Champions of a Cause: American Librarians and the Library Bill of Rights in the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

The library profession's understanding of the Library Bill of Rights—and, in fact, American librarianship's understanding of itself—is a product of both contemporary political discourse and of the American Library Association's pragmatic responses to censorship challenges in the 1950s. Between the 1948 adoption of the strengthened Library Bill of Rights and 1960, ALA based its "library faith" on a foundation of pluralist democracy and used social scientific "objectivity" to try to fend off challenges to its jurisdiction. When the McCarthy Era brought challenges to the very premises of pluralist democracy, however, librarians responded by becoming "champions of the cause" of intellectual freedom.

Over the last half-century, the Library Bill of Rights evolved out of changes in the political, social, and cultural climate and thinking and out of changes in the roles of libraries and librarians. Tensions manifest in its implementation, ably pointed out by Baldwin in his article in this issue of Library Trends, spring in large measure, from its origin and early years, from the pragmatic nature of its development, and from the contradictions inherent in librarians' roles as selectors from, and collectors of, the cultural record. The events and attitudes of the 1950s were crucial to the formation and interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights and help account for its contradictions.

The Library's Bill of Rights, the document's first manifestation, was adopted in 1939 by the Council of the American Library Association (ALA) at a time when Hitler's advance across Europe spurred many Americans...
into a spirited and uncritical defense of democracy. The context of its adoption can perhaps best be illustrated by excerpts from the writings of two influential thinkers of the time. The first, social scientist Bernard Berelson (1938), called on librarians to abandon their "myth" of impartiality. Reminding librarians that "the library, as an institution, is not impartial between, let us say, education and non-education, or knowledge and ignorance" (p. 88), he insisted that the library should not be impartial "between democracy and dictatorship, or between intelligence and stupidity or prejudice, or between the general public welfare and special interests" (p. 88). He urged librarians to "take education for democracy to the people" in order to bring "America's social thinking up to date" (p. 89). To do this, Berelson asserted, "librarianship must stand firmly against social and political and economic censorship of book collections; it must be so organized that it can present effective opposition to this censorship and it must protect librarians who are threatened by it" (p. 89).

Another influential thinker of the time, Archibald MacLeish, poet, lawyer and, from 1939 to 1945, Librarian of Congress, told librarians they had difficulty achieving professional status because they could not reach agreement on the "social end which librarianship exists to serve" (MacLeish, 1940, p. 385). A profession must be so essential to society's welfare, he said, "that it requires of necessity a discipline, a technique, and even an ethic of its own" (p. 385). The worldwide attack upon democracy by fascism, MacLeish suggested, forced librarians to examine how their purpose related to the idea of democracy, to the idea of a government in which an informed electorate makes the decisions. He then described the social end of librarianship:

To subject the record of experience to intelligent control so that all parts of that record shall be somewhere deposited; to bring to the servicing of that record the greatest learning and the most responsible intelligence the country can provide; to make available the relevant parts of that record to those who have need of it at the time they have need of it and in a form responsive to their need. (p. 422)

Attempting these tasks, MacLeish proclaimed, would not only serve the cause of democracy, but it would, in the process, also help librarianship find its long-sought-after social function—"a function as noble as any men have ever served" (p. 422). Librarians were to use their expertise in the selection, organization, and provision of information in the service of freedom (Geller, 1984, p. 178; Winter, 1988, p. 72).

These statements provide the context for an understanding of the Library Bill of Rights as it later developed and reveal its sometimes contradictory dual purposes to which Baldwin rightly refers—i.e., to define and defend librarianship as a profession and to defend the traditional values of pluralist democracy, especially intellectual freedom. Library Historian Michael Harris (1986) has asserted, furthermore, that librarians
have been obsessed with their lack of professional status and that American librarians have been—in spite of their claims of “objectivity” or assertions of supporting intellectual freedom—uncritical (and largely unconscious) instruments of hegemony. They have, he asserts, embraced and inculcated dominant cultural values which maintain the status quo and ignore differences of race and class.

This examination of the development of the Library Bill of Rights in the 1950s probes the extent to which it reflected prevailing political discourse. The essay also describes the pragmatic nature of the development of the Library Bill of Rights in reaction to external threats to librarians’ professional jurisdiction. A combination of three events frame the decade: on the one hand, the June 1948 adoption of the strengthened Library Bill of Rights and, on the other, the publication of two defining works in ALA’s intellectual freedom history—Marjorie Fiske’s (1959) *Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California* and Robert B. Downs’s (1960) *The First Freedom: Liberty and Justice in the World of Books and Reading*. In briefly recapping the intervening events, the essay highlights challenges to intellectual freedom deemed important to ALA’s leaders and their responses as they tried to move the fledgling Library Bill of Rights from theory to practice during the height of the Cold War.

With the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, changes in the nation’s political climate created challenges that awakened the largely dormant Intellectual Freedom Committee. On the one hand, a strong belief in a unique American pluralist democratic system prevailed over totalitarianism—both among ordinary people and among political intellectuals (Fowler, 1978; May, 1989). This system was marked by a diversity of special interest groups all competing on a level playing field. At the time, historians described what they saw as a unique American “consensus,” an essentially classless view of American society (Noble, 1989). A robust confidence in this pluralist democracy—and the capitalist free enterprise system that supported it—accompanied a somewhat frightening new role for the United States as a world power. On the other hand, fear of communism (like fascism, a “foreign” ideology) led to a wariness of difference, of dissent; almost any criticism of the status quo could be interpreted by someone as an attempt to subvert the “American way of life” (Fried, 1990; Caute, 1978). The Truman Administration’s struggle against a conservative Republican legislature, coupled with concern about the dangers of domestic communism led, in 1947, to the introduction of a federal loyalty program that spawned progeny in many states across the country. That same year, the House Un-American Activities Committee conducted highly publicized hearings into Communist influence in the Hollywood film industry. These government actions heightened the at-
mosphere of fear and conformity.

It was this climate that propelled intellectual freedom to the foreground at ALA's 1948 annual conference. For the first time in ALA's history, general sessions exhorted librarians to uphold democratic values of free inquiry and to combat censorship. The ALA Council quickly adopted a revised and strengthened Library Bill of Rights (see Library Bill of Rights, 1948) which would "clearly place libraries in the position of being aggressive defenders of the right to freedom of research and inquiry" (Berninghausen, 1948). The document reflected the ills it was designed to combat—i.e., the belief in the library as an agency for the promotion and defense of pluralist democracy, and of librarians' desire to guard their professional prerogatives in book selection and collection building.

Librarians' professional prerogatives were themselves interpreted in light of postwar thinking and pressures of the times. The influence of social science— with its emphasis on empirical measurement, quantifiable data, and scientific "objectivity"—was profound. Society's increasing reliance on professionals, on "experts," in every field from child care to urban planning, had taken a quantum leap during the Depression, World War II, and in post-war planning (Molz, 1984). In order to be perceived as professionals, experts in nearly every field embraced the "objectivity" of science and social science, although frequently there were other motives involved in the claim to objectivity. In journalism, for example, "objectivity" grew out of the need for wire services to sell their wares—their reportage—to newspapers of every political stripe (Baughman, 1992, p. 13). A substantial number of social and political scientists—previously concerned with reform or the discovery of values justification—decided to take up the pursuit of theory development or of purely descriptive, quantifiable studies (Fowler, 1978, pp. 128-32); in literature, the New Criticism urged readers to look only at the text, to remove the author from the study. Art lost its referents. All of these variations on "objectivity" served to protect professional groups at a time when commitment to a cause, or the search for a value-laden solution to a social problem, or the study of an author with a Communist past, might result in unwanted scrutiny. Thus, librarians' insistence on "objectivity"—their selection of books on all sides of controversial issues of the day even if they disagreed with the contents of the book—was intended both to elevate their standing as professionals and to protect their contested jurisdiction of book selection from charges of bias.

Although their "objectivity" was designed to protect libraries and librarians from attacks on their professional jurisdiction, it did not succeed. Other values underlay the Library Bill of Rights—the values of pluralism and free debate, the value of skepticism in the face of any form of absolutism—liberal values shared by postwar political intellectuals.
These very values, however, were themselves under attack by those the Library Bill of Rights called "volunteer arbiters of morals or political opinion or organizations that would establish a coercive concept of Americanism" ("Library Bill of Rights," 1948, p. 285).

As ALA responded to those attacks in the course of the decade, the Library Bill of Rights moved from a little-known abstraction to a frequently invoked credo—and pluralist democracy became the unexamined lens through which librarians viewed their domain. Like the political intellectuals of the day who were skeptical about everything except their own democratic ideology (Fowler, 1978), librarians failed to examine their "library faith," their belief that the library—and the printed word it enshrines—held indispensable sources of knowledge for the educated citizenry on whom they believed the success of democracy depends. Like Berelson, whose own studies of voting behavior (Berelson et al., 1954) convinced him it was probably better that all eligible voters did not vote, librarians were less than inclusive in their practices of selection and service. Their boards were composed almost exclusively of white middle- to upper-class individuals (Garceau, 1949); their users were neither numerous nor representative of the country's diversity (Berelson, 1949). Librarians rarely scrutinized intensely their assertions of providing access to all points of view, and they frequently failed to back their faith with works. Nevertheless, at least some librarians courageously practiced their own "subversive" selection practices by including titles that were likely to be challenged (Jenkins, 1995). And, in attempting to meet the challenges of the 1950s, the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) of the American Library Association did move the Library Bill of Rights into a central position in American librarianship and did position the ALA in the public consciousness as an association prepared to work with other organizations to keep open the channels of communication.

The IFC first had occasion to begin to work with other organizations to uphold the Library Bill of Rights immediately after its passage (Berninghausen, 1975). The Nation magazine had recently been banned in all New York City schools because officials deemed a series of articles disrespectful of the Catholic Church. IFC Chairman David K. Berninghausen, at a special hearing opposing the ban, protested it on ALA's behalf as "a threat to freedom of expression and contrary to the Library Bill of Rights and the United States Bill of Rights" (Brigham, 1948, p. 339). It was the first time ALA had spoken out against censorship at an official hearing, and some in ALA questioned the wisdom of the action. Nevertheless, Berninghausen subsequently joined MacLeish, Eleanor Roosevelt, and others on the executive committee of the Ad Hoc Committee to Lift the Ban on the Nation, and various ALA officials were invited to serve as consultants to other groups preparing statements against censorship (Berninghausen, 1975, p. 45; Dunlap, 1949). Although the
ban on the *Nation* was not finally removed until 1957, actions taken by the IFC in support of the Library Bill of Rights had demonstrated the library profession's willingness to work with other groups to fight censorship. And although ineffective in New York, protests of the ban moved the Massachusetts Board of Education to restore the *Nation* in all Bay State teachers' college libraries (Berninghausen, 1949, p. 74).

The invocation of the Library Bill of Rights proved more effective in the fall of 1948 when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors announced its intent to appoint a county library system censorship board to guard against the "liberal thoughts" of librarian John Henderson. The ALA and the California Library Association allied themselves with other groups to protest and publicize the proposed board; their efforts ultimately succeeded (Berninghausen, 1949). In spite of this success, however, few librarians brought censorship attempts to the IFC; in Massachusetts, Florida, Alabama, New Jersey, Iowa, and Washington, nonlibrarians reported censorship attempts. Still, librarians increasingly reported asking their boards to endorse the Library Bill of Rights to prepare in advance for challenges, and a number of larger public libraries developed comprehensive selection policies outlining the professional standards employed in book selection ("Worcester Library Directors Support their Librarian," 1949, p. 649; "Library Bill of Rights Adopted," 1949, p. 154; Jenkins, 1995). By 1950, ALA had demonstrated that it was prepared to use the "bully pulpit" to fight censorship and other constraints upon intellectual freedom and to join forces with like-minded groups.

By the summer of 1950, ALA had also struggled to a consensus on a statement opposing loyalty programs that failed to protect individuals' civil rights. The debate had preoccupied the IFC for almost two years, bitterly dividing federal librarians subject to loyalty investigations as a condition of employment and those led by Berninghausen and the IFC who felt such investigations threatened intellectual freedom and fostered a dangerous conformity. ALA never invoked its hard-won Resolution on Loyalty Programs to defend a librarian unjustly accused of disloyalty. Unlike many other organizations (the National Education Association, labor unions, some bar and medical associations, and even the board of the American Civil Liberties Union), however, it never required a political test for membership, and it spoke out, through its resolution, against loyalty programs that failed to protect the civil rights of employees. In this ALA differed from the political scientists and educators who approved of forbidding Communists to teach (Robbins, 1994, 1995).

The IFC's involvement in the loyalty debate probably helps account for the ineffectiveness of its response to one of the decade's most widely publicized censorship episodes. An attack on Ruth W. Brown, long time librarian of the Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Public Library, began in February 1950, just a week after Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous
Wheeling, West Virginia, speech accusing the Truman Administration of harboring Communists in the State Department. In many ways the Ruth Brown episode was emblematic of problems confronted by librarians throughout the period that bore the senator's name. Like other incidents, the charges in the Brown case came from a super-patriotic group; the periodicals challenged had already been challenged elsewhere; the ostensible offense masked a different concern. The attack also amply illustrated the shortcomings of the Library Bill of Rights and the IFC's efforts to support it.

Accused of circulating subversive magazines—chiefly *The Nation* and *The New Republic*—by a citizens' committee led by members of the American Legion, Brown was, in fact, suspect because of her activities in support of racial integration. The library board, which supported Brown, asked the IFC for advice; Berninghausen supplied the Library Bill of Rights and information about the challenged periodicals, both of which the board used in its reports to the City Commission. The efforts proved fruitless, however; both the board and Brown were dismissed and the City Commission took over operation of the library. After Brown's firing, a group called "The Friends of Miss Brown" continued to seek ALA's help in publicizing the incident. ALA complied, but Berninghausen felt keenly the limitations under which the IFC labored; since the divisive loyalty controversy, the IFC had been limited to recommending action to the executive board and council. Berninghausen felt he could not even properly send a letter of protest to the Bartlesville mayor. The Oklahoma Library Association, which had failed to form an intellectual freedom committee when asked to do so two years earlier, hurriedly constituted a committee at ALA's request to investigate the case—but only its censorship aspects. Its report was presented to the ALA Council at the 1951 midwinter conference, and the council passed a resolution condemning Brown's firing—obviously too little too late (Robbins, 1996).

The Bartlesville episode exposed the weakness of the IFC and ALA's Library Bill of Rights—which at the time seemed merely a few words on paper incapable of supporting librarians in trouble. The improvements it motivated, however, were modest by any measure. The executive board removed limitations to the IFC's ability to protest violations of the Library Bill of Rights without coming to the board first. It gave the IFC no authority for additional independent action. Furthermore, Brown's firing did not move the IFC or the executive board to consider whether segregation of a library might be a violation of intellectual freedom principles; while librarians selected literature (especially for children) that encouraged "intergroup understanding" (Jenkins, 1995), they seemed unwilling to acknowledge, through statement or action, that segregation violated democratic principles that the Library Bill of Rights pledged libraries to uphold. Like the political intellectuals who believed that plu-
alist democracy would gradually embrace equal rights for minority groups, the ALA did not, as an association, act to hasten the day. ALA would not begin to deal with that issue until the next decade (Robbins, 1991).

But ALA could not escape dealing with challenges to libraries from super-patriotic groups like the American Legion, which claimed a national crusade to guard against subversion in libraries and schools. Two such challenges—in Peoria, Illinois, and Montclair, New Jersey—led to additions to the ALA’s intellectual freedom credo and indirectly spurred an effort to educate librarians concerning intellectual freedom issues.

The first of these challenges pitted Peoria librarian Xenophon Smith against Peoria newspaper editor Gomer Bath and the local American Legion. The American Legion protested the circulation of United Nations’ sponsored films concerning “brotherhood” on grounds they contained Soviet propaganda too subtle to be detected. Smith withdrew one film and restricted others to the library’s screening room; he supported his action with a statement that the Library Bill of Rights pertained only to books, not to films or other media. The IFC and ALA’s Audiovisual Board wanted to clarify the intention of the Library Bill of Rights to cover all information media, but the IFC did not want to risk revising the text and thus make it necessary for librarians, who had only recently won approval of the statement, to go back to their boards with a revised version. So, at the 1951 Midwinter meeting, Berninghausen proposed, and ALA Council adopted “with enthusiasm” (Berninghausen, personal communication, August 15, 1990; Berninghausen, 1953), a footnote to the 1948 Library Bill of Rights: “By official action of Council on 3 February 1951, the Library Bill of Rights shall be interpreted as applying to all materials and media of communication used or collected by libraries” (“Library Bill of Rights,” 1951, p. 755). Although Smith and his board used the footnote to support their decision to place the films back into circulation, they attached comments by viewers to the insides of the film cans. Even this move did not satisfy some Legionnaires or Bath, who battled the library for two more years.

In Montclair, New Jersey, the Sons of the American Revolution demanded not only that the library label and restrict circulation of all “Communist or subversive” literature, but also that it keep a roster of patrons who used it (“Resolution Passed,” 1950). Librarian Margery Quigley asked the IFC—now chaired by Rutherford Rogers with Berninghausen as executive secretary—for advice (Quigley, 1950). The IFC—and twenty additional librarians polled by Rogers—decided unanimously to formulate an anti-labeling statement for IFC adoption. Rogers hoped the statement would respond as well to earlier requests for advice from librarians wanting to know how to handle propaganda (Rogers, 1951).

In adopting the proposed Statement on Labeling in July 1951 (“Recommendations,” 1951, p. 242), ALA asserted that librarians had a
responsibility to oppose the establishment of criteria for “subversive” publications “in a democratic state.” Nor was it likely that any “sizable” group could agree on what should be designated as “subversive.” Furthermore, the statement said, libraries do not endorse ideas found in their collections. The statement called labeling “an attempt to prejudice the reader,” and thus “a censor’s tool.” Although it opposed communism, ALA asserted, it also opposed other groups trying to close “any path to knowledge” (“Labeling—A Report of the ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom,” 1951, p. 242).

The labeling statement elicited one response that illuminated the contradictions some librarians felt concerning their roles as selectors and the library’s role as “an institution to educate for democratic living.” Ralph Ulveling (1951), director of the Detroit Public Library and well-known writer, speaker, and ALA past president, asserted that, during an “ideological war” against communism in which propaganda is “second only to military strategy,” librarians’ “usual interpretation” of the Library Bill of Rights kept channels for enemy propaganda open and therefore was incompatible with his “obligation as an American citizen” (p. 1170). He recommended restricting “communist expressions of opinion or misleading propaganda” to the reference section where their use could be monitored, while the branches would receive for “general readers” only books chosen to help people “realize their best development and to carry out their obligations ably and well” (p. 1171).

ALA President Clarence Graham asked the IFC to publish before the 1952 midwinter meeting a response to Ulveling’s statement, which contradicted directly the Statement on Labeling by urging librarians to designate some books as subversive or propaganda. The IFC realized the danger of segregating or labeling materials as propaganda; this was a time, for example, when some groups deemed anything about the United Nations subversive. Some librarians could even find the Caldecott winner *Finders Keepers* suspect because, among other things, “the predominant colors in the book are red and yellow, the exact shades used in the Russian flag” and the bone “pictured on the title page might be a map of Korea” (Cotton & Arnold, 1952). But coming to consensus on a response was difficult; the practice of segregating materials was common, justified by finances or the need to provide professional guidance in the use of sensitive materials (Hawes, 1951; Turow, 1978). It was evidence of librarians’ awareness that book selection was, at least in part, a political process. As Oliver Garceau (1950) noted in *The Public Library in the Political Process*, librarians, who generally shared the dominant community values, exercised “constant vigilance” in selecting books. Not only did public librarians as a group tend to segregate potentially controversial materials in order to limit access to them, but they did so while insisting on “the stereotypes of democratic freedom of expression and diversity of opinion” (pp. 132-33).

It was not surprising, therefore, that a number of librarians sympathized with Ulveling’s position, which seemed to offer a solution that would hold
critics at bay. After years in which “every purchase was dictated by the reaction of Congress,” *Library Journal* editor Helen Wessells (1951) wrote to Ulveling that “a compromise has to be reached.” Even ALA President-Elect Robert B. Downs (1951) called the Statement on Labeling an ideal, while Ulveling’s statement was a “realistic . . . compromise.” Some agreed with Springfield, Massachusetts, librarian Hiller Wellman (1951) who said that, although placing “less desirable” books in reference “to diminish their use” did constitute a degree of censorship, “the important point is that this censorship be sound and sensible, and not swayed by outside pressure.” Others, like John E. Smith, newly appointed IFC member from California, protested. Smith said that growing suspicion of unorthodox opinions, the increasing number of censorship attempts, and punitive measures taken against those suspected of harboring “dangerous thoughts” presented a far greater menace than Communist propaganda. “And what is propaganda? . . . Whose statement that this or that idea is ‘subversive’ do we follow? . . . Where do we start and how do we stop, if we embark on this thing?” (Smith, 1951). William S. Dix (1951a), Princeton University librarian who succeeded Rogers as IFC chair during this interval, mused that censorship pressures must be extremely strong if a leader of Ulveling’s stature had embraced labeling. The IFC had reached a crossroads; its response to Ulveling’s challenge would indicate whether it would protect librarians’ book selection jurisdiction through labeling—a censor’s tool—or through defending the right of library patrons to decide for themselves what was appropriate to read.

The IFC came down squarely on the side of freedom of choice for library users. Its response to Ulveling asserted that any program designed to protect general readers from books expressing any attitude other than direct antagonism toward communism was “contrary to good library practice and untenable as a principle” (“Book Selection Principles,” 1951, p. 347). Democracy depended on the availability of many points of view on which citizens could base their opinions. It was not up to librarians to decide what was safe for people to read (p. 350).

Ulveling’s challenge and the IFC’s response grew out of librarians’ shifting understanding of who they were and their desire for professional autonomy. As guardians of cultural values, they had historically defended their autonomy by articulating their right to exclude or restrict access to materials, since they assumed they knew what reading material contributed to their patrons’ best personal development. As guardians of free access, however, they defended their autonomy by articulating their right to make available to their patrons all kinds of materials, even those deemed “subversive” by some groups. In the 1950s, as challenges to the democratic values of pluralism and free inquiry moved librarians to their defense—both against totalitarian communism and against domestic conformity—they moved slowly to embrace their new jurisdiction.¹

Leon Carnovsky (1950), of the University of Chicago’s Graduate Library School, noted how far librarians would have to move to complete the embrace. “I have never met a public librarian who approved of cen-
sorship or one who failed to practice it in some measure,” he remarked (p. 21). He faulted librarians for betraying the public library’s “nobler function” of “presenting...all points of view, however unpopular, even loathsome” (p. 25). His ringing denunciation of censorship reaffirmed the centrality of the defense of intellectual freedom to librarianship: “Censorship is an evil thing,” Carnovsky said. “In accepting it, in compromising, in ‘playing it safe,’ the librarian is false to the highest obligations of his profession. In resisting it, he retains his self-respect, he takes his stand with the great champions of free speech, and he reaffirms his faith in the dignity of man” (p. 32).

As Carnovsky lamented, many librarians did not understand defense of intellectual freedom as central to their professional jurisdiction. William Dix believed that the Ulveling controversy “clearly indicated” the need for a “continued program of indoctrination” concerning the Library Bill of Rights (Dix, 1951b). The IFC began that program with an intellectual freedom institute held just prior to the 1952 ALA New York conference. The institute was designed to help librarians clarify how they could “implement conscientiously the abstract provisions of the Library Bill of Rights” while avoiding “becoming the tool of the Communist conspiracy or of any other group which seeks to impose its own restrictive ideology upon the American people” (Dix, 1952). It was the first of three intellectual freedom preconferences held between 1952 and 1955 and only one aspect of the IFC’s job of socializing librarians to withstand censorship pressures.

In its socialization efforts, the IFC also used newsletters, journal articles, speeches by ALA presidents and other officers, bookmarks, broadsides, and bibliographies. While giving the IFC a small budget for an executive secretary, however, the ALA did not give the committee enough money to carry out its institutes, publish its Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, or investigate a single case of censorship on site. The IFC had to seek external funding from sources like the Field Foundation and the Fund for the Republic to support its program activity. While urging librarians to live their creed, the association neglected to back words with financial support.

In spite of ALA’s refusal to support its rhetoric with funds, by 1952 the IFC had established the Library Bill of Rights as a central article in the “library faith.” The profession’s acceptance of its code is illustrated by a birthday salute accorded the Library Bill of Rights in the June American Library Association Bulletin. The editor lauded the 1948 Library Bill of Rights in glowing terms. It was, he said, “as familiar as water and sunlight. Its principles were those of democracy and its words were born in the library profession.” Although some librarians “questioned the need for any such formal statement of fundamentals,” to librarians in and around places where “book labeling or even book burning has been threatened
and enacted," he continued, "the physical reality of the Library Bill of Rights has validated its existence and proven the fine temper of its steel" (Richardson, 1952).

Notwithstanding the virtues of the Library Bill of Rights—real or imaginary—in 1953, IFC Chairman William Dix and Executive Secretary Paul Bixler felt keenly the need not only to make the credo live among librarians but also to draw national attention to proliferating attacks on libraries. For example, in Washington, D.C., a congressman proposed labeling all subversive materials in the Library of Congress (Oboler, 1952). In Sapulpa, Oklahoma, an investigating committee burned several high school library books "because they just weren't good reading for teenage children" ("On Burning Books," 1952, p. 406). In Boston, Massachusetts, Boston Post publisher John Fox launched an ultimately unsuccessful attack on the Boston Public Library for carrying Pravda, Izvestia, and the pro-Soviet New World Review (Kipp, 1952). As a result of such attacks, few librarians felt safe. As one school library leader said, "every library . . . no matter how cautious its librarian, contains books expressing ideas which someone will consider subversive" (Martin, 1952, p. 854).

To counter these fears, Dix and Bixler had already begun planning for an off-the-record conference to formulate a broadly based and widely accepted statement on the importance of the freedom to read when Senator Joseph McCarthy began his attack on the overseas libraries of the State Department's International Information Administration (IIA). Following a series of highly publicized hearings, McCarthy sent investigators Roy Cohn and David Schine to ensure that IIA's European libraries had purged books by authors McCarthy disapproved. In reaction, the State Department issued a series of confusing and contradictory directives banning material meeting various criteria of controversiality, creating chaos and, as ALA saw it, threatening the integrity of libraries (Nerboso, 1954). These attacks added impetus to the IFC's collaboration with the American Book Publishers Council (ABPC) for May's Westchester Conference on the Freedom to Read.

The weekend conference gathered twenty-five librarians, publishers, and citizens "representing the public interest" to "give some guidance to librarians in defending their basic principles" and perhaps to "have some effect on public opinion" (Bixler, 1954, p. 8). The issues were "clearly drawn," Dix felt; an "aroused and determined opposition" had to make its voice heard soon or the country would experience an "era of book burning such as we have never seen before" (Dix, 1953a, p. 3). The group reached substantial agreement which a committee headed by IFC and ABPC member Dan Lacy subsequently developed into a statement for publication—"The Freedom to Read" (Dix, 1953b).

As events unfolded, ALA's endorsement of the Freedom to Read statement at the annual conference in San Francisco was perfectly timed to
gain maximum publicity. First, on June 14, 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower addressed Dartmouth College graduates. Appearing to speak off the cuff, he gave a stirring speech against library censorship: “Don’t join the book burners... Don’t be afraid to go in your library and read every book, any document as long as it does not offend [y]our own ideas of decency.” The nation could defeat communism, he said, only if citizens knew what it taught and why it had appeal. It could not defeat communism by concealing ideas critical of the United States, ideas that should be accessible through libraries. Denying access to contrary ideas, he said, was inimical to the American way (Eisenhower, 1953, p. 59).

Eisenhower’s speech set the stage for the Whittier Intellectual Freedom preconference entitled “Book Selection in Defense of Freedom.” In sessions dealing with science and pseudo-science, morality and obscenity, and politics and subversion, participants heard several nationally known speakers (Bixler, 1953; Mosher, 1954). Among them was Lester Asheim who, in his classic article, “Not Censorship but Selection” (1953, def.), defined the difference for librarians and dealt once again with librarians themselves as censors. They had been known, he said, “to defer to anticipated pressures, and to avoid facing issues by suppressing issue-making causes. In such cases, the rejection of a book is censorship, for the book has been judged—not on its own merits—but in terms of the librarian’s devotion to three square meals a day” (p. 67). He related librarians’ practice of selection to librarianship as a profession. A profession was dependent upon society’s willingness to grant autonomy to professionals in their area of expertise. The public was “willing to defer to the honest judgment of those in special fields whose knowledge, training, and special aptitude fit them to render these judgments,” provided the professional to whom “such authority” was delegated demonstrated “the virtues which are the basis of that trust” (p. 67). He concluded:

In the last analysis, this is what makes a profession: the earned confidence of those it serves. But that confidence must be earned, and it can be only if we remain true to the ideals for which our profession stands. In the profession of librarianship, these ideals are embodied, in part at least, in the special characteristics which distinguish selection from censorship. If we are to gain the esteem we seek for our profession, we must be willing to accept the difficult obligations which those ideals imply. (p. 67)

Coming in the midst of the overseas libraries controversy and opening less than a week after Eisenhower’s Dartmouth speech, the annual conference focused on intellectual freedom and gained for the library profession the esteem it desired. Each day at least one event highlighted librarians’ role as defenders of intellectual freedom. Downs’s report to the IFC denounced the “virulent disease” of McCarthyism and praised the IFC (Conference round-up, 1953, p. 1261). A letter of greeting from
Eisenhower (1953) lauded librarians as preservers of freedom of the mind (pp. 59-60). A resolution supported the overseas libraries. And most important, the IFC and the 3,300 librarians present “overwhelmingly by a shouting and enthusiastic vote” (Lacy, personal communication, February 19, 1993) adopted the Westchester Conference’s statement, The Freedom to Read (“Conference Round-Up,” 1953). And the “clear voice of the librarians and book publishers was heard from the west” (Nerboso, 1954, p. 22).

The statement enunciated seven basic propositions that placed the defense of the freedom to read squarely in the public interest—and echoed familiar strains of belief in the critical judgment of citizens (ALA and ABPC, 1953). First, it said that publishers and librarians have a responsibility to “make available the widest diversity of views and expressions,” including “unorthodox or unpopular” ones (p. 4). Second, librarians and publishers need not “endorse every idea or presentation” in the books they provide, nor should they “establish their own political, moral, or aesthetic views as the sole standard for determining what books should be published or circulated” (p. 5). Third, it is “contrary to the public interest” for a book’s acceptability to be judged “solely on the basis of the personal history or political affiliations of the author” (p. 5). Fourth, while obscenity laws “should be vigorously enforced,” extra-legal activities “to coerce the taste of others, to confine adults to the reading matter deemed suitable for adolescents, or to inhibit the efforts of writers to achieve artistic expression,” have no place in our society (p. 5). Fifth, labeling books or authors as “subversive or dangerous” is not in the public interest. Sixth, publishers and librarians have a responsibility “to contest encroachments” upon the freedom to read by those “seeking to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large” (p. 6). And finally, publishers and librarians should “give full meaning to the freedom to read by providing books that enrich the quality of thought and expression.” By so doing, they can demonstrate “that the answer to a bad book is a good one, the answer to a bad idea is a good one” (p. 6). They concluded with a ringing profession of faith:

> We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe, rather, that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours. (p. 7)

Accolades for The Freedom to Read came from across the country (Richardson, 1953). The New York Times called it one of “America’s outstanding state papers” and printed it in full (Dix, 1953c) as did the Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor, The Baltimore Sun, and The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot. The statement garnered editorial support in a dozen other major newspapers and several prominent magazines with unfavorable comment in only four (Bolte, 1953). Obviously, the IFC had met its
objective to alert a national audience to dangers to free inquiry and to librarians' role as its defenders. It had done so successfully in language steeped in the values of pluralist democracy.

The IFC worked toward its second objective for *The Freedom to Read*—helping librarians defend their principles—by distributing free reprints. Some had the statement incorporated into their book selection policies (Dix, 1953b; Greenaway, 1954). Others found strength in it. One librarian, for example, wrote that the manifesto was "the shining peak of all that has grown out of ALA since I have known it" ([Unknown], 1955). Another, Salina, Kansas, librarian, Jerome Cushman (1955), wrote of the exhilarating effect the conference had on the profession:

> There developed a solidarity of ranks within librarianship born of a sense of urgency and need which produced something new, at least in our immediate time. There developed a fighting profession, made up of dedicated people who were sure of their direction, certain that full information was the most certain way to preserve the democratic processes. More important, the librarian, without any specific political power of his own, accepted the challenge of twentieth century Know-Nothingism and played a leading role in calling to the attention of the American people some of the seemingly forgotten facts of our heritage. This gave him the opportunity to pass one of the acid tests of professionalism—acceptance of social and political responsibility, and in all good candor, there are some good and true reasons for us to have some pardonable pride in our profession. (p. 157)

Cushman linked the social responsibility of the profession to the defense of democratic values through the provision of "full information." The statement and the 1953 conference were a kind of mountaintop experience that created a sense of assertiveness, accomplishment, and solidarity among librarians.

But one lone letter writer suggested that, without a mechanism of support, the fight to provide that full information was "a farce" (Gregory, 1953). The San Antonio, Texas, Public Library probably would have welcomed such a mechanism when Myrtle Hance demanded that the library mark all books by allegedly communistic or subversive writers with a large red stamp (Halpenny, 1953). The Galion, Ohio, school board member fighting a plan to screen all fiction from the junior and senior high libraries may have appreciated such a support mechanism as well (Greenaway, 1954). Certainly the California librarians facing the Marin County housewife who told a grand jury that certain books had been placed in school libraries to "plant the seeds of Communism" in children's minds could have used some additional support (Moore, 1955, p. 226; Benneman, 1977). But the IFC had no money for this or any other program, a strange plight for such a celebrated committee.

Still, with foundation funds, the IFC conducted its third institute in 1955, focusing on selection policies of school and small public libraries.
It was in these libraries—frequently managed by librarians without a professional education and operating without book selection policies—that the Library Bill of Rights presented a most challenging conflict of interest between individual security and the profession's allegiance to intellectual freedom. The unanimous adoption by the ALA Council of the "School Library Bill of Rights" in 1955 did, however, signal progress ("1955 Conference," 1955).

But signals of progress in librarians' support of the Library Bill of Rights were few and far between in the remaining years of the decade. Perhaps tired of its front-line stance, perhaps resting on its laurels, or perhaps retreating into ambivalence (Harris, 1976, p. 284), ALA shifted its focus away from intellectual freedom and toward internal bureaucratic matters like the ALA management survey. Headline-grabbing stories involving intellectual freedom issues diminished, and those that appeared seemed less interesting to ALA. With McCarthy's death in 1957, the Cold War settled into a pattern, although tensions escalated periodically when foreign events threatened. Librarians paid more attention to the educational reform movement launched by Sputnik than they did to the bubbling Civil Rights movement. Allied with education, they hoped to garner support and credibility. Their journals contained little about the landmark Supreme Court cases changing the legal limits of obscenity. Librarians would, however, have noticed a shift in tenor: the "obscene" was overtaking the "subversive" as the target of censorship.

The IFC also shifted in tenor. With Robert Downs as chair, it undertook the Liberty and Justice Book Awards that were financed by the Fund for the Republic. In 1957 and 1958, the IFC managed the project to give cash awards to the author and publisher of the book that made the most "distinguished contributions to the American tradition of liberty and justice" in each of three categories: contemporary problems and affairs, biography and history, and imaginative literature (Dunlap, 1956; "ALALiberty and Justice Book Awards," 1956, p. 693). The IFC seemed suddenly unaware of either challenges to materials or the problems of socialization into the librarians' credo of freedom. The 1953 Freedom to Read statement appeared to have taken care of everything.

A study conducted in California and published in 1959 after many delays revealed how wrong that assumption was. Marjorie Fiske's Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California was jointly sponsored by the California Library Association and the University of California-Berkeley Library School. Both wanted to know if fear of censorship was causing librarians to modify their book selection practices—i.e., to practice self-censorship. The study's results were discouraging. Fiske concluded that, in spite of expressing "unequivocal freedom-to-read convictions," a majority of librarians reported deciding not to buy a particular book because of its controversiality, and nearly one-fifth
habitually avoided buying any controversial material (Fiske, 1959, pp. 64-65). While professionally educated librarians were more likely to uphold intellectual freedom principles, most librarians did not believe they were adequately prepared to deal with selection and censorship issues. Furthermore, librarians who were active in professional associations were more likely to rationalize their compromising principles in the process of book selection (pp. 67, 68). Fiske also found little faith among California librarians that the profession would back them if they needed it, even though they felt better when library leaders took “a strong and open stand on controversial issues” (p. 105). The Fiske Report was not welcome news. “What can we have to say to ourselves?” Library Journal responded. “What can we say to those we’ve tried to tell about the ‘Fortress of Liberty’?” (“Censorship,” 1959, p. 50).

The twenty-five or so reviews of the Fiske Report tried to answer the question. Some pointed to new emphases on intellectual freedom principles in library education (Asheim, 1960). Some reminded readers that a “miasma of fear” had pervaded California in the 1950s. Leon Carnovsky (1960) wrote that The Library Bill of Rights and other statements were “slender reeds” for a librarian “when his professional existence is imperiled” (pp. 156-57). One reviewer, however, questioned Fiske’s statements that California librarians’ fears were unfounded (Sabsay, 1959). He questioned as well her assertion that librarians should follow a “quality” approach to book selection while she simultaneously accused them of preventive self-censorship if they failed to select a book like Peyton Place on the grounds of its poor quality. Both demand and quality belonged in a book selection policy, he said (p. 222). Librarians’ social role as “guardians of knowledge and freedom of intellect” was so important to democracy and its enemies “so all-pervasive” that it was imperative for librarians to “attain professional standards of conduct and integrity” (pp. 222-23). The Lowenthal study pointed to the need for professional organizations to upgrade librarians’ status, the reviewer said, and to the importance of improving professional education to enhance the profession and its image (p. 223). He urged librarians to respond to the Fiske Report.

Another publishing event, Robert Downs’s (1960) The First Freedom: Liberty and Justice in the World of Books and Reading, served as the most prominent response to the Fiske Report. The culmination of the Liberty and Justice Book Awards, Downs’s collection of “the most notable writings in the field of censorship and intellectual freedom over approximately the past half century” was “designed to support and defend” freedom of expression and the freedom to read (p. xii). The library press hailed it with unadulterated fervor. One reviewer called it “essential” (McNeal, 1960); another urged librarians to read the book as they would the Bible, an essay a day, over and over for a “constant awareness” of the intellectual freedom principles, “and an ever fresh fund of argument and pertinent phrases with which to stem and deter the tendencies toward censorship found daily within and without every library” (Merritt, 1960, p. 2922).
The very juxtaposition of these two publishing events, Fiske's *Book Selection and Censorship* and Downs's *The First Freedom*, epitomized the library profession's degree of acceptance of, and adherence to, the Library Bill of Rights. The Fiske report emphasized librarians' private uncertainty about their autonomy in matters of book selection and their ambivalence about their role as defenders of free access to information. Downs's *The First Freedom*, on the other hand, exemplified the celebrated public role that the American Library Association had achieved in the defense of intellectual freedom. Ironically, while it celebrated the ALA's public role as defender of the "first freedom," it marked the culmination of several years of inactivity in that defense, reflecting in its own way a kind of retreat from action.

It also reflected American librarianship's uncritical embrace of both pluralist democratic ideology, and of its "library faith." Although it was published in 1960, six years after *Brown v. Board of Education* had eliminated legal justification for "separate but equal" public facilities, it evinces no evidence of the questioning begun—albeit quietly—within ALA about the intellectual freedom dimensions of segregation. *First Freedom* includes a section on censorship in Ireland but makes no mention of censoring titles in states adhering to Jim Crow laws. The book's final section is unrelentingly optimistic, including titles like "Why I Like America" and "Freedom of Inquiry Is for Hopeful People," but never mentions the absence of other voices (people of color and lesbigays, for example) in America's channels of communication. *First Freedom* extols the "free marketplace of ideas" while failing to acknowledge that the marketplace was anything but free.

More than any other in this collection, a selection by Archibald MacLeish (1960) in the section entitled "The Librarians Take a Stand" seems to capture the discourse of the decade as librarians defined their social role and their code of freedom. In "The Tower That Will Not Yield," MacLeish (1960) described the library as a collection marked by "disinterested completeness within the limits of practicable relevance" (p. 324). Containing all kinds of ideas, it could be seen as dangerous, MacLeish said. It is, however, founded on the belief in the freedom of the human mind, a freedom guaranteed by our fundamental law. To censor or suppress books is "to question the basic assumption of all self-government which is the assumption that the people are capable . . . of examining the evidence for themselves and making up their own minds" (p. 326). Thus censorship strikes at the heart of democracy, and libraries, which oppose censorship, have become "strong points and pill boxes" where "unsung librarians . . . have held an exposed and vulnerable front" (p. 327) through the dangerous McCarthy years. Referring, as did Berelson many years before, to the "neutrality" or "objectivity" of librarians, MacLeish asserted that it was admirable in a journalist reporting the news or a judge deciding a case, but it "is anything but admirable when there is a cause to
defend or a battle to be fought” (p. 329). No librarian could be objective about free inquiry and still be “the champion of a cause,” the cause of “the inquiring mind by which man has come to be” (p. 329).

The discourse of battle which permeates MacLeish’s essay is one that resonates throughout librarianship, especially during the 1950s. The library was the “arsenal of democracy”; books were “weapons.” There is no doubt that librarians saw themselves as embattled champions of the cause of pluralist democracy and free inquiry. There is no doubt that aligning librarianship with the values of pluralist democracy served to give librarians a role they deemed socially significant. Thus Baldwin is correct in asserting that the Library Bill of Rights embodies both “deeply felt notions of intellectual freedom” and librarians’ more “parochial interests” in defending their professional jurisdiction of book selection. It is also true that librarians saw these two aspects of the Library Bill of Rights as inextricably intertwined; they had to retain their freedom of book selection in order to defend library users’ freedom of inquiry.

There is also no doubt that some librarians, for whatever reasons, displayed ambivalence—or perhaps even antagonism—toward the values embodied in the Library Bill of Rights. Baldwin (see his article in this issue of Library Trends), like Fiske, reminds us that librarians sometimes practice self-censorship. Librarians, in addition, were remarkably uncritical about their own definitions of democracy and intellectual freedom, accepting too readily the status quo. Fighting ideologies both foreign and domestic, they forgot to scrutinize their own ideology.

But there is ample evidence that in their selection of books, their special area of expertise, many librarians included—indeed, emphasized—the very topics that were most likely to bring them undesired attention, topics like the United Nations and race relations. In addition, the Intellectual Freedom Committees of 1948-1960 brought librarians prominence as defenders of intellectual freedom when such a stance was not without risks. The IFC recognized the vulnerability of librarians on the front line and worked to arm them with appropriate selection policies and professional solidarity. And they recognized the inter-relationship between librarians’ professional jurisdiction in book selection and their defense of the freedom to read. If some librarians refused the mantle of “Champion of a Cause” when assuming it might be dangerous, they showed a reticence shared by other professions as well. During the 1950s, librarians squarely aligned themselves with the ideology of pluralist democracy, and—in spite of claiming “objectivity” to enhance their professional standing and protect their jurisdiction—became “Champions of the Cause” of intellectual freedom.

NOTES

1 See Evelyn Geller’s Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries (1984) for a full discussion of the relationship between librarians as censors and their struggle for professional autonomy. As Allan Pratt points out in his Preface to Charles Busha’s Freedom versus Suppres-
sion and Censorship (1972, pp. 11-12), librarians’ faith that reading can affect behavior in positive ways leads inevitably to a belief that it can also affect behavior in negative ways. In some instances—especially when librarians exhibit authoritarian personalities (as Busha’s research demonstrated)—that belief in books has led to censorship.

According to Kenneth Kister (1970), library schools paid scant attention to intellectual freedom in their curricula in the 1950s.

REFERENCES


Resolution passed by the Montclair Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution. (1950).


