

Report: Research Trip, Austin, Texas, March 2010

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I was fortunate to receive a St Anne's travel grant to support research undertaken at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. My doctoral thesis, entitled *Pathways to Power? Conservatives and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-89*, analyses the limited success of the modern American right through the lens of federal arts policymaking. Chapter three of my thesis focuses on the early years of the National Endowment for the Arts under the first Chairman, Roger L. Stevens (1965-9).



A mock-up of LBJ's Oval Office, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas
Photo: Karen Heath

The award provided me with an opportunity to examine memoranda and correspondence between Stevens and the Johnson White House, Congressional critics and supporters, arts lobbyists, and concerned conservatives who campaigned against the agency's grant-making priorities throughout the mid-late 1960s.

Political historians have long characterised the LBJ years as the era of the Great Society; a time of progressive, liberal reform. But in the realm of the arts at least, I found the complete opposite. A persistent conservatism coloured the young Endowment's grant-making policies, for although the agency intended to bring art to

the people, definitions of 'art' and 'the people' remained limited. Revisionists have spoken of the conservative 1960s, but instead of a vibrant grassroots movement I found that conservatives were cut out of the policymaking loop and the right campaigned against the Endowment's 'Communitistic art' to little avail.

In addition to important sources documenting the political motivations behind the Endowment's early grants and the resultant criticism from conservative arts organisations, I uncovered a wealth of additional materials that illuminated a variety of arts controversies in the 1960s. In short, the trip enabled me to collect a considerable amount of material for a key chapter of my thesis. These primary sources are unavailable in the UK, but essential to my work. The research I undertook in Austin thus significantly strengthened the originality of my thesis and provided me with an insight into the inner workings and political machinations of the agency and the Johnson White House.

During my time away, I also delivered a paper at a graduate history conference at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. This paper was based on the fifth chapter of my thesis, and focused on the mid-years of the Endowment under the third Chairman, Livingston L. Biddle Jr. (1977-81). The conference provided me with an excellent opportunity to receive feedback on my work from an American audience and to network with other international scholars working in similar areas. I am especially grateful to Prof. John Lenihan of Texas A&M for his commentary on my paper, and also to graduate student *Jared* Peatman for organising the day.



*A mock-up of Lady Bird's Office, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas
Photo: Karen Heath*

When not working, I spent my time visiting various museums nearby, including the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall, Texas, known as the 'Texas White House'. And I spent an inordinate amount of time in the excellent gift shop at the LBJ Museum, looking over the political memorabilia: I confess, I bought a Barry Goldwater '64 sticker...

I am extremely grateful to St Anne's for the funding that made this trip possible, and also to the staff at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library for their friendly help and advice throughout the duration of my stay.

