

Report on Postgraduate Research Trip

European Association of American Studies

Trip Period – 11th September 2014 – 26th October 2014

Host Institutions – LBJ Library and Archive, University of Texas at Austin; Library of Congress, Washington DC

I am a student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland studying American History. I visited two areas while on this research trip – the Lyndon B Johnson archive in Austin, Texas and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. The purpose of the trip was to look at the public relations of the Johnson administration with regards to his foreign policy in Vietnam and his domestic “Great Society” policies.

This involves researching how the President and his staff used data from opinion polls to create and manage speeches, campaigns, press conferences and announcements related to Great Society measures and the Vietnam war throughout his Presidency, until Johnson’s retreat from the 1968 Presidential primaries. I flew to Austin on September 11th 2014.

On arriving in Austin I first arranged to see an archivist who was familiar with the subject that I am looking at. As I was limited by the period of time I was able to spend in the city it was important for me to manage this well. The archivist, Brian McNerney, had several good ideas on where to start. The staff at the archive were all very helpful and able to direct me to what I needed to see.

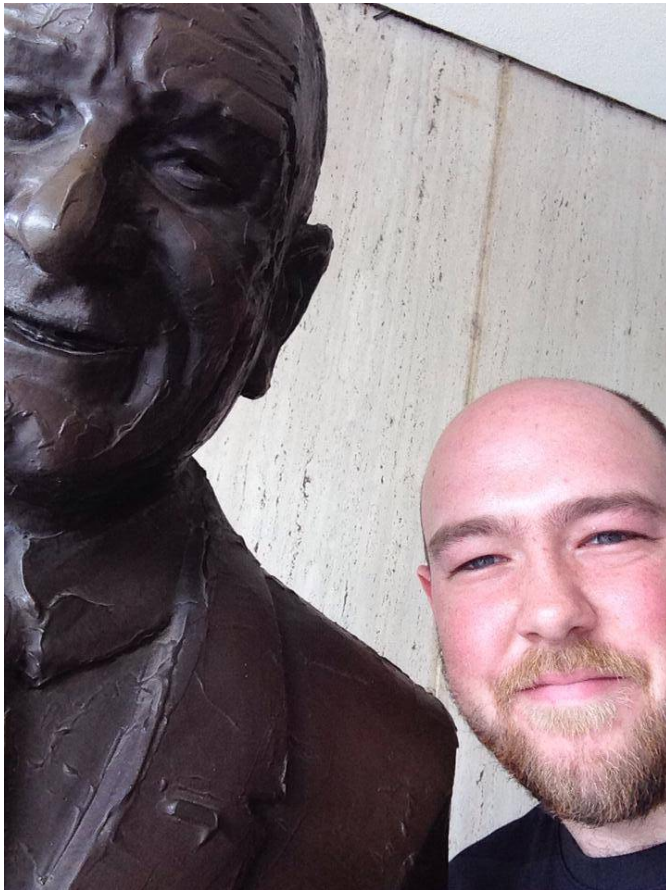
There was a vast amount of material pertaining to the Johnson administration’s interaction with public opinion. Johnson was one of the first Presidents to devote a lot of time to the study and management of popular opinion and this is clear in his archival material. From 1966, he asked staff member Fred Panzer to keep track of newspaper articles, public opinion polls and other pertinent information which could then be sent to the President to read and use as he saw fit. I was able to find a great amount of material from this collection which will be useful for this project.

In addition to Panzer’s files, Johnson kept speech files which contained background material to public engagements that were made throughout his career. These were especially useful and allowed me to look at speech drafts, communication between staff members and gain a real impression of how public engagements were structured based on available information.

Finally in Austin I was directed to a Johnson staff member and speechwriter – Harry Middleton – who lived locally and was happy for me to conduct a personal interview. At 92 years old he is one of the last remaining staff members and this was a great opportunity. He offered some great insights

into the President and the way in which he liked his assistants to work, as well as explaining a lot of the material which I found at the Johnson Library.

As well as his service under Johnson for a number of years before during and after his time in the White House, Harry worked at the Library for twenty-five years after Johnson left the Presidency and so it was excellent to be able to speak to him.



A statue of Lyndon B Johnson outside the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas

Following my several weeks in Austin I moved on to Washington DC, where I intended to use the Library of Congress to view some material on the Presidency which was not available to me back home, as well as some further archive material which was stored there. An excellent exhibit on the civil rights movement – one of Johnson’s most important Great Society projects – was open to the public and contained several interesting documents from the archives.

In the Library I viewed several books, including the memoirs of staff members Horace Busby and Jack Valenti, and LBJ and the Polls by Bruce Altschuler, which is an exceptional look at LBJ’s use of polls. This was important to add some context to the archival research which had been done in Austin. Several of the books I viewed are unavailable or difficult to find in the UK and as such this was a very worthwhile exercise.

The opportunity to visit the United States for an extended period of six weeks and conduct research on my PhD subject has been absolutely invaluable to me. This would not have been possible without the generous financial commitment given to me by the European Association of American Studies. I am very grateful to have been afforded this opportunity, and I look forward to presenting my findings and working with the EAAS again.

Benjamin Young