

The Value of History

When John F. Kennedy worked in the White House, doodling on notepads and dictating questions, there was no system set up to capture the flow of paper that recorded the President's state of mind. There was only his devoted secretary, Evelyn Lincoln. She squirreled things away, obsessively. But no one from the National Archives followed around. When Kennedy was murdered, the Oval Office files were sealed for a time. Two years later, the President's widow and trustees issued a deed of trust for his estate, donating to the archives and the Kennedy Presidential Library the paper and effects "which he intended should be deposited," and retaining for the family "such items as John Fitzgerald Kennedy had not intended to be deposited. . . ."

Meanwhile, the public fascination with the legend grew. Even as the Kennedy Library came into being, Ms. Lincoln and a host of others, including a man in Baltimore, Robert White, devoted themselves to collecting Kennedy things. After Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis died, her children made millions by auctioning her personal things. But when Ms. Lincoln died, childless, in 1995, she left her hoard to Mr. White. Now Mr. White has decided to cash in. His decision has drawn others to offer their hoards, too.

But this time, it is not just a poignant trove of personal effects. The catalogue of 600 items for sale in New York this week includes not only a slim gold wedding ring, Caroline's bracelet and the registra-

tion for Jacqueline Kennedy's Ford station wagon, but old typed pages that resonate with history. "We should come to definite conclusions on the Red Chinese admission question this week," the President wrote in a "Memorandum for the Secretary of State" on July 26, 1961. "We should have a meeting at the top on the question of Laos and Vietnam. I am concerned about Phoumi. It now appears that the talks will break down."

Ten months later, in another memo, he pondered how to explain that the United States was giving nuclear propulsion secrets to the British and not to the French — for then the Germans would want them. In October came the Cuban crisis. "Missiles Missiles!!!!," he scribbled on a doodle paper. "Soviet reaction??"

These are not things personal to the Kennedys. These are personal to the nation. Today, by law, such doodlings by Bill Clinton would be defined as Presidential records, Government property. But the Kennedy papers — along with his briefcase and writing desk — face the auction block, and an afterlife in someone's den. The National Archives is now hot to get them. The archives has no money to buy such things. Perhaps it should. But instead, on Friday, it threatened to sue, on the basis of the ambiguous Kennedy deed of gift.

Robert White has already given up some things. Perhaps, after a weekend's thought, he and his wife will give up more of the nation's heritage.

Filtering the Internet

Less than a year after the Supreme Court struck down the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which banned distribution of indecent material to minors on the Internet, Congress is again considering legislation that would harm free speech in the name of protecting children. A bill sponsored by Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, would require schools and libraries to install anti-pornography filters on their computers in order to receive Federal funds for Internet hook-ups. But recognizing potential opposition from educators and librarians, Mr. McCain kept open the possibility that a compromise would be offered when the bill reached the Senate floor.

The desire to protect children from pornography is understandable. Many parents have used filtering software at home. But such filters often miss some of the smut and block material that is not pornographic. The hazards posed by the McCain bill are playing out in a lawsuit in Loudoun County, Va. The library board installed on every terminal the X-

Stop software filter, which blocked access to scores of non-sex-related Web sites, including those sponsored by the Quakers and the American Association of University Women. The library system is being sued by library users and publishers of Web pages for violating their First Amendment rights.

The McCain bill could inflict the same problems on schools and libraries across the country. All school computers would have to use filters, and public libraries would have to have at least one machine with a filter. Senator Conrad Burns of Montana has offered a more sensible approach. His substitute bill would require schools and libraries that want the Federal Internet subsidies to adopt appropriate Internet use policies for children as they see fit. Many public institutions have already done so, without denying students or adults access to huge swaths of information. Given the limitations of filtering technology, the best way to protect children is to teach them how to use the Internet. A software program simply cannot do that.

Foreign Policy Held Hostage

House Republican leaders flaunt their disregard for America's broader interests by letting anti-abortion crusaders hold up funding for the International Monetary Fund and the United Na-

not over, and the fund may need the money in the coming months. America's trade interests and even the health of the economy could be jeopardized by delaying this funding.

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