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University Presses Join Effort to Preserve Presidential Records Act

New York, NY March 1, 2002— The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) joined an effort to overturn an executive order which limits the access to presidential papers guaranteed by the 1978 Presidential Records Act.

In an *amicus* brief filed on February 28 with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, AAUP joined the Association of American Publishers and a broad coalition of groups representing writers, scholars, and publishers in protesting the move by the Bush Administration to wrest control of publicly owned records from the National Archives and the American people.

Congress passed the 1978 Presidential Records Act after the scandals of the Nixon years in recognition of, in the words of the brief, “the compelling public interest in access to an accurate and complete historical record of the workings of the executive branch at the highest level.” The Act requires that presidential papers be made available to the public 12 years after a president leaves office. The Act does make provisions that documents be screened for national security concerns, but unequivocally asserts the public ownership of governmental records. The Bush order, issued in November, seeks to give former and incumbent presidents, as well as the families of former presidents and former vice-presidents, the power to veto or delay indefinitely the release of records even after the 12-year restriction period.

A legal challenge to this order was brought almost immediately by the group Public Citizen, as well as several historians’ organizations and prominent presidential historians. The publishers’ brief has been submitted in support of this challenge.

Other organizations that have joined the AAP’s *amicus* effort, in addition to AAUP, are: the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Association of American University Presses, the Freedom to Read Foundation, PEN American Center, the Society of American Historians, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Authors Guild, and the Publishers Marketing Association. The brief was written by the Association of American Publishers’ Freedom to Read counsel R. Bruce Rich, Jonathan Bloom, Benjamin Marks, and Natalia Porcelli (Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP).

The Association of American University Presses, established in 1937, is the world’s oldest and largest organization of nonprofit scholarly publishers. AAUP’s 121 members are affiliated with universities, research institutions, and scholarly societies. Members are located in 43 states and the District of Columbia, and publish over 12,000 books and 700 journals annually. Many of these publications are in U.S. history, political science, diplomatic history, military history, and other fields in which clear access to public records is essential for accurate knowledge of the past.