

Bush Keeps a Grip on Presidential Papers

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 1 — President Bush signed an executive order today to allow a sitting president to keep his papers private, even if a previous president wants his papers made public.

Administration officials said the order would provide an "orderly process" to help archivists handle requests for papers. Mr. Fleischer, the White House press secretary, said today that "more information will be forthcoming" because some historians and public interest lawyers disagreed.

"Those claims are absurd," said Hugh Davis Graham, a presidential historian at Vanderbilt University who said he viewed the executive order as the latest effort by the Bush White House to clamp down on the flow of presidential papers.

The five-page executive order, drafted by the White House counsel Alberto R. Gonzales, would give either a sitting president or a former president the right to withhold the former president's papers from the public.

"We thought it would be more appropriate to really give the primary responsibility regarding presidential papers to the archivists whose records they belong to," Mr. Gonzales said in a briefing for reporters, "and to have the incumbent president making decisions about whether or not those documents should in fact be released."

At issue are 68,000 pages of records from the Reagan administration, which by law were due to be made public. But the current White House blocked the release of those documents, which contain confidential communications from Mr. Bush's father, George Bush, who was Mr. Reagan's vice president.

Critics have accused the current administration of trying to withhold documents that might be embarrassing to the current president, but to other administration officials who served Mr. Reagan. Among them are Secretary of State Colin Powell Jr., the budget director; and Lawrence B. Lindsey, the chief White House economist.

Historians say the documents most likely include memorandums of policy decisions, briefing papers and other documents from White House advisers.

Until 1977, American presidents controlled the release of their own papers. But after Watergate and President Nixon's resignation, Congress passed the 1978 Presidential Records Act, which called for the release of presidential papers 12 years after an administration.

That law took effect in 1981. The Reagan documents would be the first presidential papers released under the law. The White House delayed that release three times, saying it needed time to review the papers.

Mr. Graham, the presidential historian, said the current administration was also concerned about protecting the release of documents with Afghanistan.