

THE LIBRARY—1940

*A statement of policy adopted by the Council of the
American Library Association, December 29, 1939*

THE social and intellectual unrest growing out of the present world situation may lead to confusion and hopelessness; or it may lead to something of a renaissance of critical inquiry and constructive thinking. Whether the result will be the one or the other will depend in no small measure on the ability of libraries and other agencies of enlightenment to supply the facts and materials needed by people for answering their questions.

Democracy may or may not be at stake, but it cannot now be taken for granted. An unusual opportunity exists to increase understanding of what democracy is in its political, economic, and cultural aspects, and how it can be perfected. Because some knowledge of the governmental systems with which it is or may be in competition is essential to such understanding, reading should be encouraged and facilitated not only on democracy, but on other ideologies. Propaganda should not so much be feared and avoided as confronted with evidence and informed interpretation.

The essential internationalism of intellectual materials should lead every librarian and library trustee to assist in maintaining respect for the cultural achievements of all peoples, and to advocate continuing cultural relations with all nations, in spite of difficulties.

The war, the peace to follow, disarmament, the many proposals for continental or world union, our own governmental policies—these and scores of other war-time subjects need public consideration and discussion in the light of factual materials which libraries can best provide. So also do our domestic problems, the prompt solution of which may perhaps assure the continuation of democracy.

The present situation calls for a positive program of stimulation and leadership. Libraries have an opportunity to make possible the reading of thought-provoking books on socially significant questions; they have an obligation to make it difficult for people to escape the influence of such books. Librarians do not tell people what to think; they do give their readers, in books, the facts and ideas which are the food of thought. A generous provision of books and services on all aspects of current problems and their historical antecedents is the first obligation of the library in times like these.

The library cannot work alone, but must work with all other agencies concerned with education and the diffusion of ideas. Schools, colleges, debating clubs, forums, organized groups of many kinds—all will need to an unusual degree the materials and services of the library in fields related to society's present problems. The library must not fail them.

A vigorous emphasis on issues which are of importance to citizens can be used to strengthen the library's grip on its long-time objectives. Reading and study may be vitalized by being related to events and ideas which are stirring men's minds at the moment; the diffusion of knowledge was never more important to the welfare of mankind.

When, as now, it becomes necessary to mobilize all educational and cultural resources for the preservation and improvement of democracy in America, it must be deplored that millions of Americans do not have library service. Until such service is everywhere available, a first objective of the American Library Association must be the extension and betterment of libraries with local, state, or provincial, and national support.

Intellectual freedom is never permanently assured. It is especially endangered by war. The right of the citizen to find in his library the best material on all sides of controversial public questions must be protected at any cost.

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