New Book Shines Light on Presidential Libraries

New book "Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush" by Jodi Kanter, associate professor at George Washington University, is the only critical assessment of all 13 extant presidential libraries. Through exhaustive research, she reveals how presidential libraries generate narratives about individual presidents, historical events, and who we are as Americans.


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Mark J. Rozell, author of "Executive Privilege: President Power, Secrecy, and Accountability," calls the book "A captivating, well-written account about a much-neglected topic. Viewed through the lens of performance, Kanter offers a different way to understand the utility of these sources of knowledge about our chief executives."

As a scholar of cultural performance, Kanter encourages readers to think about the funding, setting, architecture, and exhibitions of presidential museums as performances. She argues that they not only shape understanding of a president's character but create radically divergent roles for American citizens in public life.

Kanter considers the moments in the presidents’ lives the museums choose to interpret—and not to interpret—and how the libraries differ in their approaches to common subjects in the presidential narrative. Identifying the limited number of strategies the libraries currently use to represent the diversity of the American experience and American character, she offers concrete suggestions for reinventing and reshaping the practices of museum professionals and visitors.

"'Presidential Libraries as Performance' is for people interested in American history, and how it is told," says Kanter. "History enthusiasts, museum professionals, political scientists, and culture watchers will discover new and interesting details about the presidential libraries administered by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)."

"Jodi Kanter's smart, incisive book shows the power of museums to affect visitors' sense of identity, and their place in history. Without cynicism, she challenges prevailing presentations of presidential narratives," says Catherine Hughes, founding executive director, International Museum Theatre Alliance, and author of 'Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors Through Drama.' "Her study of presidential libraries illuminates the larger discussions of truth, identity, and representation happening across all types of museums."

Books are available online and in bookstores.

About the Author
Jodi Kanter is an associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the George Washington
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