

Should the American People Pay to Warehouse Consumer Goods? Re-examining the Research Value of Constituent Gifts to the U.S. President and Vice President

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Abstract: The hypothesis of my research project is simple: since the implementation of the Presidential Records Act in 1981, more consumer goods from constituents have been preserved by Presidential Libraries and Museums than were preserved during the era before the Presidential Records Act deemed that presidential materials were permanent federal records.

Based on an email survey and analysis of the websites of libraries of presidents between 1930 and 2008, as well as personal experience managing the re-processing of the Realia Series of the Vice President Spiro T. Agnew Papers at the University of Maryland, I interrogate the application of the Presidential Records Act on constituent gifts, particularly household, consumer, or commercial goods that were sent in to the Presidential offices, without alteration into artwork.

Over the second half of the 20th century, gifts to the Executive Officers of the United States grew by about 1000%. President Clinton received nearly 10 times as many gifts from American citizens and foreign leaders as President Truman. Many of these gifts are commonly available consumer goods, including clothes, sporting goods, commercial music records, plastics, ceramics, and metals. Though the White House and other executive agencies since the 1970s have made copious lists of incoming gifts as they arrive, most of these gifts never see the light of day again.

As the warehouse of consumer goods expands, should appraisal be applied to which items have research value? Intrinsic value? Should objects be digitized rather than stored? Could the textual or electronic records of gifts – stored in databases since the late 1970s – serve as surrogates, and the actual items donated to appropriate charities (a process which occurs for perishable gifts to presidents from constituents)? Has the Presidential Records Act required the preservation of “material records” of questionable value?

About the Author:

Eric Carlos Stoykovich is a Historical Manuscripts Project Archivist at the University of Maryland libraries. He works to make more widely accessible collections which document the lives and careers of public officials, families, and civic groups in the state of Maryland. Accomplishments include overseeing the accessioning over 200 linear feet of new collection material, the rehousing of over 25,000 photographic prints in the Baltimore News American collection, the revising of finding aids for the papers of Helen Koss and Georgia K. Benjamin, and the inventorying of 175 linear feet of processed memorabilia and 1,370 audio tapes in the Spiro T. Agnew papers.

He received his MLS from UMD's iSchool (2013) and a PhD in American history from the University of Virginia (2009). He worked previously at the Library of Congress and as a

contractor within the National Archives. Since 2017, he has served as co-editor of *Archival History News*, the official newsletter of the Archival History Section (www.archivalhistory.news). His research interests include archival history, notably the history of women's role in the preservation of family archives in America during the nineteenth century.