the Nehru museum, or be incorporated into the new one? Initially, it seemed that the NMML would be separate. But, the 2021-22 Indian Ministry of Culture annual report stated that the two institutions would be merged to create one integrated museum dedicated to all of India's post-independence Prime Ministers, and that it would be administered by the NMML.8

The preserved spaces in the Teen Murti Bhavan (Nehru’s rooms and Indira Gandhi’s rooms) were left in situ, while the museum parts were refurbished. The new building, which would be located behind the Teen Murti Bhavan, covered the post-Nehru Prime Ministers. Ground was broken in October 2018.

Exhibitions were designed to fit into the space that had been built. They had a lot to work with; there are 43 galleries, spread over an impressive 113,000 square foot site. The total floorspace, including the Teen Murti Bhavan, is 161,000 square foot.

A committee was put together to conceptualise the museum and identify the key aspects of each prime minister. It included three distinguished journalists and writers on contemporary history -- M. J. Akbar, Swapan Dasgupta, and A. Surya Prakash. The latter explained the principles behind the creation of the galleries.


The first was that all prime ministers should get the attention due to them, based on the policies and programmes they initiated, the major decisions taken by them, and the challenges that they faced during their tenures. The second principle was that while building [the museum], one must shake off … poverty of imagination which has stymied many ideas in the past. In other words, one must feel free to experiment with new ideas and innovations and not be inhibited in any way. The third, but very important principle was “balance”…

A Surya Prakash.10

He went on to say that one of the most important objectives was that it would be a museum that children would find interesting: ‘[the museum] will keep them engaged for hours and in all probability, those escorting them will have to drag them out.’11

Digital designer Saurav Bhaik also spoke about the project:

‘The first action we took was to study and understand the visitor profile. We figured what can be the right medium through which we can disseminate the information to the visitor in the most interesting manner. … This is why we took the approach of making the museum interactive and engaging for the visitors. The new-aged technologies like the AR, VR and robotics are used to enhance human interactivity and engagement. Through these tech enabled experiential exhibits, visitors become a part of the museum and learn by doing. This is a great medium to educate the youth, where they are able to absorb and retain the content in interesting ways.’ Saurav Bhaik.12

From the beginning, the intention was a more audio-visual experience, showcasing a minimum of personal effects. However, some items were donated by the families of former prime ministers. For example, Neeraj Shekhar, MP and son of prime minister Chandra Shekhar, donated his father’s personal documents to the museum.13

Nripendra Misra, Chairman of the Executive Council of the Nehru museum, discussed the sources that were used to inform the exhibits in the museum.

‘Information was collected through resources/repositories with institutions such as Prasar Bharti, Doordarshan, Film Division, Sansad TV, Ministry of Defence, Media Houses (Indian and foreign), Foreign News Agencies, Toshakhana of Ministry of External Affairs, Archives (private paper collections, Collected Works and other literary works, important correspondence), personal effects, gifts & memorabilia (felicitations, honours, medals, commemorative stamps, coins, etc.) speeches of Prime Ministers have all been used to depict the different aspects of their lives in a thematic format.’ Nripendra Misra.14

A big focus was placed on modern technology. The Prasar Bharti archive contributed 206 hours of audio and 53 hours of video content at the museum.15

‘The Sangrahalaya has employed state-of-the-art technology-based interfaces. Holograms, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, multitouch, multimedia, interactive kiosks, computerised kinetic sculptures, smartphone applications, interactive screens, and experiential installations’ Indian Ministry of Culture.16

The museum benefited from strong political support from Modi and was funded by the Indian government. Modi himself met with the designers and offered advice on the museum’s focus.17 When it opened, Modi was the first visitor in April 2022.18

Upon opening, Modi said: ‘The museum is a living reflection of the shared heritage of each government. To remember them is to know the journey of independent India. It gives confidence that even a person born in ordinary family can reach the highest position in the democratic system of India.’19

A gallery on Modi will open in early 2023 (even though Modi will still be in power until 2024).20

Nripendra Misra wrote about the objectives of the museum.

From the beginning, the intention was a more audio-visual experience, showcasing a minimum of personal effects.

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The Sangrahalaya is open to the public and displays a variety of exhibits that document the lives and experiences of all the prime ministers of independent India. These exhibits include letters, speeches, personal letters, stamps, coins, etc., speeches of Prime Ministers have all been used to depict the different aspects of their lives in a thematic format. Nripendra Misra, Chairman of the Executive Council of the Nehru museum, discussed the sources that were used to inform the exhibits in the museum.

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Visitor Experience

Visitors begin in the Teen Murti Bhavan, the colonial era mansion that served as the prime minister’s residence during Nehru’s premiership.

Visitors arrive and receive an audio-guide or can download the museum app. This device is a crucial part of the tour; it links up with the narration of footage and also provides general information. Most of commentary sections are quite short (around 3-5 minutes), though some are much longer (up to 30 minutes).

The first room in the museum is a projection that describes India’s condition upon independence in 1947.

The next rooms focus on creation of the modern Indian political system.

The first room looks at the writing of the constitution and various influences that shaped the framers. This is followed by a second room that looks at the political system and the selection of the prime minister. The third room is dedicated to amendments to the constitution.

In the room that deals with the Indian constitution, an interactive table demonstrates the many languages of the constitution. Along one wall, interactive boards highlight aspects of the political system including the franchise, how general elections work, and how the parliamentary government functions. On the other side of the room, another set of interactive boards discuss how the prime minister is elected, their oath, their roles, and their powers.

After that, visitors progress to the upper floor of the Teen Murti Bhavan. Here, the exhibition is dedicated to India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Large screens tell the story of the partition of India, independence in 1947, and the British withdrawal. The film uses maps, documents, clips from speeches, and archival footage.

The Nehru museum predates the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya and is a long established part of the institution. It has more significant objects on display for Nehru than for other prime ministers. Here are items of Nehru’s clothing and his cricket bats. Other preserved Nehru items include his walking sticks and an Ashoka (the state symbol of India) baton that belonged to him.

Elsewhere, Nehru’s bedroom and office are preserved, as is the bedroom of his daughter, Indira Gandhi.

A nearby room is dedicated to Nehru’s premiership life. The interactive display (in the shape of a book that allows visitors to turn the pages), shows photos from Nehru’s early life and of his family. The museum has a major emphasis on the early lives of Prime Ministers, and presents a great deal of biographical information, both in the displays and over the audio-guide.

The main part of the Nehru exhibition is in a large gallery on the upper floor of the Teen Murti Bhavan. On one side, a screen shows Nehru’s famous ‘Tryst with Destiny’ independence speech, delivered at midnight on 14 August 1947, while a cabinet nearby displays his handwritten speech notes.

This part has a large interactive timeline and then smaller displays about key issues of Nehru’s time as prime minister (including Kashmir, the creation of a socialist economy, and the elections in 1951-52). These do not go into enormous detail, but provide a few short points, or some photos or footage.

In the corridor beyond is a display of gifts to India’s prime ministers given by foreign leaders.

The interactive timelines in the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya display information simply and clearly. They use maps and short biographies of the key figures. The problems that Nehru (and subsequent prime ministers encountered) are discussed succinctly in a few paragraphs. Many of the timelines cover issues that were important, but not the paramount issues, which are represented in the bigger displays. For example, this interactive table looked at Nehru’s response to a rural communist uprising, the reorganisation of the Indian states, and the creation of the State of Bombay.

The presentation is not all so positive. A nearby room, with a completely black interior, shows a short film about the 1962 border war with China, which saw India defeated.

A final room of this gallery looks at the death of Nehru in 1964 and the nationwide outpouring of grief.

As mentioned, the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya has been a considerable investment for the Indian government, and a large purpose-built museum has been constructed on the old rear garden of the Teen Murti Bhavan.

This part of the museum is visited after the Nehru galleries and covers the prime ministers of India since Nehru’s death in 1964.

At night, this area is used for light and sound displays. The first display began in December 2022 and was dedicated to India’s space programme.

The museum is an impressive technological achievement. Visitors enter via a reception and then a hallway flanked on either side by pictures of India’s Prime Ministers, each with an inspirational quote. Lights in the colours of the Indian flag shimmer above.

‘Within this story is a message for the younger generation: there are greater horizons to conquer as we transform India into New India. The Sangrahalaya will serve as a great source of inspiration for all sections of the society, especially for the youth on whose shoulders the burden of future will predominantly fall. The Sangrahalaya is, therefore, a link between the past and the future.’ Nirpendra Misra.

Gauri Krishnan, the museum’s Chief Curator told the Deccan Herald that ‘A walk through the museum is a story of democracy.’

©MoPM
Before entering the main part of the museum, there is a short film called Freedom and Unity that profiles some of the people that fought for Indian independence, including Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Vallabhbhai Patel.

Interactive panels and tables elsewhere in the room allow visitors to explore other key independence leaders.

Every part of the museum is designed to look different. Lal Bahadur Shastri’s gallery has a 1960s aesthetic, with clean white and black lines. Later galleries focusing on the years of the Emergency are dealt with in a dark corridor setting, while the 1980s prime ministers have a more modern, electronic theme.

Nearby, interactive displays explore Shastri’s early life. Once again, complicated topics are dealt with quite simply. Shastri’s priorities upon entering office are given as ‘food security and border security.’ Elsewhere, the displays go through the main issues during Shastri’s time as prime minister, including foreign policy, land reform, and the 1965 Pakistan conflict.

The objects in this display area are quite limited but include the Chakra he was gifted during his wedding, and his badminton racquet.

The Lal Bahadur Shastri gallery is split into two parts, the first dealing with economic, social and foreign policy, while the second deals with the dramatic events of the 1965 India-Pakistan War. A large screen portrays the military history of the war, and there is a display of newspaper headlines, and an interactive display about the Tashkent Agreement of 1966, which ended the conflict.

This holographic display shows Shastri addressing the nation over radio, announcing the ceasefire that ended the war (‘the only answer lies in peaceful coexistence’). A short extract of his speech can be heard over the audio guides.

There is a display on his mysterious death in Tashkent shortly after the agreement, and the official mourning in India. Finally, there is a sculpture to Shastri portraying a soldier and a farmer, in honour of his slogan ‘Jai Jawan Jai Kisan’ (‘Hail to the Soldier, Hail to the Farmer’).

The next two galleries are focused on Indira Gandhi (a photograph of one of these galleries is on the right).

An interactive timeline on the foreground table presents information about her early life and premiership. The information boards also cover important topics, like the Pokhran 1 nuclear test (the first outside of the UN Security Council countries) and the abolition of the Privy Purses in 1971 (the government funds paid to the dynasties that had ruled the princely states on independence to join the Union of India).

In the background, a large screen flanked by artillery guns tells the story of the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, which resulted in Indian victory and the independence of Bangladesh. The museum has a strong focus on India’s recent military history. As mentioned, similar screens tell the stories of India’s other military conflicts.

The information on the interactive table is short and concise. For example, an entry on the 1971 Indian election provides a two-paragraph summary of Indira Gandhi’s campaign, noting that she travelled 36,000 miles in 29 days. It is accompanied by a photograph of a newspaper, with the headline ‘New Indira Team To Assume Office Today’ highlighted.

Unlike the Shastri and Nehru galleries, there are no objects for Indira Gandhi, but there are a few letters on display.
Once again, there are few objects, though there is one handwritten letter and one typed letter on display.

A nearby interactive table, about VP Singh, whose premiership lasted just under a year, provides details about his life before the premiership. Elsewhere, in the (relatively small) exhibition about him, there are information screens on the Mandal Commission (on the caste system) and the other challenges he faced. There is also an electronic display screen that shows a speech, and visitors can programme the audio guide to listen to the extracts.

The audio-guide offers stories and anecdotes about the early lives of the prime ministers, as well as much longer explanations of historical events (for example, there is a 27-minute lecture on the 1970s Emergency that guests can listen to).

For the galleries about 1990s Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao there is a sleek, modern aesthetic. For Rao, there are no objects on display, but there is a case containing a selection of his official letters, and there is also a document reader that allows visitors to explore another selection of his letters.

Large screens look at topics from his premiership, including the Bhopal disaster, Operation Black Thunder, the conflict in Sri Lanka, and finally his assassination. An interactive panel allows visitors to explore foreign policy topics, including bilateral engagements, relations with China, and the Indian military intervention in the Maldives in 1988. The interactive displays largely provide an outline of the key events rather than abundant detail.

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The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya does not display vast numbers of items. Certainly, in the new building, the focus is very much on archival footage, audio-visual displays, and high-tech retelling of history. However, the museum does have some objects. This cabinet contains a UN badge, a wristwatch, a pen, and glasses owned by AB Vajpayee, who was prime minister between 1998-2004.

After the display pictured above, the visitor enters a recreated ‘command bunker’ during the Pokhran II nuclear test in 1998 (ordered by Vajpayee). The explosion of the weapon can be seen from the ‘windows’ of the bunker and the ground shakes underfoot as the shockwave passes. Afterwards, a short film plays providing context, and the message in the last shot of the film reads ‘No price is high enough when it comes to securing national interests.’
This library continues to collect documentation, with over 2,400 resources added to the collection in 2020–21.

At the end of the museum is the ‘Anubhuti Zone’. This is an interactive area, where visitors can obtain a ‘photograph with the PM’ and a letter from the prime minister of their choice. There is also a quiz area which asks guests questions about the prime ministers. Finally, there is a ‘helicopter ride’ which flies visitors over the great building projects of modern India, including the Dholera Smart City, the Chenab Bridge, and the Zohila Tunnel.

These are all ‘add on’ items that cost a few Rupees and can be added to the ticket price.

The museum contains space for a gift shop (though it was not open in October 2022) and has a cafe.

Throughout the museum, there is an emphasis on spectacle, with lights and models creating a scene, and information conveyed by screens and information boards. One of the last displays of this section is an interactive one looking at Indian space rockets, satellites, nuclear missiles, and military submarines.

At the time of writing, no Annual Report had been published reflecting the opening of the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, therefore it is too early to tell the financial impact of the museum. The NMML balance sheet for 2019–20 showed an income of 487 million rupees (£4.9m) and expenditure of 473 million (£4.8m). 375m (£3.8m) rupees of income was listed as revenue from the government, with a further 91m Rupees (£90,000) being supplied by special grant. The rest of the income was covered by income from investments, sales/services, and royalties from books and publications.

It should be emphasised that 2020–21 was before the opening of the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, and during a period when the Nehru museum was frequently closed due to coronavirus. However, it does show the dependence of the institution on state support.

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya does not have an archive. But, the NMML does have a specific research and reference centre on colonial and post-colonial India. This library also contains Nehru’s personal papers.

Institutional Information

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya comes under the auspices of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). Decisions are made by an executive council.

According to its Annual Report, the NMML is a non-profit earning, non-manufacturing body and is fully funded by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.26 It has four major constituent parts, namely, a museum, a library on modern India, a Centre for Contemporary Studies, and the Nehru Planetarium.

According to the Annual Report, 2020-21, ‘The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library consists of Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya; a Library which has a pre-eminent position among the social science libraries in the country; the Oral History Division; the Manuscripts Division; the Research and Publications Division; the Reprography Division; the Centre for Contemporary Studies; and the Planetarium’.

The library continues to collect documentation, with over 2,400 resources added to the collection in 2020–21.3 The museum’s annual report details that 2,694 scholars accessed library resources over 2020–21. The library is a scholarly archive and researchers are required to establish academic intent in order to use it.29

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3. Ibid, p. 28.
The NMML also has a research section that publishes the speeches and documentation of past Prime Ministers. At the time of the Annual Report’s publication in 2020-21, they were in the process of collecting material for books about several significant Indian political figures, including two volumes on former Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee.30

The Centre for Contemporary Studies of the NMML also runs a fellowship programmes. Under the NMML’s fellowship programme, 29 Fellows were selected in different categories joined the Centre for Contemporary Studies during the period 2020-21. The library has an oral history division, which records interviews of important people who are relevant to Indian history.31

Outreach

Guided tours are provided with special attention to school groups by the Sangrahalaya staff. On 15 October 2022, the museum welcomed over 2,000 schoolchildren. They encourage school visits by offering a 25% discount.32

The museum has a website. It provides basic public information, a map of the museum, and an online shop for buying tickets in advance. There is also a timeline of India’s prime ministers. However, there is nothing close to the expansive museum websites that are provided by US institutions. The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya’s website is very focused on providing the information that visitors will need.33

Reception

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya attracted over 115,000 visitors in its first five months. The visitor numbers continued to be strong in October, with 3,200 visitors in one day during that month.34

The Google reviews are very positive and almost every review is four or five stars. Several describe the museum as ‘the best museum in India’. One person praised it as ‘buzzing with the latest technologies that transport you into a different world’ Another wrote that the ‘makers have totally nailed it in every parameter’.35

The museum has been the subject of controversy. Several leaders of the Indian National Congress (the party of Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi), as well as historians and economists criticised the plans to transform the old Nehru museum. Modi himself has frequently been critical of Nehru, blaming him for economic failures after independence, and for conflict in Kashmir.36 Some commentators argued that the creation of the museum was an attempt by Modi to ‘erase Nehru from public memory’.37

Critics also detected a swipe at the more privileged Congress leaders in Modi’s keen emphasis on the poor backgrounds of other prime ministers. For example, Rama Lakshmi noted that ‘Modi said the museum celebrates prime ministers who came from humble families in small towns, an obvious dig at the Gandhi family political dynasty.’38

The architecture was also a source of criticism. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urged the government to leave the Teen Murti complex ‘undisturbed’ and not to build over the rear gardens.39

Once it opened, most of the reviews were positive, though there were criticisms related to the focus on flashy technology rather than objects.

Writing in the Dharma Dispatch, Sandeep Balakrishna welcomed Modi’s decision, saying that it represented a departure from Nehru’s ‘colonisation’ of post-war Indian history.40

A Surya Prakash, Vice-Chairman of the NMML’s executive council, wrote that the museum had ‘brought in the more democratic idea of inclusivity’ by ending the old museum’s focus on Nehru. He continued that ‘the Nehru section… is far more informative and educative than it ever was’.41

30 Annual Report, 2020-21: 127
31 Ibid: 127
37 Ibid: 127
38 ©MoPM
39 ©MoPM
Museologist and historian Rama Lakshmi made four significant criticisms of the museum:

1. She wrote that the museum had avoided some controversial topics. ‘There is no mention of Babri Masjid’s demolition in Rao’s section’, she wrote, adding that the section on the ‘Bhopal gas tragedy’ is just a ‘bland rendition of events’, rather than addressing the specific controversies of the matter.

2. She argued that the museum lacks complexity: ‘It’s a simple arrangement of well-known facts, incidents and biographical details …It clearly lacks deep curatorial research… there has been no effort to look for rare archival interviews that can share the motivations behind important decisions like the Mandal Commission implementation…’.

3. She criticised the lack of ‘jaw-dropping objects’ beyond a small number of personal items. She argued that some of the items displayed were ‘bland and powerless’ due to ‘the absence of stories around these objects’.

4. Finally, she argued that the museum lacked ‘grand narrative’ and that ‘it should tell us who we are’.

Sanjaya Baru praised the museum as a ‘welcome addition to New Delhi’ and an ‘impressive effort’. But, he criticised the consistency of spacing between more recent Prime Ministers, some of whom, he argued, did not merit so much attention: ‘six PMs spent a total of around six years in office, while PV. Narasimha Rao alone was in office for a full term of five years. Yet, PV gets almost as much attention as each of these’. He remarked that Rao’s economic reforms had ‘shaped India’s destiny’, while some other Prime Ministers did not.

Ektaa Malik wrote that the museum should have focused more on items: ‘The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya would have left a better impression had it been less about technology than the more personal souvenirs and tangible collectibles of India’s Prime Ministers.’

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Analysis

Lakshmi’s criticisms are undoubtedly fair. The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is well presented but having to deliver such a huge topic means that it sometimes spreads information (necessarily) quite thinly. Even though it does look at the controversies of the Emergency (with a very long audio guide entry to listen to) and some of the more painful chapters in Indian history, it has the feel of an ‘official history.’

Nevertheless, Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is a unique experiment. It is a purpose-built museum dedicated to a country’s prime ministers. At the heart of the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is exactly the same aspiration as with the MoPM; to tell the story of the prime ministers.

References

43 Baru, ‘Revisiting PMs: Museum in Delhi underplays PV’, Deccan Chronicle.
44 Ibid.
46 Lakshmi, ‘PMs’ Museum bedazzles and entertains. But it doesn’t tell us who we are.’
The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya relies heavily on spectacle and technology. LED lights ripple in the colours of the Indian flag. A wall sized projection shows Nehru's independence speech while others show advancing frontlines during India’s wars. Each gallery has a distinctive look and lighting. A projection show demonstrates the condition of India on independence. There are holograms of prime ministerial speeches. There are CGI nuclear tests. There are levitating rockets and globe. There are iconic yellow phone booths in one gallery and artillery guns in another. Above all, the story of modern India is told in dozens of audio-visual displays, interactive boards, and via more traditional objects and presentations.

The technology is often used very effectively. Interactive tables and document readers allow visitors to gain more detail from particular subjects, large audio-visual presentations on India’s conflicts tell the stories succinctly, and the images of the Prime Ministers and the great events of recent Indian history feel ever present. The audio guide connects to the various screens and allows visitors to listen to the presentations (as well as providing the option to hear further details).

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya often uses technology in the form of interactive displays and tables to convey large amounts of historical information easily. MoPM should definitely consider the use of such devices, which might help to provide more information to visitors, especially when space might be at a premium.

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya reached out to the families of former Prime Ministers in order to obtain items. Similarly, the MoPM should do exactly this in order to begin a permanent collection.
Yitzhak Rabin Center and Israeli Museum

Subject: Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, 1974-77, 1992-95

Opened: 2010

Location: Tel Aviv, Israel

Visitors: c.60,100,000 per year (2010-19), 20,000 (2021)

4.5/5 TripAdvisor
4.4 Google reviews

Ratings:
25 NIS concession
60 NIS (£14), c. NIS 110 million

Cost: c. NIS 110 million (c.£30m in 2010)

Ticket price: 60 NIS (£14), 25 NIS concession

Origins

The Yitzhak Rabin Center commemorates Israeli soldier, diplomat, and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995). It is located in Tel Aviv and it is a standalone institution.1

The Center contains the Israeli Museum which details the history and development of Israel as a country, society, and democracy.7

The ‘Israeli Museum’ is more than just a memorial to a single man, it is also a museum about Israeli politics and society as they developed during Rabin’s life. Consequently, the museum tells a broader story than just one man’s biography.

The museum’s website makes clear that it is: ‘the only museum in Israel to tell the history and development of the State of Israel and Israeli society. Inseparable from the history of Israel, the museum tells the story of the life of Yitzhak Rabin.’8

Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing extremist in 1995. The tragedy of his death profoundly shocked the nation of Israel, as Rabin had been a major presence in Israeli public life, first as a soldier, then as a diplomat, and finally as a politician and prime minister. During the early 1990s, he had been the driving force behind a series of peace initiatives, including a treaty with Jordan and the Oslo Accords.

The Oslo process, and the concessions it required, were bitterly controversial in Israel and led to Rabin’s death. In the aftermath, the Oslo peace process disintegrated.

After the assassination, the Knesset voted for a permanent memorial and museum to Rabin in 1997 that would protect and enhance his legacy.2

Anita Shapira was one of the driving forces of the Yitzhak Rabin Center and Israeli museum. A well-established historian, she modelled the Rabin Center on the presidential libraries of the United States, creating a unique institution in Israel (she was also the first director of the Center from 1997). She knew that the presidential library idea had to be adapted to an Israeli reality and that an American institution could not simply be reproduced in a different context.9

There were three motivations behind the decision to create the Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli museum as a broader museum than just one focused on Rabin himself. Firstly, there was no museum to contemporary history in Israel, so there was a gap that needed to be filled. Secondly, the designers of the museum decided that they could not teach the life of Rabin without discussing the nation that he lived in. Thirdly, they could not teach about the murder and assassination of Rabin without dealing with the other arguments and ruptures in Israeli society prior to the 1990s. Under Shapira’s direction, they sought to combine the story of Rabin’s life with that of Israel itself.10

From this vision emerged the decision to place Rabin’s life story around the central corridor and then have galleries telling the Israeli story. A wide selection of historians provided expertise for the design of the museum’s permanent galleries. The aim was to have contributions from a diverse set of voices and opinions. However, it was made clear from the beginning that there would be a small group that would make the decisions.

References:

3 ‘Museums in Tel Aviv’, TripAdvisor, <https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attractions-g293984-Activities-c49-Tel_Aviv_Tel_Aviv_District.html>, accessed 7 January 2023.
10 Interview, Dr Nurit Cohen.
According to the Jewish Virtual Library, the Center functions in the spirit of three principles:

• Positioning Yitzhak Rabin as an exemplary model of responsible, fair and innovative leadership in the fields of civil society, security and the quest for peace;

• Establishing a deep commitment to Israeli civil society based on respect, social cohesiveness, democratic values and the rule of law;

• Advancing the well-being and unification of the Jewish people, in light of the danger of violent disagreement and internal conflict evidenced by the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.13

Funds for the Center were provided by donors. Dalia Rabin, daughter of Yitzhak, led the fundraising effort, with donations from the American, German, and Norwegian governments, as well as substantial private donations.14

The Rabin Center was established with these funds. Upon opening, it became an Israeli state museum (a similar model to the US presidential libraries’ public private partnership).15

The Center is located in a spectacular site overlooking central Tel Aviv. The land was a military power station that was decommissioned during the 1990s, and Tel Aviv mayor Shlomo Lahat allocated the land for construction.

The design, from renowned architect Moshe Safdie, incorporates part of the old power station’s walls. Large white sections are supposed to invoke the wings of a dove.16

The Center contains a museum focusing on Rabin’s life, an auditorium, a research institute, a library and archive, and a multipurpose hall.15

Unlike American presidential museums, where the principal figure is usually buried on the site, Rabin’s grave is not located near the Center. He is buried in Jerusalem.15


Visitor Experience

‘The centerpiece of the Yitzhak Rabin Center experience is The Israeli Museum … visitors explore the history and markings of the State via exhibit halls, each focused on historical turning points in the country’s development. The exhibits present the conflicts, social challenges and dilemmas the country faced, as well as its successes. Along the inner corridor and interwoven with the exhibits’ narratives is the life story of Yitzhak Rabin, the connecting thread in the country’s history and development.’ Yitzhak Rabin Center 17

The Yitzhak Rabin Center is a slightly different kind of museum to others that are featured in this study. While it is dedicated to Yitzhak Rabin himself, it is also a history of Israel itself – with Rabin’s life interwoven. The museum takes the visitor through Rabin’s life on an inside track - the personal. The museum galleries themselves explore the wider history of the country.

The museum is virtually all audio-visual, though information boards do tell some of the story. Sound effects play in some areas, like music on the lower floor, and the sounds of battle in the Six-Day War. There are some 200 short films, and 1,500 photographs.18

The audio-visual element is a combination of photographs, news reports, footage, speeches, and compilations. The section on the Six-Day War shows footage of the conflict, audio of military call signs and commands, music, and then extracts from Rabin’s famous speech reflecting on the aftermath.

The strategy taken for the displays was deliberately ‘overload’. There is far too much in the museum to reasonably view in a single visit.19 The aspiration was to be like one of the great museums, where there is always far too much to see. Therefore, guests can take in as much as they wish and then return at a later date. The museum therefore presents a very comprehensive history.

Funds for the Center were provided by donors.

16 Interview, Dr Nurit Cohen.
17 ‘About the Center’, Yitzhak Rabin Center.
18 ‘Yitzhak Rabin Center’, Jewish Virtual Library.
19 Interview, Dr Nurit Cohen.

The areas vary in size. The Six Day War is told in just one room, with a projection showing footage of the conflict, and a display case of Rabin’s items. Other sections are much longer.

Audio is provided via infrared headsets that plays automatically when the visitor looks at screens or information points, and then stops when the visitor moves away. This allows visitors to view as much of the displays as they would like, taking in the exhibition at their own pace. A selection of languages are available, including Hebrew, English, Spanish, Russian, French or Arabic.

At the beginning of their visit, the visitor steps onto a space representing the 1995 peace rally in Kings of Israel Square, where Rabin was assassinated. Large screens play footage from the rally, the screens go black, there is a shot, and then there are news reports about the assassination. This makes for a dramatic and disorientating entry into the museum. This is a point of memory for those who lived through the event, and roots visitors in an iconic moment.

The museum’s design is similar to that of New York’s Guggenheim Museum, with a central spiral corridor. Visitors leave the ramp to go into the specific galleries, exploring them, and then stop where the visitor moves away. This allows visitors to move around at their own leisure, skipping busy sections or parts they are not interested in.

The central ramp of the museum presents the life of Rabin from the pre-state Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, to the establishment of the state of Israel, his time in the military, and finally his political career. Doors then lead to display spaces that discuss the history of Israel from independence until 1995. This weaves the story of Rabin into the wider story of the history of the country.

Note that the pictures in between the cases (which are devoted to Rabin’s life) depict groups, of which Rabin was a part. This emphasises that Rabin was not simply one man on a pedestal, he was part of many.

Every part of the museum contains five consistent elements:

1. The development and politics of Israel (represented throughout).
2. Military affairs, terrorism, and conflict, represented on border fence style displays.
3. Fissures within society, represented by jagged red displays. These cover the controversies and protests within the country and within society.
4. Large diorama style displays that cover certain topics - early settlement, the Yom Kippur War, the Madrid Peace talks, and the first Intifada uprising.
5. An international timeline giving context to world affairs on the floor.

The story of Rabin’s life is told using the displays pictured on the following page, most of which are around the central ramp, with a few located in the galleries. They provide a small amount of text with context, some photographs, and a video screen which shows news reports or speeches. Every short clip ends with a line drawing of Rabin. At the bottom of the display, there are some personal items that belonged to Rabin. The pictures on these displays are deliberately smaller and more personal in contrast to the larger, group photos around these cases.

Rabin is mentioned directly in the galleries on three occasions when his life story interacted with the wider story of the country:

1. The Six Day War, during which he was Chief of Staff, and then, afterwards, gave a famous speech that contemplated not only the victory, but the loss of life.
2. Rabin’s first government (1974-77), which led to the Camp David Accords and peace treaty with Egypt in 1979.
The items in the Yitzhak Rabin memorial are used sparingly. They have an intimate connection to Rabin’s life - like sunglasses, business cards, or his briefcase. Whereas some had originally opposed the use of items (fearing that these would make it seem like a reliquary), in fact the visitors respond extremely well to these items.

The final section of the museum has a much larger exhibit that deals with Rabin’s second (and much more significant) government of 1992–95. At this point the corridor opens up, as the story of his life becomes the story of the politics of the country.

Displays discuss the economic achievements and education reforms of the period. Sombre music plays, and the museum presents the subsequent tragedy, not only as a personal one for his family and friends, but as a genuine opportunity for peace that was lost.

Within this part of the display is a recreation of Rabin’s office from 1995, set out exactly as he left it before departing to speak at the peace rally.

The final part of the museum returns us to the central room (but one floor lower). This is set out as a memorial space to Rabin, and screens play a unique angle, revealing some of the history behind the operation from the perspective of the passengers taken hostage and the secret services whose intelligence led to the operation.22 The exhibition was described on the website as a ‘joint exhibit of the Yitzhak Rabin Center and the Israeli Secret Intelligence Service’, a cooperation that allowed the exhibition to tell a hithertofore untold story about the operation.23

Other exhibitions have focused on the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day War and the War of Attrition (1967–70).24

For example, a recent exhibition was about Operation Thunderbolt, the rescue of hostages from Entebbe airport in 1976. It had a unique angle, revealing some of the history behind the operation from the perspective of the passengers taken hostage and the secret services whose intelligence led to the operation.22 The exhibition was described on the website as a ‘joint exhibit of the Yitzhak Rabin Center and the Israeli Secret Intelligence Service’, a cooperation that allowed the exhibition to tell a hithertofore untold story about the operation.23

The workshop after the museum visit will often take the historical lessons and connect them to current challenges. The museum ends in 1995, so one purpose of the sessions after the visit is to bring the story into the modern era.


The Center also offers workshops for teachers and educators where they can explore issues pertaining to Israeli society and democracy, as well as to the educational challenges facing those individuals who deal with civics and social education.29

Displays discuss the economic achievements and education reforms of the period.

The museum works with high school, work, and military groups. They then provide tours centred on the museum, often focusing on subjects that are of particular interest. For example, a school group might focus on divisions in Israeli society, see these in the museum, and then discuss them in a seminar style group in the education centre.

The Center also has considerable outreach programmes. The museum itself is considered by staff to be just one ‘educational tool’ that the Center uses for its wider mission of promoting a democratic society. One of the great advantages that the museum has is that they built an infrastructure for education; there are classrooms, seminar group rooms, and an auditorium.28

One wing of the museum, the Morton Bahr Educational Wing, provides educational and leadership programmes. These ‘support the mission of the Center by instilling democratic values, narrowing socioeconomic gaps, and addressing social divisiveness’.25

The museum has a strong online presence, in both English and Hebrew, with a detailed biography of Rabin, as well as links to speeches.

The website also runs digital exhibitions, including a recent digital initiative called ‘Democracy Sucks!!!’
Institutional Information

As it is an official Israeli state museum, the Yitzhak Rabin Center is funded by the Israeli government.

A McKinsey report on Israeli museums in 2015 estimated that the level of government subsidy for the Rabin Center was about 66% of its running costs. A part of the revenue comes from donations through fundraising (c.30%). A small part is raised via ticket sales.30

A foundation was initially created for the museum, raising money for the museum’s construction and then supporting it for a decade of membership.31 However, the Foundation was dissolved in 2018. Fundraising from within the Center continues and it does have a donor network.

The Yitzhak Rabin Center’s main costs, according to its approved budget for 2021, were the museum and education centre (3.3 million NIS, £792,401), administration (2.4 million NIS, £736,080), research (0.5 million NIS, £134,000) and archives (0.5 million NIS, £134,000). The total budget was 6.9 million NIS (£1.8m). For the 2019-20 period, the Center’s income was about 750,000 NIS (£180,091).32

Reception

During the pre-pandemic times, the Rabin Center attracted some 80-100,000 visitors per year roughly split equally between tourist visitors and organised group tour programmes.36 The main audiences for the museum, according to a 2022 public works document, are listed as ‘students, soldiers, retirees and tourists’.37

This is a museum to a controversial figure, and one whose memory is still highly contested in Israel. The Oslo peace process was divisive and, with the continuation of the conflict, divisions remain. Therefore, the museum does attract controversy from time to time, especially around the anniversary of Rabin’s assassination. There have also been times when political figures bitterly opposed to Rabin have visited or attended exhibitions, which has led to some critical commentary.

The museum also acknowledges the suffering caused by the 1948 war amongst the displaced Palestinian population. A screen shows segments of footage of refugees, with quiet music. The acknowledgement of Palestinian suffering during the 1948 war was a controversial point with some of the guests who requested that it be removed entirely. However, the museum’s management insisted that it remain in place.38

The museum has been praised for its approach to difficult topics.

...the Museum doesn’t try and gloss over the controversies that raged at the time of his murder…. The centre and museum are dedicated to helping repair the terrible split in Israeli society that existed the months before and immediately after the assassination. Its aim is to show the importance of true democracy with respect to the rule of law together with tolerance from all sides, for all opinions. Ann Goldberg, Jewish Chronicle.39

Writing in the Jerusalem Post, Ruthie Blum described the museum as ‘state of the art,’ and a tourist attraction ‘worth exploring’.40

Liam Hoare, writing in the Fathom Journal, contrasted the Rabin museum favourably with the ‘one-sided’ Begin Center in Jerusalem, praising it as an ‘excellent’ museum. He noted that the ‘the physical arrangement of the gallery emphasises that Israeli history itself here is secondary to and exists to serve the main gallery, augmenting Rabin as a figure of tremendous historical importance’.41

The Center was originally conceived as a research centre, albeit one that had a museum attached.


Rabin, ‘Summary of work year 2020 and work plan for 2021’.


However, some disagree. Esther Zandberg, writing in Haaretz criticised the Center’s architecture as a ‘megalomaniacal monument .. aggressive and preposterous at the same time’. She argued that it was far from Rabin’s image and distant from the heart of the city. She criticised the museum as an experience that ‘neutralizes any attempt to think freely and draw lessons from it’. The visitor is a captive who is shunted along a route... from which there is no escape either from the pathway or the narrative written and handed down from above.42

Analysis & Lessons
The Rabin Center has an excellent museum. It has a strong narrative and presents the history in an accessible and innovative way. However, the Center does not offer a perfect model for the MoPM.

While the blend of Rabin’s own story with the national history works very well in the museum, telling a wider such story with the MoPM would broaden the museum’s scope so far as to make it unmanageably vast. The main period covered by the Rabin museum is just 47 years. A British museum with a similar focus would have to be many, many times larger.

The Rabin museum is exceptionally well designed, with all of the elements working together very well indeed. It tells a much broader story effectively, and links Rabin’s life with the story of Israel. However, this approach would not be appropriate for MoPM. British history is simply too long and it would broaden the museum’s mission too much.

In terms of presentation, the Rabin museum might offer a lesson in how the MoPM could display personal objects related to Prime Ministers; sparsely, but while establishing a clear link between the items and the context, story, or narrative.

The Rabin Center’s use of archival footage offers a good lesson in how the MoPM might present the 20th and 21st Century Prime Ministers. Displays could show evocative and interesting footage, especially where there is an absence of items.

The museum makes extensive use of audio-visual technology. Selecting technology was a careful process in the museum’s design phase. Too much technology risks the museum looking dated quite quickly and is also a considerable financial burden. It is more likely to break.43

Having lots of information in the galleries, but allowing the visitor to choose their own course, might be a good way to handle the MoPM. Audio-guides or interactive displays can provide a lot of information, and fulfil the aspiration of a comprehensive museum, without overwhelming visitors.

Knowing where documents are kept for advising researchers is helpful, but otherwise it is not worth investing enormous time and resources into an archive when other facilities are so much better able to handle them or are already established.

The Center uses its exhibition space to tell unheard stories. This is certainly something that MoPM should consider. There are plenty of stories in British politics and government that have gone untold. MoPM could work with the Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence, the intelligence services, or the National Archives to tell such unheard stories.

The Center has very strong outreach programmes. Perhaps the MoPM could consider a mission aim for programmes focused on promoting democracy or leadership?

43 Interview, Dr Nurit Cohen.
L’Historial Charles de Gaulle

Subject:
Charles de Gaulle, Leader of the Free French, 1940-44, Chairman of the Provisional Government of France, 1944-46, Prime Minister of France, 1958-59, President of France, 1959-69

Opened:
2008 (renovated and reopened 2019)

Location:
Musée de l’Armée, Les Invalides, Paris, France

Annual visitors:
200,000

Designer:
Moatti Riviere

Cost:
$28m

Ticket price:
€14 (€11 for discounted, €5 for student) for entire museum

Ratings:
4.5/5 TripAdvisor (for the Invalides)
4.7/5 Google reviews

“`The Historical Charles de Gaulle is an interactive multimedia space dedicated to the work of the public figure, leader of Free France and then founding President of the Fifth Republic.”

Origins

The Charles de Gaulle Historial is the permanent exhibition dedicated to President Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) at the Musée de l’Armée (henceforth ‘army museum’) in the Invalides in Paris. ‘Historial’ is a French neologism meaning something between a museum, a monument, and an educational exhibit.

In the official guidebook it is described as not a memorial nor a museum in the traditional sense of the term, it is a place of knowledge ‘the image in all its forms is favoured through interactive devices.’

In 2004, French President Jacques Chirac announced that, in the absence of a ‘place to keep the memory of Charles de Gaulle alive in Paris’ there would be a new permanent exhibition dedicated to the ‘life, personality and work of Charles de Gaulle’.

The Invalides itself was opened in 1874 as a barracks and home for veterans. Today, the Invalides hosts the army museum, which is dedicated to the history of the French army. It originally opened in 1905 though a predecessor Musee de l’Artillerie opened in 1795 and was hosted at the Invalides from 1871.

The project was designed by French architecture and scenography company Agence Moatti Riviere, who were selected in March 2015 after a public competition. The overall cost of the project was €14 million according to Moatti Riviere, though La Depeche quoted an overall figure of €18 million for the entire project.

Moatti Riviere said that ‘we wanted to bring together, without clashing, the architecture of the 21st Century and that of a building from the 17th Century’. The content of the exhibition is a cooperation between the army museum and Fondation Charles de Gaulle.

It was built over 2005-07 and opened in February 2008. The gallery was located in an area of the Invalides that had not been used for prior museum work, and though de Gaulle had served as an officer at the Invalides, the area used was not one with which he had any particular association. When the space was created during the 2000s, old German fortifications dating from the Second World War were discovered, requiring a delicate process of demolition by hand to avoid weakening the 17th Century buildings around.

Then French President Nicolas Sarkozy inaugurated the project in February 2008. He described the opening as one of the “paradoxes of our country’s history, that the memory of the great man is unanimously celebrated, while throughout his life his legitimacy was contested.” The exhibition certainly reflects this contested memory.

The current incarnation of the exhibition dates from 2019. In 2017, the museum decided to update and overhaul the exhibition. Old technology was approaching the end of its service life.

‘The main focus of the renovation involved a variety of aspects. Visitor welcome, for instance, was given a complete rethink. The identity and presence of the Historial within the building of Les Invalides were entirely revised, from the entrance in the museum’s west wing, to the landings, stairwell and entry arch. Vincent Graudier. Director of the Historial.”

Visitor Experience

The Moatte Rivere website refers to the Historial as the ‘invisible monument’. This is accurate: the Historial is wholly hosted at a basement level, with no part visible above ground.

There are four main parts to the Historial; The Temporary Exhibition Space; The Entrance; The film; The Exhibition.

When visitors arrive, they are greeted by the aforementioned “France Forever” mobile by Alexander Calder. A nearby information point explains the key features of the artwork.

Beyond the Calder mobile is an exhibition space, hosted in the corridor before the Historial. Twice a year, this is used to illustrate a historical topic from de Gaulle’s era. In July 2022, it hosted an exhibition on the Free French-fought Battle of Bir Hakeim in 1942. The items displayed were from the collections of the army museum. These are the last historical objects that visitors will see before they enter the Historial (and indeed, the last historical objects they see before returning to the main museum).

After the entrance, the visitor has a choice. They can proceed to the 25-minute film. Or, alternatively, they can explore the exhibition itself and return to the film later.

The exhibition’s content is largely footage, photographs, and extracts from de Gaulle’s own writings. The audio-visual materials were drawn from numerous sources, including AFP, Agence photo-RMN Grand-Palais, Archives de Guerre, the Imperial War Museum, the Charles de Gaulle Fondation, Magnum Photos, La Documentation Francaise and Sotheby’s Picture Library (amongst many others). The renovated Historial opened in 2020, with new technology and a new section on the events of May 1968. A notable acquisition and addition was the France Forever Mobile, a work of art made by Alexander Calder in 1942. 'a piece recognised by the Ministry of Culture as being of major heritage interest. Bought with the patronage of the CIC [bank and commercial services organisation], a key partner of the Musée de l’Armée, the mobile in the form of an almost solar Cross of Lorraine symbolises the future victory of the forces of Free France over the black clouds of oppression and barbarism. A dedicated display accompanies this exceptional work.'

Vincent Giraudier

The exhibition’s content is largely footage, photographs, and extracts from de Gaulle’s own writings. After the entrance, the visitor has a choice. They can proceed to the 25-minute film. Or, alternatively, they can explore the exhibition itself and return to the film later.

The centre-piece of the Historial is the auditorium, where five screens (645 square foot) play a 25-minute film about de Gaulle’s life (described by the museum as a ‘vision of the Gaullist epic’). The screens sometimes project the same image, sometimes one long image or piece of footage, and at other times, portray something different on each screen. The effect is spectacular and it provides an excellent introduction to de Gaulle’s story.

The guidebook describes the auditorium as an ‘inverted dome’, similar to the dome in the nearby Saint-Louis-des-Invalides Cathedral where Napoleon lies.
The film was produced by the Fondation Charles de Gaulle and according to the museum is ‘suitable for both the connoisseurs of the period and the neophytes’. The five screens are a tribute Abel Gance’s 1927 film Napoléon.17

Having received an overview of de Gaulle’s life from the film, the next destination for most visitors is the main exhibition space.

The main exhibition is divided into two parts, with a ring around the auditorium described as "an overview of the century" projected onto a circular glass ring, from the Belle Époque to the pop years, from Charlie Chaplin to the Rolling Stones.18 This provides historical context to the events of de Gaulle’s life.

The ‘overview of the century’ is a liminal space between the exhibition rooms, which are referred to in the guidebook as ‘Alcoves of Knowledge’. The four rooms of the exhibition are: Youth and War, 1890-1945; The Liberation, 1944-46; Desert Crossing, 1947-58; The Fifth Republic, 1958-70.19

Projections of de Gaulle dominate the exhibition. Each ‘audio-visual door’ is clearly signposted to guests with a large image of de Gaulle. The early sections use posters from the Belle Epoque (1875-1914) to evoke an image of France during the 1890s.

One interactive display in the Historial takes the shape of a book that depicts de Gaulle’s military writings during the interwar years. The interactive table shows de Gaulle’s memoirs, and allows the visitors to explore extracts via an interactive timeline of the 1946-58 period. De Gaulle’s handwriting is projected over the wall immediately above the display. The visitor can search for specific ‘places’, ‘moments’, and ‘portraits’, and the interactive display will show de Gaulle’s writings on those topics. Elsewhere, a display shows an open book, and touching either side of the display causes the ‘pages’ to ‘turn’.

The room dealing with the Liberation has screens showing footage of de Gaulle’s return to France during 1944, and then another map depicts his progress through Paris during the August liberation. The guide says that it shows de Gaulle’s progress through ‘the great emblematic places of our national memory’.

One interactive screen in this part of the exhibition details de Gaulle’s 1944-46 government. Visitors can select one of the priorities of that government (‘Ending the War’, ‘Restoring the Republic and the Authority of the State’, ‘Rebuilding France’) and then the display shows related newsreel footage. The interactive screens also allow visitors to watch interviews with people who worked with de Gaulle.

Virtually everything is electronic. There are screens showing images, large floor to ceiling projections, and interactive displays. There are very few captions or signs in the exhibition space.

This room focuses on de Gaulle’s ‘Desert Crossing, 1947-58’. The images and posters on the wall deal with de Gaulle’s attempts to build a post-war political movement (the RPF). One of the interactive displays allows visitors to explore the symbolism of the posters for and against the RPF movement. A film plays at the beginning of the display, showing de Gaulle speaking at RPF rallies.

An interactive display allows the visitor to watch newsreel footage covering the beginnings of the RPF, its high point in the late 1940s, and its abeyance after it was defeated in the 1951 legislative elections.

At the end of the display, there is a selection of family photos, visible only through small viewing portholes.

The fourth ‘alcove of knowledge’ is the most extensive. It deals with de Gaulle’s presidency (1958-70). There are five rooms; The Return to Power Against the Background of the Algerian War; France During the Cold War; Les Trente Glorieuses (The Glorious Thirty); May 68; Resignation and Death.

Entering the display, the visitor is greeted by a bold red, white, and blue display, starting with a bank of television screens depicting the backdrop of the Algerian War, and how de Gaulle returned to power in 1958. Another set of screens shows the progression of the Algerian war, and how de Gaulle brought the conflict to an end.

One display shows a hologram of a comedian doing an impression of de Gaulle at a press conference. Another interactive device shows interviews with people around at the time who had a perspective on de Gaulle’s government. These included interviews on difficult topics like the war in Algeria and the torture of detainees.
The army museum has a good website with resources for professionals.

Nearby, interactive screens provided context around the political changes related to the new Fifth Republic (the drafting of the constitution, de Gaulle’s legacy, the adoption of the new constitution by referendum), and the changes that have followed (including a clip of the broadcast of the 1965 election, speeches by subsequent presidents, and news footage of the 2000 referendum on presidential terms).

Another device in this part of the museum is called ‘Questions of History’. It is a touchscreen that allows visitors to ask questions directly to a historian. A choice of questions is on the screen, including ‘Did de Gaulle decide on a solution to the Algerian problem?’ and ‘How was Algerian independence gradually imposed on de Gaulle?’

The next room is about ‘France during the Cold War’. There is a globe featuring large screens, and interactive interfaces that can be used to select topics. It explores de Gaulle’s foreign policy via six themes, such as Franco-German reconciliation and the growth of the European project. These screens can be used to watch highlights of de Gaulle’s foreign policy, usually with several options to begin with, and then with four or five videos on each topic on things like ‘De Gaulle’s Republic and the American Continent’ or ‘Charles de Gaulle speaks in Russian’.

In the section on Europe policy, footage played of his 1967 press conference during which he articulated his opposition to Great Britain’s membership of the European Economic Community. Some of these videos were up to 12 minutes long, though most are fairly short (3-4 minutes).

The following room focuses on de Gaulle’s domestic policy and takes its name from that given to France’s post-war economic growth: ‘Les Trente Glorieuses’ (The Glorious Thirty).

Photos display posters and adverts from the 1960s. The narrative is clearly one of peace and prosperity. Screens show newsreel footage of art projects, the construction of new towns, and education reforms.

An airlock-like portal takes visitors into the penultimate room. Crude posters can be seen and the noise of crowds and police sirens can be heard. This area deals with the protests of May ’68 and the end of de Gaulle’s presidency.

Another interactive screen on the other side of the room shows interviews with participants in the events of 1968. This shows footage of newsreels, including ‘Confrontation in the Latin Quarter’ and ‘The Silent Majority’, which shows the right’s reaction to the protests of May ’68. Screens show interviews, selected newsreel footage plays, and finally a television screen deals with the referendum that re-elected De Gaulle’s proposed reforms, and his resignation.

According to the museum’s website, this is the only museum space in Paris to discuss both the Cold War and the only permanent exhibition in France that deals with the events of May 68.

The last part of the permanent display shows a few photographs of de Gaulle in the final months of his life, together with footage of his funeral in 1970.

Though the Historical is bereft of items, the army museum itself holds numerous de Gaulle objects in its collections. These items mainly date from his army service. They include his briefcase, kepi, cigarette case, tunic, pennant and command flag, gloves, belt, and papers. There are also a few items related to de Gaulle’s presidency, including gifts and uniforms.

A specific Charles de Gaulle tour on the museum’s audio guides, which are available at the front entrance, allows visitors to find the de Gaulle related spaces and items in the army museum.

Outreach

There are some programmes for children and tours available on the museum’s website. The Charles de Gaulle Foundation also provides activities and resources for schools. However, this is not a big part of the Historical’s mission.

The army museum has a good website with resources for professionals, and a ‘Magazine’ section with the latest news about the collections.

A page on the website provides instructions for visitors, as well as visitor guides for teachers of both secondary school and primary school level. Guidebooks and worksheets for students are also available.

The website also provides educational documents for teachers to help with tours. These include an ‘Accompanied tour of the Historical Charles de Gaulle’. The museum welcomed 153,226 young people (defined as under 26 and 403 school groups in 2021.

They do run programmes for young children, and these are often related to exhibitions, including the Playmobil exhibition at the Invalides: en avant Napoléon! However, there does not appear to be any specifically de Gaulle themed children’s section.

The Historical’s website is part of the army museum’s website. It does not have a large presence online.

The Historical itself does not host any archives, though the army museum does have a library, military archive, and media archive.
Institutional Information

The Historial was created as an initiative of the French government and is part of a state-run museum.

The army museum is under the supervision of the Minister for the Armed Forces, represented by the Secretary General for Administration. Its day-to-day exercise is ensured by the Heritage, Memory and Archives Department.27

It lists its mission as: ‘to present to the public the military history of France, in all its components, land, air and sea, through specific collections that it endeavours to enrich’.28

According to the 2021 Museum Review, the army museum has 200 staff in total. The Historial is overseen by the Charles de Gaulle Historical department, which lists a head of department, assistant head, and curatorial assistant as staff.39

Most of the museum’s income comes from government funds. As the Historial is only a part of the museum, it is hard to calculate the exact costs.30

In 2021, the army museum’s income was €10.2 million, of which €2 million came from ticket receipts, and €7.4 million from government funds.31

As far as funding is concerned, the army museum has programmes for both individual and corporate supporters. There are general programmes, as well as specific fundraising drives (for example, a present one is aimed at supporting the ‘restoration of the Emperor [Napoleon’s] tomb which is located in the Invalides’).32

Donors receive a range of benefits, including invitations to the inaugurations of temporary exhibitions, guided tours of the permanent spaces, a catalogue of the exhibition, invitations to concerts during the musical season, and invitations to sponsor events.33 The museum website also lists ways of donation via beneficiary.

Sponsorship tickets are available, by which a visitor can become a ‘patron’ of the museum by adding €2–€10 to their tickets.

The Society of Friends of the Army Museum has supported the museum since 1909.34 It offers a variety of memberships for between €25-100. Benefits include free access to the various parts of the museum and privileged access to new exhibitions.35

Companies can also support the museum. They can receive a tax reduction (to the amount donated) for doing so.36 There are several levels of support. A ‘Support’ package (from €25,000 to €50,000) provides a number of free entry tickets, privileged visits, and catalogues of the current temporary exhibition. The most expensive tier of sponsorship, ‘Major Patron’ (greater than €150,000), offers the same benefits, but with the addition of invitations to concerts and the use of certain rooms within the Invalides (including the grand Turenne Room).37

According to the 2021 Museum Review, the army museum has 200 staff in total.

Reception

The army museum is one of France’s premier museums and in 2014 was the fourth most visited museum in Paris. In 2018, it attracted 1.2 million visitors (with 458,000 in 2021, when it was open between May-December).38

Visitor profiles for the Historial as a distinct entity are not available. However, they are available for the army museum. Just over half (54%) of the museum’s visitors are international. Of these, in 2021, the portion of visitors under the age of 26 was 33%.39

The Historial seems to have been well received.

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31 Ibid, p. 113.
33 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
A more critical tone was taken by Felicity Bodenstein and Dominique Poulot, who described it as ‘very much in the traditional vein of glorification offered to great military leaders that characterises the Musée de l’Armée; indeed, the circular underground structure closely resembles that of the tomb of Napoleon’.

One criticism came from David Bell, who referred to it as a ‘commemorative misfire’.

‘This example, however, all too clearly reflected the middle-aged designers’ vision of what would attract a generation raised on computers and video games… The overall effect, however, is strangely sinister. It reminded me of nothing so much as the nuclear-command bunker in Strangefellow… De Gaulle himself, whose cultural tastes tended toward the deeply traditional, would almost certainly have loathed the place.’

David Bell, The Nation.

The Historial has been quite influential. Vincent Giraudier, Director of the Historial wrote that ‘The resulting technical specificity makes this historic remembrance site a veritable “interpretation centre” that has served as a model for a number of facilities since, in France and overseas’. According to information in its own displays, the Historial has influenced the design of the Cité de Vin Museum in Bordeaux, The Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, the Auckland War Memorial Museum in New Zealand, the Chatet 2 cave, and the new Verdun memorial.

Analysis & Lessons

The de Gaulle Historial uses a variety of audio-visual displays to tell de Gaulle’s story. These include eye catching pictures, footage, screens, and interactive panels. The Historial is a good example of a completely new exhibition that has been created for a particular figure, when there is no intrinsic relationship between that place and the person.

A competing museum can be created in the absence of objects to display. The experience of the Historial is educational and informative. The outline of the century immerses the visitor in the imagery of de Gaulle’s era. It is a good place to learn about Charles de Gaulle.

The Historial uses innovative technology to create an interactive experience. Visitors can watch as much as they like and interact with the interviews/touch screen displays as much as they choose. There are 20 hours of audio-visual material in the exhibition, and therefore more than enough for even the most ardent enthusiast. This can serve as a good model for the MoPM.

The layout is very effective. There is the auditorium in the centre, a corridor around that, and gallery rooms that lead back to the central corridor. It is easy to navigate and for visitors to comprehend. The circular design leads visitors along a chronological path and back to the exit.

There are limits to what audio-visual material alone can provide. The visitor doesn’t see anything that they can associate with de Gaulle’s person. The de Gaulle trail on the electronic guide, which points visitors to de Gaulle objects in the museum, seeks to remedy this. There is also a booklet that can be purchased from the museum that matches sections of the Historial with the items located elsewhere in the museum’s galleries. This seems like a tacit admission that the Historial alone is not enough and that visitors also want to see items related to de Gaulle’s life.
The Museum of Australian Democracy

Subject: Australian democracy (since 1901)

Opened: 2009

Location: Canberra, Australia

Annual visitors: 272,000 (2018-19)³

Designer: Ralph Appelbaum Associates³

Cost: $12.2 million AUD⁴

Ticket price: Free

Ratings: 4.6 Google reviews
4.5/5 TripAdvisor
#5 attraction in Canberra, TripAdvisor

“...the premise of the office..."¹

 Origins

In 1988, the Australian Parliament relocated from Canberra’s Parliament House to the new premises on nearby Capital Hill. During the 2000s, plans were made for a new Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD). It opened in Old Parliament House in 2009."¹

Prime Ministers at the MoAD

The most interesting feature of the MoAD, and the reason for its inclusion in this report, is that it often engages with the office of prime minister and those who have held the office. Over the pages that follow, I have detailed a few ways that the MoAD has worked with the office of prime minister. As I did not visit the MoAD, this section will be shorter, and will only highlight the prime minister related aspects of their work.

Originally, the history of the prime ministers was a key part of the design and the promise that there would be a research centre for prime ministers had helped ‘sell’ the idea to the Australian government.

The Australian Prime Ministers Centre was part of the MoAD when it opened in 2009. The Centre housed published material relating to Australia’s political history, including biographies of prime ministers and a complete set of Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates and Parliamentary Papers. It also had study areas and a reference librarian. It originally offered a research and scholarship programme ‘intended to foster research and creative projects that expand knowledge about Australia’s prime ministers and their governments.’¹¹

However, the Australian Prime Ministers Centre was the victim of spending cuts in 2016, and it was decided to transfer it wholly to an online format at the end of that year.⁷

The MoAD now hosts a comprehensive website for prime ministers, which links directly from the front page of the museum’s website.

The Australian Prime Ministers website (https://apm-origin.moad.gov.au/) features information, biographies, timelines, and links to items in the museum’s collections that are associated with those figures (for example, Tony Abbott’s bicycle or Sir Edmund Barton’s ceremonial uniform).

The website links to primary sources, libraries, and archived webpages that the researcher might use. The website has a catalogue of 70,000 items related to Australian prime ministers held by various collections all around Australia.³

The website also provides information about important locations related to Australian prime ministers, such as their homes⁸ or Melbourne General Cemetery, where four of the prime ministers are buried.⁹

According to MoAD staff, the website is really designed for ‘the history tourist’ rather than the more scholarly ‘history researcher.’

The prime ministerial historical resources in Australia have been called a ‘distributed national collection’ University libraries, the National Archives, the National Library of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, and the National Trust all have key resources. One of the most important achievements of the website is to bring these collections together and make them visible to the general public.¹₀

² Ibid, p. 17.
¹⁰ Interview Campbell Rhodes, Laina Hall, and Toni Dam.
Additionally, the MoAD also created the Network of Prime Ministerial Research and Collecting Agencies. This is ‘a group of cultural institutions, university libraries and heritage-listed homes which hold prime ministerial collections and/or promote research and public engagement with Australia’s prime ministers.’

This organisation facilitates collaboration between these collections, including professional development for staff, and promotes exhibitions and events. The main purpose of the initiative was for a bigger museum to support the smaller ones and help them to preserve their collections.

The prime ministers are key figures in Australia’s democratic history and play a role in many of the exhibitions, including the new permanent exhibit, Democracy DNA. There, the prime ministers of Australia are represented by information boards and items are displayed.

‘Democracy DNA provides a journey through time quite unlike any other. Starting in 1901, visitors can learn more about each of the nation’s prime ministers in our new, reimagined timeline. Completely rewritten biographies that explore each leader’s backstory and motivation sit alongside popular short films from our previous permanent exhibit, Democracy DNA. There, the prime ministers of Australia are represented by information boards and items are displayed.

According to staff, seeing personal items is one of the aspects that really connects with visitors. For example, one item is a service helmet that Abbott wore as a volunteer during the recent fires, another is a pair of red speedos that he famously wore at the beach, and which became a part of his image. These items really hook people in and provide a view of the prime ministers as humans with a lived experience.

Yet the prime minister is only one contributor in the great ongoing national conversation that is our democracy. Therefore, each prime minister’s story is set within the challenges that they and the people of Australia faced in their time. Curious and thought-provoking objects and imagery speak to pivotal global events and the issues we face at home. These are the events that shaped our nation, from the Great Depression and world wars to new economic policies and social revolutions.’ Annual Report, 2021-22

Laina Hall, the senior historian and content head, described the rationale behind the new exhibition:

‘A key intent was to not elevate the prime ministers as people unlike the rest of us, but to try and situate them in a global context and how they related to ordinary people. But having said that, the nature of the design and the fact that we do have to address the important role of prime ministers I mean you still walk into the space and think ‘it’s an exhibition about prime ministers’, but once you delve a little deeper, you get those layers.’ Laina Hall.

The MoAD has also been successful in gaining the support and patronage of five former Australian prime ministers: John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott, and Malcolm Turnbull. All feature on MoAD’s website.

The Democracy DNA exhibition was opened by Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott. The latter was quoted as saying that ‘this display gives people a very good taste of what it’s like. So if you don’t want to read the histories, if you don’t want to delve into House of Representatives practice, come here, spend a couple of hours browsing, listen to the stories.’

Images of the Australian prime ministers are very important for the MoAD. After all, the prime minister is both the country’s foremost democratic politician and the most widely recognised figure. In advertising, MoAD staff have found that there are some former PMs who connect very well with the public – like Menzies or Gough-Whitlam – especially on social media.

MoAD also engages with the history of prime ministers in other ways as well (mainly through their public programmes within the Old Parliament House building itself).

For example, the MoAD preserves the Prime Minister’s Suite in the Old Parliament House, as it would have looked when Bob Hawke was prime minister (1983–91). This allows them to use the area for tours.

The prime ministers are key figures in Australia’s democratic history and play a role in many of the exhibitions.
These tours are often themed around different things, with a selection that run regularly, and others that are put on for special occasions. Most tours have a prime ministerial connection or anecdote.

According to the staff at the MoAD, the stories and tours that visitors really like are those that humanise the prime ministers. People enjoy hearing about aspects of their character, like Menzies’ wit, or Hawke’s congeniality, or Gorton’s quirkiness. The best stories are those that focus on difficult dilemmas, like whether to leave power or fight on. The MoAD are assisted in this task by a knowledgeable and expert staff.

Australia is a useful example, because it has a similar democratic culture to the UK. It is far closer to Britain’s lively parliamentary democracy than the traditionally more deferential attitude that is more common towards US presidents.

The Australian historian John Hirst said in his lecture “The Distinctiveness of Australian Democracy”: “We have no respect for anyone who thinks they have a natural claim to rule us. We very certainly have complete contempt for the politicians who make our laws.”

Australians have a weird attitude to their leaders. 50% love them and 50% hate them. They love and hate their politicians. The tone of an American presidential library wouldn’t work...it would be silly to put prime ministers on a pedestal... Campbell Rhodes

The downside is that being an official museum, and having the cooperation of the prime ministers themselves, means that the MoAD does not tend to go into deep detail about less savoury aspects. There is very little coverage of scandals or episodes that might embarrass prime ministerial patrons.

However, the MoAD is able to discuss topics that are more remote to the audience. For example, staff do add context to some of the earlier prime ministers, understanding that they were men of their times as much as anyone else. Tours can also explore topics. For example, one tour looks at the 1975 Australian Constitutional Crisis, and while the MoAD staff do not say it explicitly, the controversies of the day, and the ways it might have been better handled are suggested by the tour.

Institutional Information

MoAD is a state museum. In 2019-20, the MoAD’s total income was $22.7 million, and expenditure was $21.3 million. The MoAD received $18.3 million in funding from the Australian government. In 2021-22, income for the year was $18.3 million, with $13.5 million of that being revenue from the government.

Today, the Museum of Australian Democracy employs 117 staff.

Reception

According to the Annual Report, over 2019-20 the MoAD was visited by 191,000 people. Overall, 61,000 students and teachers participated in onsite school programmes and 78,000 people participated in facilitated public programmes. 90% of visitors were satisfied with their visit. 49,000 visited their website.

Analysis & Lessons

The MoAD is a good example of a museum that has engaged directly with the history of prime ministers.

MoPM should copy the way that the MoAD engages with former prime ministers. Good relationships with former prime ministers can help the museum to obtain items and association with the former prime ministers can be used for credibility and publicity. There may have to be some compromises, but it would help to raise MoPM’s profile.

MoAD has shown a great deal of creativity in the temporary exhibitions. ‘One to Eight’ is an excellent example of the sort of exhibition that the MoAD has shown a great deal of creativity in the temporary exhibitions. ‘One to Eight’ is an excellent example of the sort of exhibition that engages with the prime ministers in an unconventional way. MoPM should definitely consider such an exhibition. It could be a good way of publicising and remembering some of Britain’s more obscure prime ministers.

Australia is a useful example, because it has a similar democratic culture to the UK.
Recommendations & Risks

It is surely time for Britain to emulate the fine examples featured in this report and build a museum to the British prime ministers.

Each museum discussed in the preceding pages offers strong lessons that can inform the creation of Museum of Prime Ministers (MoPM). By learning from these great museums abroad, we might finally create a great museum to Britain’s highest political office.

1. General Models

1.1 There is no one model that this report would recommend wholeheartedly. But there are lessons that can be learned from all of the examples within these pages.

1.2 There are two exhibitions that are particularly noteworthy: the Charles de Gaulle Historial and the Smithsonian’s First Ladies and The American Presidency.

A Glorious Burden.

A physical layout similar to the de Gaulle Historial might make for a very strong exhibition. The Historial’s concentric layout, with the auditorium at the centre, and the galleries beyond is an easily navigable and a very effective use of space. The main downside of the Historial is the lack of interesting objects.

The Glorious Burden and First Ladies exhibitions offer strong examples of non-chronological exhibition spaces, with items grouped thematically. Given the space that will likely be available to MoPM at first, it is almost certain that a similar thematic focus would work best. Though it would be a challenging task, the MoPM should seek to emulate the Smithsonian’s historically significant collections.

1.3 This report also recommends against an all-encompassing Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya style museum. Ambition is commendable, but it seems unlikely that MoPM will ever have the space to be able to provide such a comprehensive overview.

1.4 This report also recommends against the US presidential library model. There are three reasons why this is not an appropriate model for MoPM.

First, presidential libraries need to be understood as, partly, huge archives of presidential papers and objects. A key part of the delivery of this mission is the role of the US NARA, a government body. Neither of these is relevant to MoPM.

Second, the presidential libraries, at least at first, benefit from a tone of respect towards US presidents that is not really shared by Britain’s political culture. The US president is head of state, and therefore entitled to trappings of state that the prime minister does not receive.

1.5 This report recommends against a Hall of Presidents modelled presentation. Because the Hall of Presidents is part of Disney World, it is difficult to assess its success and whether it would work as a standalone institution. Though it has the advantages of a strong presentation and (without the Audio-Animatronics) likely low running costs, it is not a museum, and the association with a Disney-ified presentation of history would damage MoPM’s credibility.

1.6 This report recommends against an alternate focus for the museum (like Parliament or Democracy or British history). Both the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Museum provide very impressive examples of museums that deal heavily with political personalities, but have a larger focus. However, one must take into account three factors:

Firstly, the MoAD and Yitzhak Rabin museum have shorter periods of history to discuss. The former deals with 122 years of democracy (1901-2023), the latter 47 (1948-1995). By contrast, the period of British history concerned would be over 300 years.

Secondly, a larger focus would mean a dilution of the museum’s purpose and would encourage ‘mission creep’.

Thirdly, given that MoPM’s resources are limited at the outset, an alternative task would simply broaden a project that really needs focus.

2. Establishment

2.1 From the outset, most of the museums featured in this study have had a combination of strong political and financial support.

- US ‘official’ presidential libraries (with the exception of John F. Kennedy’s) have had the advocacy of the president himself, financial support from foundations and charitable organisations, and, once opened, are supported by NARA.

- Likewise, the development of the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya has been strongly supported by the Indian government and it exists within the Nehru museum, which is a state organisation.

- The Smithsonian, Museum of Australian Democracy, and the Charles de Gaulle Historial have all benefited from large degrees of official support and funding from their home governments.
MoPM MoPM

- Ford’s Theatre is part of a state agency (the National Park Service), even if it is supported by a non-profit organisation.
- The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum had strong financial support from its foundation and the ongoing support of the Illinois state government.
- The Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Museum was funded from private sources, but is today a state organisation.
- Only Mount Vernon and the Hall of Presidents can be considered to have been without government financial support. The first is a non-profit which has benefited from extremely robust fundraising resources. The second is a theme park attraction, and its financial model is linked to the wider health of the park. The Hall of Presidents cannot be judged a financial success on its own merits.

2.2 The MoPM will require determined and committed leadership, invested in a long haul project. This will be a considerable undertaking. It will take enormous effort to get this project to opening day. It will continue to require a great deal of effort and commitment afterwards, especially in the absence of strong political support and government funding.

2.3 MoPM needs to establish a clear focus in its mission statement, which can inform the interpretive plan, the museum’s activities, and the construction of the permanent exhibition. Simply put, what is the focus of this museum?

The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya aims to ‘honour the contribution of all the prime ministers of India towards nation building (and) sensitize and inspire the younger generation about the leadership, vision and achievements of all our prime ministers’.2

Most presidential libraries have a clear (and fairly obvious) mission statement to commemorate one particular presidency. For example, the George W. Bush Presidential Library: ‘promotes an understanding of the American presidency, examines the specific time in history during which President Bush served, and provides access to official records and artifacts from the George W. Bush Administration’.3

A clearly defined focus will inform the selection of a company to design the galleries. It will also influence the creation of an interpretive plan.

The following questions should be considered from the outset:
- What are the themes?
- What is the audience?
- What do we want visitors to get out of this?

The mission statement could be something like: ‘The Museum of Prime Ministers is dedicated to the history, influence, and legacy of the British prime ministers. It collects and displays items related to the premiership and that belonged to those who served as prime minister. The MoPM promotes the understanding of British history and the values of leadership, good government, and democracy.’

2.4 MoPM should create a large ‘board of historians’ who can advise on specific matters during the development of the museum. But, there needs to be a clear executive of 3 or 5, who actually make the decisions.

More than one of the museum professionals I interviewed advised the creation of an advisory group with a ‘range of people with broad and differing viewpoints’. Having such a group helps the MoPM to earn endorsement and credibility from influential figures. It also ensures that the museum is inclusive, representing a wide range of perspectives and helping to avoid allegations of bias.

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library started with a large board of historians. This board also included some schoolteachers, who were particularly helpful in advising how the museum could resonate with children. However, the board of historians was not found to be a useful decision making instrument, and, after a few meetings, the individual historians were used for expertise on specific subjects (like audio scripts or captions).

‘It is essential – essential – to have a large group of people with different views, different approaches, different beliefs and conceptions about British history. You need to have this varied group that is working together and agreeing on the narrative. But, from the start, it has to be very clear that there is a small group of people, 3-4 tops, that is carrying out the decisions.’

Dr Nunt Cohen, Education Director, Yitzhak Rabin Center

Likewise, the Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli museum had a large and diverse group of historians to advise it during the development. However, they also found that there had to be a small decision-making group. The main decision-making group should consist of the museum’s designer (or design company representative), the person in charge of the content, and somebody who is good at brokering compromises and agreements.

2.5 Reflecting and acknowledging that division and argument are an inherent part of politics will help the museum to avoid the charges of sycophancy and hagiography that are frequently levelled at American presidential libraries.
3. Exhibitions, Appearance, Technology

3.1 There are several potential models for the layout of the displays. This will (of course) be partly dictated by the choice of location, though some of the museums discussed in this report might be considered as models. For example:

- (as mentioned) the Charles de Gaulle Historial in Paris. The de Gaulle Historial has a concentric plan. In the centre is a large cinema style screen, around that is a circular corridor by which visitors navigate between galleries, and around that are rooms. Visitors can choose to visit the specific galleries or skip some if they are only interested in certain periods.

- the Yitzhak Rabin museum, which has a Guggenheim style ramp design. In the centre is a space representing the place where Rabin was assassinated. After that, visitors descend a spiral ramp. Visitors can then depart from the ramp to visit the galleries discussing periods in which they are interested, which then return them to the spiral ramp. The advantage is that this is easily navigated, and allows visitors to quickly access, or return to, parts of the exhibition.

- the Glorious Burden exhibition at the Smithsonian. Visitors start with Inaugurations, and then progress through the galleries in a linear fashion until they reach the exit of the exhibition. This is a more old-fashioned presentation, but, depending on the premises acquired, it might be the best course available.

3.2 The MoPM should have firm narrative themes in its exhibition. Some of the museums in this report have been criticised for lacking a clear sense of narrative. Others, like the Rabin museum, Ford’s Theatre, and the George W. Bush Presidential Library have been praised for having clear themes.

The MoPM should be more than just a collection of random dates and objects. Such narrative themes could be more abstract like ‘decision-making’, ‘changing times’, or ‘leadership’, or they could be specific, focusing on individual decisions or aspects of the job like national security or Parliamentary leadership.

3.3 When choosing a designer, the MoPM needs to establish whether it will be an ‘experience’ focused on storytelling and immersion or, a more traditional, object-focused museum.

This report has detailed a variety of different types of museum. Some of the museums are more traditional, like the Museum of Australian Democracy or the Smithsonian’s ‘Glorious Burden’ exhibition. A more ‘traditional’ museum may prove more durable in the long run, and a greater contribution to public history and scholarship, but also risks being perceived as less exciting.

Certainly, some of the other examples in this report, like the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, or the Charles de Gaulle Historial lean heavily in the direction of ‘experiences’ often by using technology, audio-visual presentation, and immersive techniques. It has been noted that one of the trends in contemporary museum design has been to deliver ‘experiences.’ These are, in the words of cultural studies reader Dr Silke Arnold-de Simine, ‘places of recollection, not so much driven by objects but by narratives and performances’.

An ‘experience’ may prove a bigger commercial hit and might be better for storytelling but suffers from the drawback that it would probably be criticised more heavily by the wider history community. It is not necessarily either/or, and there can be a middle course between a high tech museum, and one with more traditional elements.

3.4 An audio-visual only approach is not recommended. The de Gaulle Historial shows that some museums/exhibitions can be created reliant on audio-visual material alone (albeit with a small exhibition space in the entrance). Likewise, the Hall of Presidents at Disney World is a history-themed presentation for park visitors (which also has a smattering of objects displayed in the lobby).

However, personal items are far more memorable and interesting than exciting graphics and a museum filled with screens. Moreover, the audio-visual first approach could lead to accusations that the museum is not a museum, but merely shallow ‘edutainment’.

3.5 The MoPM should present a tangible heritage. Though MoPM would not start as object rich as the Smithsonian or US presidential libraries, it could acquire items and use them to tell interesting stories about the British premiership. Over time, the museum could develop a considerable collection.

A museum needs objects in order to connect with visitors. Objects have a unique power and are a tangible link to the past. People coming to the Museum of Prime Ministers will want to see something.

‘As much as possible, visitors really like the immediacy of something real, and something tangible that they can see. The videos and presentations and interactivity are great, but people go to the National Archives in Washington DC to see the real Declaration of Independence. They don't want to see a picture of it, they want to see the real thing.’ Amy Hamilton, Curator (2022), George W. Bush museum.

3.6 There must be an effort to find, obtain, categorise, and borrow items to display in the MoPM.

The museums discussed in this report display an enormous variety of objects associated with leaders, including clothing, monuments, hats, gifts, pens, toys, games, weapons, sports gear, cars, election paraphernalia, and photographs. Some of the items are very personal. For example, such items include Washington’s false teeth, Rabin’s sunglasses, Abbott’s swimming trunks, and Nehru’s cricket bats.

3.7 One theme that came out of my discussions with museum professionals is that visitors often respond enthusiastically to personal objects because they humanise the subject. People are often most interested in people, rather than more abstract ideas and trappings of high office. MoPM should seek items that, in the words of Laurence Small of the Smithsonian, ‘show the office as at once incomparably grand and irredibly human’.1

3.8 The MoPM should also seek historically significant objects. Some items have a deeply political significance, for instance the loudspeaker George W. Bush used for a speech at the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the filing cabinet damaged by Richard Nixon’s plumbers. Seeing an object like Abraham Lincoln’s hat from the night of his assassination links the visitor to a moment in history in a way that a video will not.

3.9 The MoPM should have a display about Life in Number 10 containing items that show both the official side of life (state dinners, clothing from official occasions, tableware, lecterns, gifts from visiting dignitaries, red boxes) and personal life (clothes, children’s toys, furniture etc). Every US presidential library has a ‘life in the White House’ section, and there is often a display of the first lady’s dresses. The First Ladies exhibition at the Smithsonian is very highly rated by guests.

During his successful presentation to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Bob Rogers described the story of ‘Nelson’s bullet’ and how, with that one item, the entire history of the Napoleonic Wars and the battle of Trafalgar could be told.2 Though it may be difficult to envision at first, there must be items out there that the MoPM could use to tell a powerful story – Thatcher’s handbag perhaps, or anything that belonged to William Pitt, Lloyd George, or William Gladstone. The British premiership provides endless stories of determination, success, and failure, sometimes sinking to the lowest political skulduggery and occasionally rising to the highest ideals.

3.10 MoPM should consider displaying objects from depictions of the prime minister in popular culture. The Smithsonian’s Glorious Burden exhibition used to display some notable items related to Hollywood and television depictions of the president. The de Gaulle Historial showed several depictions of de Gaulle from comedians and cartoonists. The Bush museum’s exhibition on presidential humour displayed comedians lampooning presidents.

Likewise, the MoPM should consider displaying items related to television and movie depictions of the prime minister. Over the last few decades, there have been many depictions of the prime minister, including in television shows such as The Crown, Dr Who, House of Cards, Anatomy of a Scandal, and Victoria, as well as films like Amazing Grace, The Iron Lady, Darkest Hour, and the Special Relationship. Surely, some items from these productions can be found.

Scottish tourism sites have noted the ‘Outlander Effect’ as tourists flocked to heritage sites that evoked the series. While MoPM might not be able to surpass Outlander’s romantic adventure, it might well be able to remind audiences of the excitement that accompanied films and television shows depicting the prime minister.3

3.11 In the absence of objects, MoPM could also display letters, official documents, and speech notes. Two of the most impactful items that I witnessed during my research were documents. The first was the bloodstained note of the speech that Yitzhak Rabin gave moments before he was assassinated. The second item was the notes that Jawaharlal Nehru read from as he gave his ‘Tryst with Destiny’ speech upon India’s independence.

3.12 The MoPM should seek close cooperation with the National Archives. Cooperation with the National Archives will be important and the MoPM must establish strong links to that end.

3.13 Throughout this report, the permanent exhibitions have been organised either chronologically or thematically. Given that the earliest manifestation of MoPM will likely be a temporary exhibition, before a move into relatively modest premises in Central London, a thematic permanent exhibition (rather than chronological) is the most sensible option.

Most of the museums in this report are dedicated to one leader (Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, Charles de Gaulle). As a result, it is appropriate to tell the story of their life in a chronological fashion (albeit the Clinton museum’s permanent galleries are a blend of both, with thematic alcoves).

In all likelihood, the MoPM will probably never be housed in premises as considerable as some of the US presidential libraries or the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya. Comprehensive coverage of all three centuries of the British

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The Smithsonian’s Glorious Burden exhibition adopted a non-chronological approach, emphasising different aspects of the presidency (like the inauguration, the president’s roles, popular culture etc).

Perhaps the best approach would be that of the Smithsonian’s Glorious Burden, to find a way to mention all prime ministers across the course of the permanent exhibition, but not to make a ‘big deal’ about prime ministers who were not, historically speaking, particularly important.

One good option might be for the MoPM to have a largely thematic presentation and then emphasise a significant few prime ministers. The Smithsonian’s First Ladies exhibition showcased a small number of important first ladies. This might be a good model for MoPM, which might be best off displaying items from a few prime ministers (perhaps Pitt the Younger, Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, Lloyd George, Clement Attlee, Margaret Thatcher) rather than more comprehensive coverage.

That way, the museum might better bring out the characters of these figures and emphasise their importance.

The MoPM should have a film that can serve as an introduction to the topic of the prime minister and the history of the office. This should be around 20-25 minutes. None of the museums visited in this report ask visitors to sit for any length of time greater than about 25 minutes. Several of the museums have had particularly impressive films. These are:

- The Charles De Gaulle Historial has a five-screen auditorium at the centre, telling the story of de Gaulle’s life and times. The film lasts for 25 minutes.
- Both Clinton and Bush presidential libraries have a short 15-20 minute introduction, hosted by the president whose library it is.
- Mount Vernon has several large cinema-style screens, one telling the story of Washington’s generalship during the War of Independence, and the other showing a selection of films related to Washington’s presidency. Each film lasts about 20 minutes and uses a selection of maps, CGI, and reconstructions to portray key decisions and moments of Washington’s life.

The MoPM might wish to consider the use of some of the following technology in the permanent exhibition:

- Audio headsets. Both the Charles de Gaulle Historial and the Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Museum provided guests with automatic audio headsets. These play immediately when the visitor looks at a screen or display (reducing the need to operate a controller). This might be an effective way of presenting content, particularly if the museum makes use of a lot of footage. It is also an excellent way to accommodate different languages.
- An App. Many museums also have their own mobile App. The Clinton museum has a tour presented by Bill Clinton himself. The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalya has a tour of the museum on their own specialised app. This is another good way for the MoPM to communicate with its audience. An app allows visitors to guide themselves, and they can access more detail about objects or subjects via the app, reducing the need for lengthy captioning. An app can also reduce the cost/attrition of headsets and controllers. Moreover, an app offers other possibilities as well; it could provide self-guided tours such as, for example, the locations of vanished prime ministerial residences in central London.
- Audio-visual presentations for complicated topics.
  - The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalya made extensive use of video screens and footage, using them to explain complicated issues in 5-15 minutes.
  - The Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Museum used hundreds of hours of film to tell the story of both Rabin and the development of Israeli history since 1947.
  - At the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, ‘The Civil War in Four Minutes’ conveys a complicated topic (namely, the military history of the American Civil War) quickly and simply, whilst an odometer conveys the conflict’s human cost.
  - Use of interactive technology like interactive tables and document readers, which allow more interested visitors to explore topics, while creating no demands on the more casual visitor.
    - The document readers and interactive timelines at the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalya allow visitors to spend more time in areas that interest them, while less interested visitors can simply skip them.
    - At the George W. Bush museum interactive tables allow visitors to explore photographs, maps, and documents related to the military conflicts of the Bush years. Another interactive display presented Bush’s schedule from the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, with highlights linking it to audio, photographs, and footage of that time.
• At the Charles de Gaulle Historial, interactive panels allowed visitors to access interviews with people who had worked with de Gaulle as well as archival footage from his era. Another interactive display presented extracts of de Gaulle’s memoirs.

• MoPM might consider interactive displays that would allow visitors to explore Downing Street. These could be used to take a visitor back in time, showing historic images of the interior of Number 10, alongside its modern appearance.

• A Decision Points Theater style exhibit asking visitors to make the same historic decisions as prime ministers.

• The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya uses holographic displays to show prime ministers speaking. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library uses holographic and CGI displays to convey the pressure of political life. A bit of technological wizardry could bring to life historic speeches or cabinet meetings.

Certainly, when it comes to earlier prime ministers, for whom items and objects may not be available, the MoPM should consider the use of footage, technology, and images to fill the gaps.

3.16 The MoPM should not be afraid to provide a lot of information in its audio-visual displays and its app, but it should be voluntary. Great museums have far more than can be seen in one day.

Computerised devices can make a great deal of information available. The strategy of the Yitzhak Rabin museum was ‘overload’, providing far more audio-visual material in the museum than anybody could absorb on one visit. Likewise, the Charles de Gaulle Historial and the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya have far more material available in their displays, audio guide, and interactive devices than can be viewed in a single visit. This sort of detail satisfies the enthusiast and there is a lot of British history to cover.

It should be clear to visitors that the main tour is much shorter, and viewing all of the information available is not necessary for a full experience.

3.17 While recommending the use of technology to bring history alive, this report cautions against an overreliance on technology.

Technology can sometimes become dated quite quickly, especially given the pace of innovation. A permanent gallery that was once very modern, might look quite old fashioned 15 or so years later, as it approaches the end of its lifespan. Technology also breaks relatively easily, especially if the public interact with it, requiring regular replacement. Finally, it is expensive to replace technology when an exhibition is built around it.

3.18 The MoPM should have a particularly memorable artistic installation, object, or monument.

The museum needs a memorable display, exhibit, or monument that will grab the attention of visitors. Such a display would need to be ‘insta-friendly’ and should become a recognisable symbol of the museum. It does not need to be a classical display or memorial, and could instead take the form of an artistic exhibit.

Two examples from the museums discussed:

- Ford’s Theatre’s book tower containing thousands of books about Lincoln.
- Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya’s Chakra and outstretched hands monument.

3.19 Alternatively, if space permits, consideration should also be given to a big item, such as a car or carriage that can serve as a memorable display item.

Many US presidential libraries have a major object, like a car, helicopter, or even in the case of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, an Air Force One Boeing 707. For example, the Clinton museum displays a Secret Service limousine that Clinton used during his presidency. Similarly, the Smithsonian’s ‘Glorious Burden’ displays a carriage that Ulysses S. Grant used during his inauguration.

Traditionally, the British prime minister has been a less celebrated figure than the American president and historically has not had similar trappings of power.

However, if the MoPM could acquire an interesting major item it could serve as an exciting symbol of the museum (as well as a fascinating object in its own right). One candidate would be a car that had been used as a prime ministerial limousine.

3.20 MoPM might wish to display reconstructed clothing or material for the early prime ministers, for whom there may be very
MoPM

All three presidential libraries featured reconstructions of the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room. The Bush museum had a recreation of the Oval Office, the Rose Garden, and the Situation Room (with the latter being used for group sessions). The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum recreated the appearance of the White House in 1860 in its main lobby, as well as several rooms from the White House, as they would have looked during Lincoln’s presidency. In a similar vein, the Rabin museum has a recreation of his study on display.

Most British people will never get near Number 10’s door, fewer still pass through it. A reconstruction of the Cabinet Room would allow people to venture into a room that few even see. If it were interactive, visitors could sit in the prime minister’s chair. It could be open to general visitors and it could also be used as a classroom by visiting school groups.

MoPM should have a temporary exhibition space and should use it for exhibitions on an eclectic mix of subjects. Throughout this project, I have been impressed by the creativity displayed by the museums in their temporary exhibitions.

The Clinton Presidential Library has hosted exhibitions on American popular culture during the 1990s, as well as the Beatles, and the Louisiana Purchase. The Bush Presidential Library has hosted exhibitions on Presidential Humour, Christmases at the White House, and Portraits of America’s Immigrants. The MoAD has featured several temporary exhibitions on former prime ministers, some quite conventional, and others (like the artistic ‘OnetoEight: Australia’s First Prime Ministers’) have been more unusual.

Temporary exhibitions have allowed many of the museums featured in this report to tell stories and show perspectives that have sometimes not been heard. MoPM should use its temporary exhibition gallery for this purpose. For example, the Rabin Center used its exhibition to tell the story of the Mossad’s participation in the events of the Entebbe raid.

Similarly, there are countless perspectives related to the prime minister and Downing Street that have gone unheard or been forgotten by history. A temporary exhibition space at MoPM could tell these stories. Additionally, the exhibition space could be used for political topics that are more tangentially related to the prime minister: Parliament, Whitehall, the Press, the intelligence services (indeed, the list of topics that an exhibition space could cover is endless). It is fair to say that the potential exhibitions are limited only by the imagination of the curatorial team.

A temporary exhibition space has a number of benefits. Firstly, it will help to attract repeat visitors to the museum. Secondly, it will gain the museum regular bursts of publicity. Thirdly, it will help attract good staff. Fourthly, it will keep the museum feeling intellectually fresh and interesting, even when the permanent displays have been in place for a while. Fifthly, it allows the museum to host daring or unconventional exhibitions, while being more conventional in the permanent exhibition. Finally, it is a way of telling stories, displaying objects, and representing perspectives that have not otherwise been heard, which fulfils the museum’s mission.

Most of the museums in this study were built for an audience of adolescents upwards. Most of the institutions in this report aim mostly at an audience that is 12+. The MoPM will need to decide what it would like to do to for young children. Perhaps simple things like learning games or an item hunt might be the best way to accommodate younger ages.

Some of the museums do make efforts to provide for young children. For example, there are touchscreen games for children at the Bush museum. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library has both a hands-on exhibit area for young children (Mrs Lincoln’s Attic) and a specific storytelling programme for very young children. Most developed of all is Mount Vernon, which has scavenger hunts, discovery stations, and a ‘hands-on-history’ centre (of course, Mount Vernon is a much bigger estate than just the museum).

4. Outreach

MoPM should have a strong website and should establish a database for prime ministers, similar to that of the Museum of Australian Democracy. This is a good way for the MoPM to provide a public good and contribute to the public’s understanding of history outside of the museum space.
Many of the institutions featured in this report have a very strong online presence. Ford’s Theatre has online exhibitions and pages recounting historical events. The MoAD has an entire prime ministers website project, providing an authoritative source of information on Australia’s past prime ministers. The US presidential libraries maintain large archives of presidential material, including old websites, and run online exhibitions about aspects of presidencies.

MoPM should also follow the example of Ford’s Theatre in rigorously assessing how users interact with the website, and always working to make it a more effective platform. In straitened circumstances, the website might be one of the best ways to deliver tangible benefits to the public.

4.2 The MoPM should take inspiration from some of the examples contained within this report and establish strong outreach programmes for school groups and children.

This is another way of delivering a public good. Successful outreach programmes will also financially benefit the museum.

A space could be set aside for school and education groups. Or, if there is to be a reconstruction of the Cabinet Room, it could be used for school groups.

- MoPM could offer interactive programmes dedicated to a ‘Situation Room’ style experience. Similar to the George W. Bush Presidential Library, in which a class is asked to react to a developing political situation.

- Other classes could be offered which focus on understanding the roles of the prime minister (like the ‘Presidential Hats’ programmes offered by some presidential libraries).

- For students or older children, the museum could offer broader sessions aimed at promoting democracy, leadership, or history. Both the Yitzhak Rabin Center and Ford’s Theatre carry out a range of activities that promote those aims.

- MoPM could aim to combat cynicism in politics, providing sessions that help young people understand the political world, and suggest that politics can be a good career choice.

- Finally, the museum can offer tours to groups on specific historical themes. MoAD, in particular, offers a range of tours led by expert staff. Most of the museums in this report offer such tours to schoolchildren or students.

4.3 MoPM could also provide professional outreach to other museums.

This is probably better realised as a long term goal, rather than something the museum should start with.

One of the MoAD’s most successful innovations was working with other prime ministerial museums and organisations, and establishing a network of museums and historic places that are relevant to the office of prime minister. This has allowed the MoAD to build links, provide expertise, and create opportunities for professional development with staff at smaller museums and institutions.

More broadly, this would help to ensure the legacy of different prime ministers, by supporting the places associated with them.

4.4 The MoPM could consider a travelling exhibition, but should be aware that the only museum to do so in this report is the Smithsonian, which has enormous resources.

4.5 Outreach is dependent on facilities. The MoPM will need to decide whether it wants to provide such facilities.

Many museums in this report (including the Yitzhak Rabin Center, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Ford’s Theatre, and the Bush museum) have purpose built outreach facilities such as classrooms, auditoriums, lecture theatres, and adjustable-size spaces. These sorts of facilities are necessary for outreach programmes. Without them, it is much more difficult for the museum to offer anything other than a tour.

5. Facilities

5.1 Strong consideration should be given to providing a gift shop and stocking unique Number 10 or prime minister themed items. Almost every museum in this report has a gift shop selling a range of trinkets, books, and souvenirs (with the exception of the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, where the gift shop was unfinished in October 2022). Some of the items sold are unique, for example items related to particular presidents are only sold in their presidential libraries (another good example of this phenomenon is the White House Christmas ornament, that is only sold in one physical location: the White House Visitor Center in Washington DC).

Similarly, MoPM should also have a gift shop selling Number 10 memorabilia (branded with the Downing Street door ‘10’ logo perhaps) or prime minister related books and items. Whereas souvenirs related to most prime ministers are unlikely to sell, it is very possible that items (like ‘bobble head’ figurines) representing iconic individuals - like Lord North, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, or...
However, this would probably not be to capitalise on that fame. 

5.2 Other facilities, like a cafe, should be dictated by location.

Most of the museums featured in this report contained a cafe. The presidential libraries and Mount Vernon even contained restaurants.

However, this would probably not be appropriate for a museum of MoPM’s likely starting size. The first priority is to obtain space, and a cafe or restaurant area would be a draw on space, and add further complications. Moreover, such a cafe would have to compete with every other local cafe and so provision of such facilities is not necessarily desirable.

6. Archive

6.1 This report recommends against the construction of an archive or scholarly research centre.

The US presidential libraries begin with an enormous collection of documents that need to be categorised, and they have NARA to categorise them. Mount Vernon was able to build a George Washington research library. That reflects both Mount Vernon’s robust resources and their role as a curator of Washington’s memory (and their efforts to rebuild his library). MoPM would not start with the support of an organisation like NARA, nor would it have the finances of Mount Vernon.

A cautionary tale is provided by MoAD, which created an Australian Prime Ministers Center for scholarly research, but ultimately found it a costly endeavour, and it was closed and moved online. Similarly, the Rabin Center attempted to build a comprehensive archive but eventually scaled back their efforts.

6.2 Building an archive would be expensive, time consuming, a drag on resources, and would require space within the museum that would be at a premium. It would also be of dubious utility. There are few valuable documents that could be exclusively held at the MoPM. Most prime ministerial papers are already safely stored in university libraries or archives. Therefore, this report argues against the creation of an archive at the outset of the project.

7. Funding

7.1 This report provides no easy answers when it comes to the matter of funding. With two exceptions, all of the institutions discussed in this report receive strong financial support from government or state authorities.

Mount Vernon does not accept or need state funding. The Hall of Presidents is funded because it is part of Disney World.

Additionally, the George W. Bush museum has also opted to ‘go it alone’ without NARA’s support for their museum. Time will tell as to the success of this endeavour. However, NARA are still involved in the George W. Bush Presidential Library’s archives.

7.2 None of the museums featured in this report cover their costs either solely or largely through admissions. One curator said directly that ‘you will never make it by admissions, it is just not possible.’ Another said ‘you will never get enough people through the doors alone.’

With the exceptions mentioned, all of the museums and exhibitions in this report are funded by a mixture of revenue streams, above all direct government support.

There are, of course, downsides to government funding. It is always controversial and subject to the whims of politicians. It is also frequently cut in times of economic difficulty (when a museum might need the extra funding the most) and exposes the museum to political influence. However, as a source of income, it is probably the most reliable that a museum might obtain and establishing a consequential museum without any kind of government funding is a formidable enterprise.

7.3 The heaviest costs will be during the creation and development of the museum. But there will continue to be heavy financial costs after that point.

Audio-visual technology will fail and need to be replaced. Anything that the public interacts with, will also need to be replaced fairly frequently. Temporary exhibitions will be expensive to develop and create.

Other, unexpected, costs will also arise. In 2021, the Yitzhak Rabin Center found that the fire extinguishing system needed to be replaced - a complex and expensive process after a difficult pandemic year.

7.4 Ideally, a portion of the initial budget, perhaps 10% or even 15%, should be put aside for when the museum needs improvement or, eventually, renovation.

US presidential libraries are legally required to provide endowments of 60% of the building’s cost to the NARA. Though no presidential library has yet provided such a costly endowment, previous libraries were required to provide 20% or 40% of their building’s cost. The purpose of the money is to ‘offset facility operating expenses’ and ‘support facility maintenance needs’.

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9. Margaret Thatcher - might sell quite well. The shop could potentially be modelled on the Houses of Parliament gift shop which sells branded House of Commons and House of Lords gifts. Moreover, anytime that any British prime minister is featured in movies, or films, the gift shop should seek to capitalise on that fame.

5.2. The US presidential libraries begin with an enormous collection of documents that need to be categorised, and they have NARA to categorise them. Mount Vernon is not necessarily desirable.

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In order to raise funds, MoPM might consider establishing a charitable foundation that can focus on fundraising or an in house membership programme. Many US presidential libraries are supported by presidential foundations in this way. This organisation can, and should, offer perks like free admission or access to exclusive events like lectures or drinks receptions. Many British museums have a ‘friends of’ charity as a supporter. A friends group would need to be closely aligned with the museum’s leadership. The sad saga of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library’s split with its foundation should be considered a firm warning. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Mount Vernon run their own membership schemes. Additionally, some British museums, like the IWM or British Museum have chosen an integrated membership scheme, offering a series of benefits, administered directly by the museum.

The MoPM should try and build a network of donors. It should use the prestige of historic prime ministers as a marketing tool for donations. It should also consider sponsored exhibitions and sponsored exhibition spaces. Many of the American museums (including the Smithsonian, Mount Vernon, and Ford’s Theatre) have formidable donor networks. This reflects the importance of these sites. The MoPM should attempt to build a network of private and corporate donors if it wishes to survive. Mount Vernon is able to raise funds because it can count on the widespread respect for, and prestige of, George Washington, America’s most important founding father. Likewise, Ford’s Theatre can count on a certain level of donor support because of the respect for Abraham Lincoln. Perhaps the MoPM can similarly use the respect and good names of certain prime ministers to promote donations. Surely projects or displays associated with names like Lloyd George, Clement Attlee, or Margaret Thatcher would attract donors eager to participate in the commemoration of such figures. Almost every space of Mount Vernon’s visitor centre is named after a donor. A MoPM should absolutely court such sponsorship if it is available and have spaces, exhibitions, and displays named after donors. MoPM could also consider fundraising by allowing individuals to sponsor objects in the collection.

With two exceptions (Ford’s Theatre and the Smithsonian), all of the museums in this report charged for entry for amounts between £3-25. Many museums in the United Kingdom are free to enter (from ‘National Museums’ like the British Museum or IWM, right down to the level of local museums). However, plenty of London museums, such as the Churchill War Rooms and the London Transport Museum, charge for entry and even many of the major museums charge for entry to exclusive exhibitions.

The MoPM would benefit from the involvement of former prime ministers. It would boost the museum’s profile, potentially help the museum acquire items, and would add authority to the museum’s audio-visual presentations. Many museums in the United Kingdom are free to enter (from ‘National Museums’ like the British Museum or IWM, right down to the level of local museums). However, plenty of London museums, such as the Churchill War Rooms and the London Transport Museum, charge for entry and even many of the major museums charge for entry to exclusive exhibitions.
MoPMMoPM should try and build a similar relationship with former prime ministers for four main reasons:
- First, former prime ministers might be persuaded to lend (or even give) items to the museum.
- Second, their patronage would boost the museum’s profile.
- Third, their presence in audio-visual material would lend credibility and authority to the museum (as well as being interesting). Visitors would know immediately that this is a serious museum thanks to the participation of former prime ministers.
- Fourth, they could participate in ‘evening with’ type events.

It must be acknowledged that this may require compromises and does come with costs. The museum will probably not be as critical of recent figures as it can be of those of more distant times. Recent political controversies (like the Iraq War, Brexit and its consequences, the trials of several prime ministers) will likely have to be handled more softly.

8.2 Additionally, MoPM should also reach out to the families of some of the more distant prime ministers. The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya received some items because they were donated by the families of former prime ministers. This might be the best way to find hitherto unseen items.

Risks
Over the pages that follow, I have outlined a few risks and criticisms that might be levelled at the MoPM.

It is important to note that no museum project can be perfect. Some controversy and criticism is inevitable. As a museum on a political topic, MoPM will face criticism whichever way it develops.

All of the museums presented in this study have faced criticism and controversy. Criticism is an element of any robust democratic society. Often critics will point to neglected aspects and their commentary can be used to improve the museum. However, there is a risk that MoPM would instantly be the most controversial museum in Britain. Sensitivity will have to be taken when it comes to displays about controversial recent figures.

Controversy and criticism tends to be around specific figures rather than the offices themselves. The Smithsonian and MoAD have been broadly uncontroversial in their presentation of the American presidency and the Australian premiership. As long as the MoPM is careful, and consults a broad range of voices, it need not become a particularly controversial museum.

Too many stale, pale, male aristocrats: A display of former prime ministers at the Museum of Australian Democracy earned the nickname ‘the Blokerama’ from museum staff. Likewise, the history of the British premiership offers an abundance of dead, white, male, aristocrats. While deeply interesting to the enthusiast, a parade of similar faces may not be particularly enthralling to the visitors, who may tune out at the presentation of the umpteenth aristocrat premier.

The museum will have to tell the story of the British premiership in an exciting and interesting way. A good solution might be to emphasise a small number of important prime ministers in the permanent exhibition, while leaving out the rest.

Avoiding hagiography: Former politicians will be keen to promote their legacies. But the experience of US presidential libraries shows that too much attention from the main figure can damage historical presentation. These museums are often accused of being far too forgiving and deferential towards the figures within.

‘One of the attractive things about British public life is that all but the very greatest individual careers tend not to finish in a mood of hushed celebration and the recollection of spolit triumphs, but to dribble away in argument, reassessment, rethinking and even sustained mockery.’ Philip Hensher, Independent.13

Previous attempts to establish prime ministerial museums in Britain have failed. Most notably, a Margaret Thatcher museum and library, announced in 2013, has failed to materialise. This failure occurred despite open political support, an existing organisation to raise funds, and, reportedly, several ‘large donations already pledged.’14 Edward Heath’s more modest plans for a research library at his home at Arundel House were no more successful.15

The New Statesman argued that ‘the idea of a Thatcher museum’ was surely un-British in the first place… Building expensive memorials reflects the deference that Americans accord even to their worst presidents.16 A MoPM would face similar criticisms and objections.

While there is a small museum to Lloyd George at Llanystumdwy, and the houses of several prime ministers are preserved, the only prime minister to receive a significant museum is Winston Churchill. Churchill is really the exception that proves the rule; the Churchill War Rooms in Whitehall rely not on ‘ordinary politics’, but on Churchill’s historic role in the drama of the Second World War and the ‘Finest Hour’ in 1940.

The museum might be seen at odds with current museum trends and zeitgeist. Many major museums have been influenced over recent years by trends like ‘decolonisation’, unheard voices, or towards more inclusive retellings of the past. A MoPM dedicated to the history of powerful, establishment figures might meet with some intellectual opposition and criticism from within the museum community.
Let us be frank, British prime ministers have not, in recent years, covered themselves in glory. In the last five years, Britain has seen: three prime ministers defenestrated by their own party; the shortest premiership in British history*; a series of political scandals over lockdown rules and sexual offences; a lengthy and divisive political crisis over Brexit; a cost of living crisis; and a pandemic during which, whether fairly or unfairly, many believe that the government might have performed more effectively.

The London museum landscape is one of the most demanding in the world. The Clinton Presidential Library and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library have the advantage of being major attractions in their home cities. Many US presidential libraries are star attractions of their locale. The Yitzhak Rabin Center is the only museum in Tel Aviv to focus on the modern history of the state. Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is New Delhi’s main attraction for India’s contemporary history. By contrast, London has an abundance of museums, and many of them offer free entry.

There is a risk that the MoPM is seen as ‘The Museum of (Conservative) prime ministers’. This is no easy task; there have been far more Conservative prime ministers since 1900 than any other kind. Of the last ten prime ministers, seven have been Conservative. In the 100 years since 1923, just under 37 of those years have seen a non-Conservative prime minister at the head of the government. If the museum gains a reputation for being about ‘dead Tories’ it may fail to attract a wide range of visitors.

There are too few items for historical figures. The further back the premiership goes, the less likely the MoPM is to acquire objects (or for there to be objects that even exist from those eras). Figures like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were considered great figures of history within their own lifetimes, and people collected items related to their lives. The Smithsonian, Ford’s Theatre, and Mount Vernon already had a collection of items from a relatively early stage. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library also benefited from the State of Illinois’s collection of Lincoln items. American institutions also have considerably more fiscal resources to purchase items.

Few British prime ministers earned such distinction as Washington or Lincoln. Consequently, there may be very few items available to the museum for the first century (or two) of the existence of the office of prime minister. Filling this gap effectively will be a challenge, but achievable using some of the measures outlined in the report (reproductions of items, interactive and audio-visual displays).

Lack of a relevant place. Most of the museums to former political leaders are based in a place with a personal connection to them. The Clinton museum is in Little Rock, capital of Clinton’s home state of Arkansas. The Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya is located in the Teen Murti Bhavan, once Nehru’s home. Elsewhere, many museums to important figures are located in former homes, like Mount Vernon, or in particularly important sites, like Ford’s Theatre. The ‘biggest item in the [MoAD’s] collection’ is the Old Parliament House in which it is housed.

By contrast, MoPM is unlikely to have a unique building of its own and consequently will have to work harder to create interest amongst visitors. The task may seem rather daunting. I will leave the final word to Theodore Roosevelt, who himself knew a fair amount about adversity:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds, who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.” Theodore Roosevelt.

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* Unless one counts the Earls of Bath and Waldegrave, which most historians do not.