
Today's Economic and Political Climate and What It Means for Libraries

Major R. Owens

Let me begin by thanking you for suggesting such a profound and beautifully broad topic for my speech today. A discourse on "Today's Economic and Political Climate and What It Means for Libraries" offers me an all too rare opportunity to burst forth with ideas and pent-up theories and forecasts which nobody else has been willing to entertain. Most groups want specific statements on very narrowly defined topics. But I rejoice in the latitude you have allowed me. What is seldom realized is that being one of four hundred thirty-five congressmen can be a very frustrating experience. One does not often get a chance to

speak. And when the opportunity to speak does come it is usually limited to one minute or five minutes.

It is an honor to have the opportunity this morning to share ideas without a five minute time limit with such a distinguished and critical crowd. I know it's early and therefore I feel doubly honored that so many of you are here. As I stand here my mind is racing with facts that are relevant for a discussion of the economic and political climate. In this age of information where you are bombarded with data from all sides, I sometimes experience a personal information explosion in my own head. There is sometimes an information glut, an information flood which threatens to drown me. It is easy to understand why so many people feel so constantly overwhelmed in this age of information. Too much data, too many facts can foster confusion; too much knowledge and information—for some people—creates chaos.

One great advantage of being a librarian is that we view the world with an encyclopedic orientation. We are satisfied to know just a little bit about everything as long as we know where to find more information if we need it. Librarians seldom become overwhelmed no matter how many fragments of information there are. We remain confident that everything can be fitted into Dewey or LC.

It would be useful for us to focus first on today's political climate. And beyond the present climate we also want to forecast the future. In other words, today's political climate is a barometer of the political trends we can expect for the next five to ten years. Of course the term "political" covers a multitude of developments, events, postures, strategies, etc. and these happenings are taking place in many arenas—local, national, hemispheric, international, outer space, etc. We could quickly go mad trying to contemplate all of this at once.

To facilitate understanding, let's simplify matters and focus on one key political situation, one set of dominoes in a casino filled with domino games. Let's focus on the basic question of



Speech delivered by Congressman Major R. Owens at the biennial conference of the North Carolina Library Association, October 4, 1985, at the breakfast sponsored by the Round Table on Ethnic Minority Concerns and the Round Table on the Status of Women in Librarianship.

war and peace. This is a critical question. One third of the U.S. budget is presently being spent on military matters at a time when we are not at war. Tremendous cutbacks have taken place in categories such as aid to education and aid to libraries in order to finance a doubling of our military budget. But what would happen if suddenly or even gradually the security of our country was defined another way? What would happen if the prospects for a hot war, a global nuclear war, were greatly diminished? What would happen if the major decision-makers of this country were to squarely face the realization that, yes, we are in a struggle but it is going to be a long protracted peaceful struggle and not a hot, world devastating nuclear conflagration?

I submit to you that the most important political development, the key trend-setting political development at this moment, is the closing of the door of nuclear war as a possible option in the struggle between communism and capitalism. Washington jargon repeatedly uses the term window. You have heard of windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability. I want to expand on the metaphor and say that what is now about to happen is too big for a window. Not the window, but I am saying the door of possible global warfare is closing. The two great adversaries—Russia and the USA—are presently moving in ways which are slowly sliding that dangerous door shut.

Every day that goes by with negotiations in Geneva; each pronouncement in this propaganda contest in preparation for the big summit; and of course, the summit itself; each day that goes by with these unfolding developments which often seem merely ceremonial and sometimes seem to be completely phony; each day is buying time for the continuing emergence of the realization on both sides that global nuclear war would be suicide. Scientists on both sides have already agreed on a whole list of possible consequences of nuclear war including the long nuclear winter where the sun will be shut out and all human life will face starvation or freeze to death.

Even the most bellicose generals are beginning to admit that the horrors of a global nuclear confrontation are too great to be risked. We can not take the chance of losing everything in an attempt to destroy each other. That door is closing. It is closing slowly but I am confident that the door of global nuclear war as a possibility will be tightly shut before we enter the nineties.

But what will be the implication for libraries? What will this mean for librarians? First, what will this central and pivotal political development mean for other political developments? How will this international and global adjustment impact on national and local politics? How will it affect the deficit? What will be the impact on tax reform? What will be the impact on the economy? Where will librarians be needed and what will be



1983-85 NCLA Executive Board: (standing) Karen Perry, Judith Sutton, Ben Speller, Eunice Drum, Stuart Basefsky, Mertys Bell, Leland Park, Pauline Myrick, Rebecca Ballentine, Larry Barr, Shirley McLaughlin; (kneeling) Bobbie Williams, Mary Avery, Patsy Hansel, Vivian Beech, Jerry Thrasher, Ariel Stephens.

the economic worth of librarians?

Before we can answer these questions we must first be clear on one vital point. I said that the door of possible *nuclear global conflict*—the door to the hot war—will be closed. But I also stated that the struggle between the two dominant politico-economic systems will continue. An ongoing, long-term conflict similar to the struggle between ancient Athens and ancient Sparta will now intensify. But it will be a peaceful struggle. What does it mean to move from a military struggle preoccupied with missiles and silos to a more intense peaceful struggle?

In 1985, and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, digging in for a long-term peaceful struggle means that brain-power and all things related to the intellectual processes achieve a premium status. Not merely the brain-power needed to design missiles and star-wars satellites, but right across the board: all knowledge and information about all human endeavors will be needed. In all the spheres beyond the military we will need a highly educated populace. At every level of activity we will need training for excellence.

In a world at peace there will be maximum commercial competition. Global buying and selling; free trade versus protectionism; the balance

of payments; the flight of American jobs to cheaper labor pools; lack of knowledge of the culture of foreign markets; inadequate knowledge of foreign language; these and similar problems must be confronted in the global commercial competition. Due to an absence of knowledge in the past, Americans have always entered foreign arenas with as many handicaps as advantages. We have always expended more resources than we should have to achieve less than we should have.

In 1982, immediately after I was elected to Congress, I was invited to attend a seminar at Harvard where the freshmen congressmen would be taught how to be good congressmen. One expert after another repeatedly ended with the same conclusion. In Vietnam and Southeast Asia; in Central and South America, in the Middle East; wherever the U.S. had been drawn into military or peaceful interaction with a non-European country or region, we had experienced great failures due to a lack of knowledge of the language, history, culture, basic mores and traditions of the area. And furthermore, when efforts were made to pull back and more systematically study the history, politics and culture of an area where we were engaged, there was an absence of books and other materials to facilitate these crash study



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efforts. In America there were no significant collections of materials on Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Chile, etc.

Collections as comprehensive as possible, translated and or in the native language: collections about all of the countries of the world are needed by a great nation. Take it for granted that sooner or later we will be engaged in some enterprise in each country on this earth. Whether we are selling cosmetics in Canada or raincoats in Brazil; tractors in Nigeria or cameras in Indonesia; whether we are making consulting contracts with Kenya or negotiating scholarships for South African blacks; regardless of the types of political, cultural or commercial intercourse, we will need collections which provide the necessary background knowledge and information.

Budget decision-makers continue to assign low priority to all types of libraries ... Neanderthal thinking about libraries is still in command.

Among our friends in the capitalist, free world the need for understanding in order to compete with each other is equaled only by the need for understanding in order to cooperate with each other. The fact that little Japan seems now to be taking everything from everybody is making everybody angry with the Japanese. The balance of trade between Japan and the U.S. is fifty billion dollars in Japan's favor. The balance of trade between Japan and the rest of the world is thirty billion dollars in Japan's favor. A crude and not so funny joke I have heard several times in Washington goes as follows: "If we don't learn to sell more of our products to the Japanese soon, we'll have to declare war again to prevent them from taking over the American economy."

To avoid stupid confrontations among friends; to maintain world economic order among the countries of the free world is a challenge which will require the mobilization of a highly trained American citizenry. It is obvious that the overdeveloped economies such as the U.S. and Japan will soon not have anything to sell which the other does not already have. The underdeveloped countries of the world constitute the market for the future. But before we can trade the natural resources of Africa for the manufactured products of the U.S.A. we must help Africans to

develop the industries which extract those resources from the African soil. This is a task which cannot only be done best by black American engineers and technicians, but black teachers and black librarians are needed to carry out a parallel educational and social aid program in Africa.

I have chosen this example because aid to historically black colleges is presently under attack in Washington. The point I am making is that in this coming global peaceful struggle for the political allegiance of people in all parts of the world where we are in a struggle for maximum trade and economic arrangements we will need all of the educated talent we can get. And particularly where there is some factor which involves a special affinity or identity with other people, we should take advantage of that factor. When the Washington decision makers and budget-makers fully awake to the implication of the meaning of the long-term peaceful struggle, they will not be attacking special aid to black institutions. Instead, they will be encouraging more aid of all kinds to get more black graduates for assignments in many parts of the world.

In addition to the attack on aid to black colleges, aid to libraries is also under attack in Washington. This attack demonstrates an even greater ignorance of the implications of the emerging long-term struggle in the commercial arena with our free world trade rivals and in the ideological arena with the Soviet Union. The struggle will require brain-power. The struggle will require unlimited amounts of knowledge and information. The struggle will require a population trained to make use of knowledge and information.

Systems for handling information will be needed as never before. An almost infinite number of collections and databases must be established. In every area of significant activity systems for storing information; systems for disseminating, targeting information; systems which librarians are best able to handle will be needed. Of course, you and I know that these needs are here already. There are massive library and information needs which are not being met at every level and in all types of libraries. Budget decision-makers continue to assign low priority to all types of libraries. This is the reality at this moment. Neanderthal thinking about libraries is still in command. Unfortunately the news from Washington this year is not good news. The president again placed zero in the budget for all library programs and congress was forced to wage an uphill fight to maintain the status quo. Although nearly two months have passed since the budget

agreement was finalized by the House and the Senate, there is still no clear statement showing what "status quo" means for Fiscal Year 1986. For example, last year, the budgeted amount for LSCA was 125 million dollars. The estimated expenditure for LSCA, however, was only 86.9 million dollars. The question is: Will the fiscal 1986 budget be set at this lower level? And a larger question, of course, relates to the fact that such a large percentage of the 1985 funds were not spent. Surely the money was needed throughout the country. What kind of bureaucratic sabotage did the administration engage in to prevent the expenditure of authorized and budgeted funds?

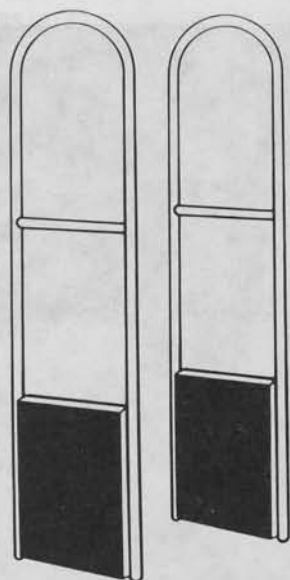
In the area of higher education we think the budget heading is clearer. College library resources will move from zero to 12.5 million. Library careers will move from 900,000 dollars to 5 million dollars. Research library resources will move from 6 million to 12.5 million dollars. None of these figures relate to the enormous needs of the library community. All of these allocations use 1981 as the starting point and that was the year of the dramatic cutbacks in human service programs. As you can see then, the only good news from Washington is that we prevented the zero funding disaster recommended by the administration.

But as the door is closed to the possibility of nuclear war and the realization fully dawns that we are involved in a long-term struggle where the winners will be those who accumulate and apply the most brain-power, this Neanderthal thinking will be forced to give way to a new recognition of the importance of the entire education infrastructure of America. And, more specifically, the pivotal role of libraries within the education infrastructure will have to be recognized.

As the importance of every vehicle for education and training is understood more, the value of the library and information services which we have long taken for granted will be discovered by important policy makers. We can expect that our assertion that libraries are the most cost effective educational units will be validated. The fact that libraries have the lowest service cost per capita and the fact that they serve citizens from preschool to old age will be more appreciated.

The following are a few of the broader implications for libraries of these emerging political and economic developments:

I. A new perception of libraries and librarians will raise the level of performance expectations and generate more and newer demands on the library and information profession. To respond



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systematically and creatively to this breakthrough in perception we first of all need a cadre of scholars, intellectuals and philosophers. The new awareness of the library will come in embryonic forms and therefore our response must be shaped by the best minds we can muster. When our government decides to stop building missiles and aircraft carriers and to start funding new library systems, networks, collections and information retrieval systems on a national scale, who will be qualified to conceive and implement these ideal constructs? We are going to need more sound theories followed by more concrete planning. We're going to need more people who know how to package reforms, adapt to changing demands and oversee new approaches. More professors of Library Science are needed and more brilliant students are needed to guarantee the existence of a braintrust for the immediate and the long-term future.

II. At the other extreme we need children's and school librarians with a new orientation.

III. We need to explore the concept of the public library as a family learning center with a new kind of librarian who could be called a family learning counselor.

IV. At the corporate level we are going to need more database administrators, librarians who are well versed in utilization of information in every format and willing to accept the challenge of the information explosion. Computers and electronic retrieval systems are at the core of this rapidly emerging expansion of special librarianship.

V. To perform the same kind of critical library and information tasks for businesses and corporations too small to maintain in-house "database administrators" there will be a demand for more library and information service entrepreneurs. The know-how of library science is a service that one will be able to sell at higher and higher prices.

VI. To meet the needs of both the private sector and the government for more information about foreign friends and enemies, there will be more overseas assignments for librarians, especially those who have a knowledge of foreign languages.

What I am saying is that the implications of today's economic and political climate reveal to me a dynamic future for the library profession. The long-term survival of America, the national security of our country, is dependent on a new



The Public Library Section's PR contest featured winning displays and printed pieces.

awakening. And when our decision-makers are fully aroused from their long Neanderthal sleep they will understand the need to place librarians on the front-lines in the continuing peaceful struggle for commercial and ideological survival.

Our immediate mission is to make certain that these decision-makers, the people who allocate the budget: our mission is to make certain that they are aroused sooner instead of later. Our duty is to rush their reasoning processes and make them understand that one door is closing but many new doors of challenge are opening. We must insist that America can remain *America, the beautiful*, only if it becomes *America, the informed*. We must insist that libraries are needed to move America beyond basic literacy to information literacy and computer literacy and technological literacy and literacy in international cultures.

Librarians must step forward to provide a vital share of the leadership needed to guarantee an informed America. In these closing years of the twentieth century and at the dawn of the twenty-first century, libraries are definitely not a low-energy activity. As the peaceful struggle gathers momentum on all fronts, libraries are not superfluous, ornamental or subsidiary in the intellectual processes which are the ultimate forces which will shape our world.

What today's economic and political climate means to librarians is a new opportunity to assert ourselves: one more opportunity to offer the kind of guidance and direction that only librarians are qualified to give. Other professionals may be awed, confused, overwhelmed by the knowledge and information explosion. But librarians peer into that seeming chaos of words, articles, books, broadcasts, videotapes, microfilms, microfiches, recordings, pamphlets, films, manuscripts, and electronic databases and we dare to shape order out of that chaos. Using knowledge and information to make peace will not be a dull or difficult task for librarians. Rejoice at the closing of the doorway to violence. Through all the new doors of intellectual challenge librarians are well prepared to walk without fear or hesitation. This age of information is ours.



North Carolina Central University has announced the appointment of Dr. Benjamin F. Speller, Jr., to the position of Dean of the School of Library and Information Science. Speller had served as Acting Dean of the School since 1983, when he succeeded the late Annette Lewis Phinazee.

Dr. Speller received his Ph.D. degree in Library Science from Indiana University in 1973. He also received his M.A.T. in Library Science from Indiana and his A.B. in History from North Carolina Central University.

Under Dr. Speller's tenure as Acting Dean, the School has changed its name from the School of Library Science to the School of Library and Information Science, has implemented a specialization in information management, has received a grant to study the feasibility of a Masters degree in Information Science, and has received a grant to establish an Office for Library Staff Development and Continuing Education and a Continuing Education Microcomputer Laboratory.

A member of national, regional, state, and local professional organizations, Dr. Speller was recently elected a director of the North Carolina Library Association. In addition, he serves as Chair of the Library Education Section of the Southeastern Library Association and as Chair of the Resources and Technical Services Section of the North Carolina Library Association.

Dr. Speller is also the author of a number of journal articles and monographs in the library field.

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