An Interview with Patrick Mordente

Patrick X. Mordente was named the director of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in February 2017. A 29-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force and a command pilot with more than 2,700 hours of flight time in T-37, T-38, and C-130 aircraft, Mordente graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1987 and attended Undergraduate Pilot Training at Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi. He served on multiple high level staffs within the Department of Defense, including the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. He is a combat veteran who served in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. As a wing commander, he worked closely with military historians to preserve unit and installation records. In October 2016, he retired as the vice commander of 18th Air Force at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois.

Interview by Thomas Faith

What are your current duties?

As director of the library, I am ultimately responsible for all of the work done here. We have a large archival staff, and I keep very informed on their processing and reference activities. Our museum staff is busy planning future exhibits and taking care of our huge collection of artifacts. With the new “Situation Room Experience,” our education specialist is conducting exciting and fun programs with local schools and Southern Methodist University (SMU). I help with all of those activities and also keep an eye on our administrative operations. On top of that, I feel a big part of my job is creating partnerships and making the broader community aware of what National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum are all about, so I am constantly talking to groups and connecting with the local community. I also take a very active role in the design of future museum exhibits, working in close cooperation with our partners.

What aspect of your personal or professional experiences do you think most influences your approach to your current position?

As a retired Brigadier General with 29 years of military experience, I have managed large organizations, shaped organizational strategic vision, and been responsible for the overall performance of complex units with varying mission requirements. I have been extremely successful developing productive teams and fostering effective partnerships. I believe this is because of the importance I place on individuals and building positive working relationships.

The George W. Bush Library is a relatively new institution, what are some things you hope to accomplish there in the next few years?

NARA’s mission is to drive openness, cultivate public participation, and strengthen our nation’s democracy through public access to high-value government records. What better place to provide this kind of access to history than right here at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum? First, I plan to continue the great work begun by my predecessor, Alan Lowe, and to further grow our strong partnerships with the Bush Center and SMU. I also want to capitalize on our many outreach programs with local school districts and college campuses to increase understanding about how our government works and the many challenges our nation faced during President Bush’s Administration. Finally, I am very interested in implementing advanced technology, in line with the National Archives’ vision, to provide better, faster, and easier access to the volumes of records here at the Presidential Library.

What makes its location at Southern Methodist University in Dallas a good site for the Library?

The process of choosing a location for the Bush Presidential Center started years before the dedication. Several Texas institutions submitted proposals; but in the end, President Bush chose SMU. SMU put forth an excellent plan detailing both the location of the facility and ways the various institutions could work together. The Bush family appreciates the high quality of SMU as an institution of learning, as First Lady Laura Bush serves on the SMU Board and obtained her degree in education there in 1968. The University also has the benefit of being well-situated in Dallas, a major metropolitan area in the heartland of the nation. An academic institution of 11,000 students near downtown Dallas, SMU has proven to be a significant partner. Every day, the Bush Library works closely with SMU students and faculty on a wide range of educational activities and programs.

How is the Library addressing the challenge of making electronic records accessible?

Since George W. Bush’s Presidential records became subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) on January 20, 2014, the number of records open and available to the public has surpassed 1.4 million pages, more than 82,000 email assets, and 12,384 digital photographs. The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum’s website makes research into the Bush Presidency easier for the general public. Researchers can view born-electronic on the computers in our Research Room or...
purchase a disc of the electronic files. We are working toward a process to automatically export electronic records from our Electronic Records Archive (ERA) directly into the National Archives Catalog (NAC). This way, researchers can access these records from the NARA’s website. For open textual records, NARA staff members located here are steadily digitizing these holdings and continue to work closely with the NARA’s Office of Innovation to ensure they are included in the NAC and posted in our website’s Digital Library. Our goal is for researchers, no matter where they are, to have the opportunity to access the records of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

Has the Library encountered challenges processing the volume of FOIA requests it receives?

The primary mission of every Presidential Library is to make information available to the public, and at the heart of that mission is the Library’s archival collections. What differentiates the Bush Library from previous Presidential Libraries is the incredible size of our electronic records archive—80 terabytes of electronic information with 200 million emails. If these emails were printed, it would total more than 1 billion pages. Add this to our textual collection of roughly 70 million pages of paper records and the audio-visual archives of 4 million photographs and roughly 60,000 audio and video records. With the hundreds of FOIA requests the Bush Library receives each year, our challenge is to understand each researcher’s request to determine how to best search the records to find the material most relevant to their project.

Are there efforts to share and standardize practices across the Presidential Libraries system?

As a new director—and as someone who comes to this role from the military—I am just beginning to learn all of the intricacies that go into running a Presidential Library and being part of the National Archives. I have met with the Archivist of the United States, his senior leaders, and my fellow library directors. What I’ve learned is there are certain archival and preservation standards that all of the Libraries use in their work. At the same time, however, each Library has its own unique resources and attributes based on its location, the president whose story it holds, technology available during that president’s administration, and its relationship with various partners. The ideal is for each Library to be entrepreneurial and innovative in how it provides access to its records and engages audiences in historical inquiry, while also ensuring we properly protect and preserve the treasures in our care.

How do you approach the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as a historical subject?

“A Nation Under Attack” exhibit in the Museum, which includes steel from the World Trade Center, the bullhorn President Bush used to address the crowd at Ground Zero, and letters he received in the days following the attacks, is a solemn and moving memorial to a pivotal moment in our Nation’s history. Using actual TV news footage, the exhibit takes visitors through how Bush’s presidency—and the world—abruptly changed course on Sept. 11. It was important to put the information there and let visitors experience it for themselves. It is full of emotion as it is, and we did not want to, in any way, shape the story. I believe this is particularly important for younger visitors. For many of us, we remember what happened, where we were, and how we felt; but for our younger visitors, they either were not yet born or too young to remember. Being able to show the videos, see the names, touch the steel, and experience in a small way what happened, is critical to understanding our world now and how things changed.

What role does President Bush or members of his administration play in programming at the Library?

Without saying, the Library’s greatest partners are President George W. Bush and Mrs. Laura Bush. Without their service and their inspiration, the Library would not exist. They are tremendously supportive. The Bush Center continues to support a variety of library activities. For example, the Library mounts at least two special exhibits every year. One is always a holiday exhibit that follows chronologically the holiday themes from the Bush White House. The other is on a topic of relevance to the Bushes, the Bush Administration, the presidency, and/or American history. Thus far, the Bush Center has funded all the Library’s special exhibits including our current exhibit, “Portraits of Courage: A Commander in Chief’s Tribute to America’s Warriors.” This inspiring exhibit brings together 66 full-color portraits and a four-panel mural painted by President Bush of members of the United States military who have served our nation with honor since 9/11—and whom he has come to know personally.

What is your favorite aspect of your duties?

My favorite part is interacting and talking with the young people who visit the Museum and participate in our various Education programs. Camp43, our three-day summer camp for 2017, 2018, and 2019 high school graduates, recently wrapped up. Using a series of engaging speakers, personality tests, and fun team activities, this unique training opportunity presses students to discover their own leadership qualities while learning about the principles that guided George W. Bush during his presidency. It was great fun to watch these students actively engaged in lessons and discussions, and then experience that lightbulb moment.

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