

Remarks of
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U.S. Commissioner of Education
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Mr. Chairman, I'm delighted to participate in this important convocation. Its very clear that libraries and the State of Maine belong together.

Last year six million books were borrowed by the people of Maine, a number topped only by the State of New York. In Bangor, the average is 14 books per person per year. Bookmobile service is provided for 272 rural communities through 46 small libraries.

You have helped fulfill the dream of this democracy of making books available to all, and in so doing you have affirmed the dignity of man.

Very often I am asked to define the "basic skills" in education. My response is quick and unequivocal. I'm convinced the mastery of language is the "basic of the basics." Our use of language is what separates us from all other forms of life.

All we know, all we fear, all we hope are created and conveyed through symbols.

And if a child does not master language, he or she is "tragically" cut off from the benefits of life. But language is essential -- not just for the individual but for society as well. And I'm convinced the test of the civility of any culture is the value it assigns to language.

It is no accident that throughout human history every great society has also had great libraries where its great literature could be preserved and cherished. In the excavations at Nineva in 1850, tablets of clay were found covered with cunieform characters.

It is estimated that this great Assyrian city had a library of 10,000 separate works and documents. The tablets were methodically arranged and catalogued.

In 1300 B.C. in Egypt, Ramses II had a very famous library and when Persia invaded Egypt the Persians carried many books away. It was a precious bounty. In Greece, Plato was a book collector. And Aristotle bequeathed his library to his disciple, Theophrastus. And the library of Alexandria was the most celebrated in the ancient world with an estimated 400,000 to 700,000 volumes. The Romans brought libraries from Persia and Athens as spoils of the wars. And in the 4th Century, A.D., there were 28 public libraries in Rome.

It is no accident that with the decline of civilization during the middle ages there was a decline of books as well. Libraries and books were destroyed in barbaric fashion, and remote and isolated Irish monasteries protected books as "treasured jewels" and preserved a golden thread of memory to the past.

The point is that the quality of any civilization can be measured by the quality of its language and the quality of its love for books.

In America, our first libraries were owned privately by individuals, usually the religious leaders or the intellectuals. William Brewster, of Plymouth, had a library; Governor Winthrop, of Connecticut, had a library; Cotton Mather, of Boston, had a library; and John Harvard, of Cambridge, was able to start Harvard College primarily because of his library of 20,000 volumes.

But America had a larger dream. Books were not only for the rich. This Nation was built on the brash assumption that education and learning should be available to all -- not just the privileged few.

In 1822 James Madison captured the spirit of this new democracy when he said that a "popular" government without "popular" information, or the means of acquiring it, is but

a prologue to a farce or tragedy. From the very first, this Nation was convinced that democracy and education were inextricably interlocked. And that books should be available not just for the wealthy but for the poor as well.

For 200 years we worked to build a network of public schools and public libraries to fulfill this dream of universal learning.

In 1731 Benjamin Franklin helped organize the Library Company of Philadelphia, which became the "mother" of all North American "subscription" libraries. Each shareholder purchased books to be used for "commonal" purposes.

In 1803 a New England bookseller donated a collection of books to be used by the children in his hometown of Salisbury, Connecticut. The town's "selectmen" were authorized to use tax money to enlarge the collection. Thus, the first public library began. In 1835, the first "convention of libraries" was held in New York. Henry Barnard, a Connecticut Superintendent, became the first U.S. Commissioner of Education.

In 1876 the first meeting of the American Library Association was held. That same year the U.S. Commissioner of Education donated the postage stamps to send out invitations for a second meeting. By 1928 every state except Delaware had passed a law authorizing public libraries.

Very recently the Federal Government has become a partner in this dramatic process. From 1957-1979, \$720 million in Federal funds went to public libraries. In 1956, 88 million people had access to the public libraries. In 1977 it had risen to 201 million people. Today, there are some 8,300 public libraries and 90,000 service outlets.

The Federal Government has helped school libraries as well. From 1966 to 1979, 150 million books were purchased, 10,000 books for every one of the 16,000 school districts -- or 1 out of every 3 books. There is an outstanding School Library Program in the Waterville (Maine) Senior High School, a beneficiary of a \$275,000 Federal grant. The library has become a model center as a result of its special atmosphere, the teacher cooperation, and the creative use of audio facilities.

After the spread of the "subscription libraries" 200 years ago, Ben Franklin said, the libraries "have improved the general conversations" of Americans, and made common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries.

The point is that the library has always been an essential institution in this great democracy.

But this evening I have a more somber note to strike. The harsh fact is that -- with all of our enlightenment -- in recent years, library budgets have been cut, extension services have been reduced, lights are now turned out in the evenings and on weekends. And in some communities a new kind of dark age has begun.

Curiously, I believe language and the printed page is being threatened by something called TV. In 1938, E.B. White watched TV for the first time, and wrote:

"I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky."

Forty years have passed, and television has become, at once, both an unbearable disturbance and a soaring radiance in the sky.

Today, for better or for worse, Archie Bunker is better known than Silas Marner. Fellini is more compelling than Faulkner. The 6 o'clock news is more influential than a historical novel. We have created a culture in which messages are more fleeting and less valued, and where our conclusions are shaped more by passing impressions than by profound insights.

Clearly, television will not and should not go away. But I'm convinced the time has come to reaffirm the essentialness of the printed page and to promote libraries as the anchor points of civility in a free society.

We must have a library in every community to keep our heritage intact. Without a library, we would be forced to see our world through the fleeting images of the present, and we would be forced to read only the most recent books in print.

The point is that if our language and our literature is limited to TV or to books in print we will be intellectually impoverished and locked in by commercialism and passing fads. We must retain quality libraries as places where perspective is maintained, where writing of the present is woven into the wisdom of the ages -- a seamless web of insights and ideas.

Just as every community needs its supply of water, supply of energy, and supply of food -- so it needs its supply of wisdom and perspective to keep it informed and free.

In October 1933, when "book-burning orgies" were sweeping the university towns of Germany, Professor Howard Mumford Jones said in a speech before the American Library Association:

"The charter of our freedom is that the people shall have the right to receive and freely to discuss ideas regarding themselves and the state to which they belong:

And the frail shield which we have to interpose--between this hard-won political platitude and the storm of absolutism which is sweeping the world--is the thin and perishable leaf of the printed book."

We must also have a library in every town and village to provide a place for lifelong education. The library is just such an institution. It is an open school for every person, who can go and select his or her own course of study.

In Moby Dick, Ishmael says of himself, "I have an everlasting itch for things remote." A civilized society must see to it that all citizens continue to scratch the everlasting itch.

Yogi Berra, that American philosopher, said you can do a lot of observing by just watching. Well, you can do a lot of learning by just reading, and the public library is the school for continuing education for every person.

Finally we must have a public library in every community to add enjoyment to our lives. Libraries are not just books; they are community contacts for films, dance, crafts, story telling, and the arts.

They are places where our intellectual and aesthetic joys are fulfilled. In his poem, The People Yes, Carl Sandburg wrote:

Once having marched
Over the margins of animal necessity
Over the grim line of sheer subsistence
Then man came
To the deeper rituals of his bones
To the time for thinking things over
 To the dance, the song, the story
Or to the hours given to dreaming
Once having so marched.

During the long years of recorded history, civilization has marched over the grim line of sheer subsistence. This gives us opportunity, but obligations as well.

What do we do with the moments of freedom available to us? I believe the challenge is to support those institutions that bring us to the deeper rituals of our bones.

The library stands alongside the church, the courthouse, and the school as a cherished institution.

Libraries must be preserved and strengthened, because in so doing we keep our past alive, we promote universal learning, we respond to the deeper rituals of our bones.