

Interview with American Library Association leader: “This government stands completely exposed”

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In July of this year, the governing council of the American Library Association passed a resolution calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. Although there is widespread opposition to the war among cultural workers and academics in the United States, the ALA is one of the first professional organizations to publicly oppose the Iraq war.

In the past, the ALA has defended authors' and readers' rights to intellectual freedom. In 1988 it opposed the FBI's Library Awareness program through which the Bureau attempted to coerce librarians into turning over lists of borrowers of material it deemed a threat to national security. The ALA has recently opposed section 215 of the Patriot Act, which criminalizes the free exchange of information.

Alfred Kagan is a member of the ALA's Social Responsibility Roundtable and its representative to the ALA's governing council. He is a bibliographer at the Africana Library at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, one of the largest collections of materials on Africa in the United States. He recently spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about the ALA's antiwar resolution.

WSWS: Could you tell us about the history of the resolution itself?

Kagan: This is the second time we tried. It was proposed by our roundtable, which has been active since the 1960s. It seeks to promote a progressive direction in the ALA and there couldn't be a more important issue than the Iraq war. We tried to introduce a resolution last year but didn't get very far, although there was a fair amount of support. This year we won by a margin that surprised us.

WSWS: Why do you think that was?

Kagan: Partly because it has become clear that libraries are suffering because of budget cuts for the war. A lot of libraries around the country are facing closure, having their hours limited and staffs cut. There was an attempt to close the whole library system in Salinas, California. They kept them open because we made such a fuss. Public university libraries are feeling this as well.

Part of it is also that people have really woken up. I noticed that the front page of the *New York Times* is reporting that Bush has the lowest popularity ratings ever. There is unrest in the military. Lots of military families have maimed and dead. That goes through society. Something has to happen. The ALA is following public opinion. A majority of Americans don't want this.

WSWS: What do you feel this war is about?

Kagan: It's the neoconservative idea of taking over the Middle East for its natural resources.

WSWS: What do you know about the situation with Iraqi libraries?

Kagan: There was a lot of destruction and the military couldn't have cared less. There is evidence of books being piled up and burnt. It was quite a big to-do in the ALA. We passed a resolution on artifacts and cultural resources.

Here you have an ancient civilization with an important intellectual history for the whole world. Iraq was a middle-income nation, fairly developed. That is just not good for American imperialism. They want to mold Iraq into another neo-colony. They want to change its culture in a way that is favorable for American culture.

WSWS: Could you tell us about the history of the ALA's defense of civil liberties?

Kagan: One issue that is held dear to all librarians is the freedom to read. This goes through every unit of the ALA. It's on issues of freedom of thought where the ALA has been the strongest. When the FBI was going around to libraries in the 1980s to see what people were reading, we felt that we had to do something.

WSWS: The ALA has opposed section 215 of the Patriot Act. How do you see the Patriot Act?

Kagan: Most of us see it as one more aspect of the war policy, as another way to control the population with fear. Let's just say that the more people think, the less likely they will follow like sheep. Mass media is in the hands of a few big corporations who give carte blanche to the government.

There was a sentiment in the ALA that wanted to oppose the whole Patriot Act, but we had to withdraw that idea to get passed what we did. Many librarians want to be concerned with what immediately affects libraries. My own argument is that you can't lose all of the rest of our freedoms and still let people read what they want. You don't have free libraries in a fascist state.

WSWS: What do you think of the situation in New Orleans. What is the situation with libraries there?

Kagan: Well, first of all, I think that this government stands completely exposed. They had no ability to do anything for New Orleans. As to the library situation, obviously we're at a preliminary stage. The reports so far have been mixed. Tulane's library is fine. Other reports have said that public library buildings have been completely submerged. The Louisiana Library Association is raising funds to reconstruct buildings and collections.

WSWS: What happens to libraries in hard economic times?

Kagan: They suffer. But what's really interesting is that in hard economic times, library usage actually goes up, as it is now. Many people don't have access to the Internet any other way. Libraries are one of the best bargains in terms of government spending. Libraries are a public good; they are one of the few socialist initiatives in the country.

Unfortunately, governments don't see it that way.

WSWS: You live in the Urbana-Champaign area of Illinois. Are you familiar with the Socialist Equality

Party campaign of Tom Mackaman last November?

Kagan: Yes, I am. Tom Mackaman has been a very positive influence around there. I voted for him. We had a debate in our faculty union about which candidate we should support. We had a lot of people who supported him.



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