



JOURNAL ARTICLE

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Libraries & Culture

Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 165-188

Published by: [University of Texas Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25542533>

Page Count: 24

The American Heritage Project: Librarians and the Democratic Tradition in the Early Cold War

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In the late 1940s and early 1950s the American Library Association sought to promote the role of libraries in adult education and to secure federal funding for public library service amid the mounting censorship attacks of the early cold war. Through its American Heritage Project, begun in 1951 with funds from the Ford Foundation, the ALA demonstrated its belief that loyalty to democracy and commitment to free speech were not only compatible but identical. Organizing library discussion groups as a forum to consider the meaning of traditional American values in a time of crisis, librarians claimed an active part for themselves, reached a wider audience, and laid the groundwork for broader support of libraries. Despite the risks, librarians reaffirmed their professional commitment to intellectual freedom and the important role of the public library in defending it.

While librarians celebrated their 75th anniversary conference in Chicago in July 1951, ALA executive secretary John Mackenzie Cory and soon-to-be executive secretary David Clift flew to California to meet with officials of the Fund for Adult Education, recently established by the Ford Foundation. After a turnaround flight, they brought dramatic news: the fund had awarded the American Library Association \$150,000 to conduct a nationwide program of reading and discussion groups on ALA's 75th anniversary theme, the Heritage of the U.S.A in Times of Crisis.¹ The announcement symbolized the association's decision to honor its past by demonstrating the contemporary importance of libraries.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the library community faced diverse challenges: to promote the role of the library in adult education, to secure federal funding for public library service, and to articulate the profession's response to mounting censorship attacks. As librarians sought to increase political support for library service, the American Heritage Project gave libraries new visibility. At a time when the library profession sought to define its own principles, the American Heritage Project envisioned a new role for libraries as arsenals of a democratic culture.² At their public library, citizens might consider the controversial issues of the day: the limits

such great issues as the use and control of atomic energy, disarmament, housing, and health.²⁵

At subsequent meetings, as the ALA confronted other issues arising from the growing fears of communism and the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, its statements of principles were often tempered by Cold War realities. In 1950 the ALA Council called for repeal of Maryland's Ober Law following the dismissal of a librarian from Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Library for refusing to sign a loyalty oath required by the statute. At the same time, however, it passed a somewhat equivocal resolution stating that, while librarians have a special responsibility to provide information on all sides of controversial issues, employers might still require affirmations of allegiance as long as persons accused of disloyalty were given a fair hearing before discharge.²⁶ At the midwinter meeting at which he announced the 75th anniversary American heritage theme, Graham asked members to adopt a resolution on "Libraries and the National Emergency." Seeing the peace and security of the world threatened by despotism and aggression, the librarians pledged to strengthen services to meet national defense needs, conserve resources, and lift morale, in addition to providing information and preserving "the open market of ideas which libraries represent as a symbol and guarantee of freedom."²⁷

Discussion on the Northwestern University Reviewing Stand radio show on 4 February 1951, following the ALA midwinter meeting, linked the need for more libraries with current challenges to intellectual freedom and the heritage theme. Addressing the topic "The Author and Reader in Time of Crisis," ALA executive secretary Cory pointed to the shortage of libraries: "I think that probably few people realize that the real impact of libraries is limited by their availability in many parts of the country, with more

ies: "I think that probably few people realize that the real impact of libraries is limited by their availability in many parts of the country, with more than a fourth of the people in this country not even having access to a public library."²⁸ Libraries had a philosophical as well as a practical importance. "I am vitally concerned with *the right of the reader*," he declared. "He should have *full access to conflicting ideas, to controversial points of view, to minority opinions*, if you will, so that conflict can be resolved through his own thinking and exploration."²⁹ At the end of the broadcast he stated, "We hope to promote nation-wide community discussion of these problems and of the relationship of our heritage to current crises. We are going to continue to *fight on behalf of the reader for his access to ideas*, and on *behalf of the author for his freedom to express his opinions*, in order to stimulate thinking on the conflict, and, if possible to resolve it."³⁰

The 1951 midwinter meeting had provided further evidence of the tense and sometimes hostile atmosphere of the early Cold War. On the Reviewing Stand show, Walter Laves, former deputy director general of UNESCO, expressed shock over an attack on the freedom of the library in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where "some self-appointed group of pseudo-pa-

triot's has decided that certain books should not be on the library shelves."³¹ Beginning with a protest against an interracial program at the local YWCA, the Citizens' Committee then challenged the town librarian, who had supported efforts for better race relations. Accused of keeping subversive materials in the library, she was fired after thirty years of service.

On 3 February 1951 the ALA Council had approved a resolution submitted by the ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom protesting her dismissal and stating its own position: "The allegations were based on the library's holdings of *The Nation*, *New Republic* and *Soviet Russia Today*. The ALA does not defend any specific publication, but in view of the responsibility of libraries to provide information on all sides of controversial issues, this incident is an infringement of the Library Bill of Rights, the official statement of policy of the association. . . ."³²

As anniversary plans progressed, the association's Committee on Intellectual Freedom considered the question of labeling Communist or subversive publications. In April 1951 the Montclair, New Jersey, chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution formally requested that ALA endorse both labeling and a requirement that labeled materials be segregated within libraries and available only on written and signed application. After a small poll of librarians indicated strong opposition, the committee recommended a resolution against labeling, which was unanimously adopted by the ALA Council on 13 July 1951:³³ "Although we are all agreed that communism is a threat to the free world, if materials are labeled to pacify one group, there is no excuse for refusing to label any item in the library's collection. Because communism, fascism, or other authoritarianisms tend to suppress ideas and attempt to control individual

agreed that communism is a threat to the free world, if materials are labeled to pacify one group, there is no excuse for refusing to label any item in the library's collection. **Because communism, fascism, or other authoritarianisms tend to suppress ideas and attempt to coerce individuals to conform to a specific ideology, American librarians must be opposed to such 'isms.'** We are, then, anti-communist, but we are also **opposed to any group which aims at closing any path to knowledge.**"³⁴

The library community, however, reflected some of the same divisions as the nation at large. On the day the ALA Council denounced labeling, Detroit Public Library director Ralph A. Ulveling created a stir with an address to the general membership meeting on book selection policies in times of crisis. He argued that the provision of materials on all points of view was incompatible with his obligations as a citizen and his library's role as a government institution.³⁵ His proposal that controversial material be included in reference and research collections but not in general circulating collections was referred to the Committee on Intellectual Freedom and debated for months in the professional literature.³⁶

Thus, by the time Cory and Clift announced funding for a nationwide program of discussion groups to explore the meaning of the American tradition in crisis times, the ALA had already undertaken its own interpreta-