

Presidential 'Pyramids'

If Watergate has accomplished nothing else of positive benefit, it has inspired a fresh look at the American presidency, and how it grows.

One of the latest books to put the White House under the microscope is "The Presidency in Flux," (Columbia University Press) by George Reedy, the late President Lyndon-B. Johnson's press secretary.

In one section of the book, Reedy examines a phenomenon most other observers have ignored — the proliferation of presidential libraries in recent years which, according to Reedy, "has taken on megalomaniac overtones."

Libraries have been established to house the works and papers of Presidents Harry Truman, Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and others.

The most pretentious edifice to date is that honoring Reedy's old boss, LBJ, on the campus of the University of Texas in Austin. A move to create a library to house the documents (and tapes?) of President Nixon has been stalled by the Watergate scandal.

In an article taken from his book and published in the current Intellectual Digest, Reedy suggests that rather helping historians, such repositories may actually confound their problems.

Post 9/13/73

"I doubt seriously," he says, "that the libraries reflect a genuine concern for future generations and the problems they face. They smack more of the Egyptian pharaohs who sought immortality through the erection of stone pyramids."

Reedy explains the trend of contemporary presidents to establish presidential libraries as an attempt by the chief executives to have posterity think well of them. When a man achieves the White House, he says, "there is nothing more that the people can grant him."

Thereafter, he says, it is only a matter of time until constituencies fade in his sight. The larger question becomes the reaction of history to his administration rather than the reaction of voters.

"I suggest there is something unhealthy," says Reedy, "about a form of government in which a man who is faced with day-to-day problems of government devotes so much energy to his image in the future."

He adds, in words that deserve to be struck in bronze and affixed above the door of the Oval Office.

"The reaction of history — especially history that has yet to be written — is a poor guide to public policy."