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The Presidential Libraries Act And The Establishment Of Presidential Libraries



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The Presidential Libraries Act and the Establishment of Presidential Libraries

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Synopsis

The Presidential Libraries Act (P.L. 84-373; 69 Stat. 695), as originally enacted in 1955, sought to create a system of government “preservation and administration ... of papers and other historical materials of any President or former President of the United States.” Pursuant to the law, the General Services Administration’s (GSA’s) Administrator could, among other actions, accept ... the papers and other historical materials of any President or former President of the United States, or of any other official or former official of the Government, and other papers relating to and contemporary with any President or former President of the United States. (P.L. 84-373) Amid concerns about growing costs of the libraries, the act was substantially amended in 1986 (P.L. 99-323; 100 Stat. 495) to “shift the burden of on-going building operations costs of future libraries from the taxpayer to endowment funds.” Through the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the federal government currently operates and maintains 13 presidential libraries, and it may soon assume responsibility for a new facility for the records of former President George W. Bush. The libraries, which primarily serve as archival repositories and museums in which the records and memorabilia of the former Presidents are held and made available to researchers, are privately constructed on behalf of former Presidents. Upon completion, and with approval from both the Archivist of the United States and Congress, the land, buildings, and sometimes other amenities for the library may be deeded to or otherwise placed under the control of the federal government. Among some concerns associated with the construction and maintenance of presidential libraries is the role of the private organizations that build and, sometimes, continue to inhabit the buildings. The private organizations, commonly referred to as presidential library foundations, support the construction of the libraries and sometimes provide funding for the exhibitions displayed within the library or its museum. Each library and foundation has a unique partnership. Such a relationship, however, may also lead to difficulties over which exhibits are displayed at the libraries as well as concerns over which spaces are publicly owned and which are privately owned. Moreover, some presidential library scholars have raised concerns over whether library exhibits, which are often funded by the library foundations, present a balanced version of each President’s administration or if they tend to portray the President in an inaccurate or, at least, more favorable, light. This report details the legislative history of the Presidential Libraries Act. The report then provides information on existing library facilities and their locations. It also analyzes legislative options for the act, including increasing endowment requirements for the library foundations and clearly delineating the relationship between NARA and the libraries’ supporting organizations. Congress, for example, might consider

consolidating the libraries into one centralized location or could attempt to create standards for the historical exhibits at the libraries.

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