

Statement on the FY-1990 Appropriation for the Library of Congress

Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch (Committee on Appropriations), by Louis R. Harlan, President, American Historical Association, Speaking on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

February 7, 1989

I am Louis R. Harlan, a professor of history at the University of Maryland and president of the American Historical Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the FY-1990 appropriation for the Library of Congress, on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance. I speak for professional historians in the United States and in a general way for the scholarly community, the heaviest users of the Library of Congress and of its many services both directly to scholars and indirectly through the other research libraries throughout the United States. The Library of Congress is important in its own right, but it is also the keystone of the arch of information services throughout the United States.

Before speaking of the appropriations you are considering, let me explain how the Library of Congress has been an indispensable part of my life work. I became a regular user of the Library while a graduate student at Johns Hopkins, commuting daily on the train from Baltimore, forty-one years ago. In the years following graduate school, I spent every summer at the Library, living in rented rooms on Capitol Hill before it was gentrified. After moving to the nearby University of Maryland, I and my wife and research staff of the Booker T. Washington Papers worked daily in the manuscripts division and the stacks of the Library of Congress. My experience is not unusual, except perhaps in the length of it. The Library of Congress is part of the way of life of thousands of researchers. We depend on its services.

The Library of Congress is appropriately named. It is the Congress's library, for good historical reasons. It has been the Congress that has nurtured and protected the Library for two hundred years, and the Library has reciprocated by aiding Congress through its Congressional Research Service and other supporting activities. In continuing to lay claim to the Library of Congress, however, Congress also has a responsibility to maintain it adequately as the American national library, second to none, the greatest in the world, the fountain of our national expertise and the center of a national information network. As important as the Library is to Congress, it is even more important to the research community on which the nation depends to keep our nation competitive and the leader of the world.

Scholarly users of the Library of Congress have become increasingly concerned over the past five years or so as we have seen a combination of reductions in budget requests, Congressionally mandated salary increases without budgetary provision, and decline in the real value of appropriations, force the Library to cut personnel and services. The worsening situation with the backlog of uncataloged books at the library is a direct result of these cuts. As you know, most of the books from American publishers in the Library of Congress come without purchase on account of the copyright laws, but another part of its holdings of printed matter is imported from abroad, and the recent decline in the value of the dollar has sharply reduced the Library of Congress purchasing power in the world book market. We all realize that the large budget deficits of recent years have created a fiscal crisis and set everybody in the federal system to seeking ways of cutting costs. [Note: Comparative figures developed by the American Library Association for its testimony before this Subcommittee in 1988 reveal that recent budgets of the Library of Congress were vastly more constrained in terms of growth than budgets of other federal institutions with which it might be usefully compared. Over the five year period FY-1984 to FY-1988, the LC budget increased by

6.5% from \$232.9 to \$248 million. During the same period budgets were increased at the Smithsonian by 28.6%; National Library of Medicine by 26.2%; National Archives and Records Administration by 23.3%; and the National Agricultural Library by 22.8%.] But wouldn't it be penny wise and pound foolish to nickel and dime this great national resource to the point of reducing its effectiveness?

In considering the Library of Congress appropriation, your committee must keep in mind also the ripple effect of any curtailing of the Library's services to the national information network. Not being a librarian myself, I asked my own campus librarian what services the Library of Congress offers to other research libraries. Joanne Harrar, Director of Libraries of the University of Maryland, College Park, says in part: "The Library of Congress's sharing of its own cataloging information, and more recently its facilitating the sharing of that which originates in other libraries but which conforms to LC standards, has allowed our libraries to avoid duplication of a significant cataloging effort: to benefit from subject and language skills often difficult if not impossible to obtain locally: to increase accessibility to research library holdings throughout the country and hence to promote resource sharing via interlibrary loan. Clearly, those of us in academic research libraries view the Library of Congress's role as essential to the continued development and improvement of our own libraries services individually and cooperatively and thus to the ongoing advancement of knowledge in all areas."

The scholarly community's greatest concern right now is that continue appropriations for the Library of Congress at levels reduced below the LC s requests will not only limit its traditional services to users and libraries but also will impede its pioneering work in the automation of libraries and its imaginative efforts to keep ahead of the deterioration of its books and manuscripts through microfilming and the newer technologies of preservation. One hears that about ten per cent of professional positions at the Library stand unfilled because of lack of enough funds to pay the salaries. The Library of Congress has an outstanding new head, James Billington, widely respected in the scholarly community and with many good ideas about increasing the efficiency of the Library and making it more user-friendly. He needs the resources to fill those empty staff positions and to rapidly close the gaps created by recent budget pinches. The Congress needs to strengthen his hand, not weaken it through further budgets that do not cover the basic needs. A budget of \$292.6 million is surely not too much for the support of the premier library in the world.