

Statement on the FY-1990 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by Sidney Verba, University Librarian, Harvard University, Speaking on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance

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My name is Sidney Verba. I am the Director of the Harvard University Library and a Professor of Government at Harvard. It is a pleasure to testify before you today on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance. I want to comment on the program on book preservation of the National Endowment for the Humanities from three perspectives: the perspective of someone involved in the general welfare of scholarship and learning in America and in the welfare of its basic resource, the library; the perspective of the Director of the nation's largest university library; and the perspective of a scholar, active for thirty years in research.

Scholarship and Learning in America

I became Director of the Harvard University Library about five years ago. I am a political scientist, not a professional librarian. At the time, I, along with most of my colleagues on the faculty, had no sense of the magnitude of the "brittle books" problem. We had all seen brittle books, but the problem had never been presented to us in its full magnitude. I soon learned that this was one of the most serious, potentially tragic, and seemingly intractable problems faced by libraries.

The problem of our disappearing record seemed beyond solution. It was of such a magnitude that one could only imagine working around its edges. To deal with the matter comprehensively would require a level of resources beyond that which the various research libraries could muster and a degree of coordination that seemed beyond the capacity of our diverse institutions. Yet with the leadership of the National Endowment, with the encouragement of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, the National Humanities Alliance and other groups, and with the support of the Congress we appear to be moving to a solution.

The increased funding that has gone into the preservation of brittle books has made it possible for us to anticipate that much of what is at risk of destruction will now be saved. The National Endowment's program provides the essential resources for this task. It does not, nor is it intended to, provide all the needed resources for the task. We in the library world continue to seek funds elsewhere and to use the resources of our own institutions for these purposes. But the NEH funding creates the base on which we build.

Our heritage is decentralized among the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Agricultural Library, over a hundred research libraries at universities and other institutions as well as libraries and archives at a number of colleges, historic organizations, and other public and private institutions. Longstanding cooperative relationships among these institutions make coordination of preservation efforts possible. The NEH program also supports important efforts that encourage and supplement the activities of individual libraries.

To encourage libraries to contribute effectively to this national preservation effort, NEH funded the Association of Research Libraries to undertake with the Library of Congress a project to create machine readable records of existing preservation microfilm masters. The availability of these records will minimize duplication of effort among the libraries participating in the brittle book program. Also with NEH funding, ARL conducts a Preservation Planning Program for libraries to encourage the development of local preservation strategies that contribute to the national effort. ARL has also just concluded a project that has resulted in an inventory of collection strengths among research libraries in North America, an important base of information for preservation selection strategies.

If we are to solve this problem, we have to work as a synchronized, coordinated whole -- dividing up the task in a meaningful way so as to maximize the resources we have. NEH's leadership is creating that program. We can move ahead at Harvard with major preservation projects in the knowledge that our work will complement rather than duplicate that of other libraries.

The leadership of the Commission on Preservation and Access is also vital in developing plans for one of the most difficult tasks we face: the selection of materials to be preserved. Through its sponsorship of committees of expert scholars from various disciplines we will be able to mobilize the scholarly community to aid in this task. The Commission plays a critical, catalytic role to convene informal task forces to focus on solutions to particular problems, to address issues of international concern, to support research and demonstration projects, and to provide important communication functions.

The NEH program goes well beyond the preservation of these materials. It also represents the beginning of the development of a true national research collection. Such a national collection will mean that nineteenth and early twentieth century books will no longer be available only in those major libraries with old and deep collections such as my own. At present, we are discussing a national center for the distribution of microform materials to whoever wants them. Such a center would facilitate a national collection. The rich historical collections that were on Harvard's shelves -- and accessible only by traveling to Cambridge -- will be equally available to scholars all over the country. The NEH program will not only preserve our heritage for the nation, it will make it accessible to the nation.

Harvard and the National Program

Rarely has a program caught on as quickly as the NEH program. I can describe this best from the perspective of my own library, but I know the situation is paralleled in many other libraries. It is a program for which we have been waiting. We had talked of our problems and we had bemoaned our fate. And we had, in fact, done a good deal on preservation. We had, with our resources, with federal resources, and with private resources, filmed over 16 million pages of fragile materials. But we were ready to do more. We, therefore, have applied to the NEH program for a substantial project in several crucial areas of our broad collection. The subjects are varied -- materials from our rich collections in European history, from our unparalleled collections in the history of law, and from our unique collections on American social history. We could have selected other subjects, and over the years we intend to do so. What we film will depend on where our collection strength lies and what others are filming. But the important thing is that we will be adding to a national endeavor. That fact energizes our efforts for we can see a real payoff in adding our work to that of others.

I want to stress the secondary impact of the NEH program. It will do more than support a vast amount of filming in those institutions that receive funding under the program. If the experience at

other institutions is like that at Harvard, it will stimulate many other preservation activities. In our planning for the NEH program, we have redesigned our organizational capacity for preservation, a redesign that will allow us to meet the challenge of the new level of work. And we have directed our efforts at fundraising with our supporters and alumni toward the task of preservation. The prospect of NEH funding, rather than reducing our commitment to raise additional funds, has increased it. I believe many other institutions are having similar experiences with the NEH program.

A Look at Preservation from my Own Discipline

Much of the discussion of the preservation problem is based on statistics. Sometimes the discussion is punctuated by the demonstration of a crumbled book. I would like to go beyond the abstract statistics or the illustration of a randomly selected book to show how an entire field of endeavor can be endangered by the crumbling of our library resources. For this, I'll turn to my own area of research.

I am a political scientist and the author or co-author of more than fifteen books in the field. The main focus of my research has been on the political and civic involvement of the public -- how ordinary citizens take part in political and civic life. It is a subject that goes, I believe, to the heart of our democracy. The citizenry is sovereign in America. I have tried in my research to study the extent to which it exercises that sovereignty and how it does so. The work has, I believe, received scholarly recognition and has had an impact on how we understand our political life. Several of the books have won prizes. I am, on the basis of this work, one of less than a dozen political scientists elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Most of my work is on recent American political life. One interesting and somewhat distressing fact about recent citizen participation has been the sharp decline in voting turnout in the past two decades -- from almost 64 percent in the 1960 election elections. The decline is even more dramatic when we consider that voting turnout should have been going up, given the fact that we have a more educated populace and that many of the barriers to voting have been eased in the last twenty years.

In looking into that problem, my attention and the attention of other scholars, has turned to an earlier period of voting decline around the turn of the century. In the late nineteenth century, voting turnout in presidential elections was in the 75-80 percent range; by the 1920's it fell to the 50 percent range -- lower than today. Why did this happen? To answer the question, scholars have turned to study the changing nature of American elections and the American party system from the end of the Civil War through the early part of the twentieth century.

This is not the place to discuss the history of the American party system -- we are here to talk about brittle books. The point is that the written record of this era -- the party histories, the campaign documents, the candidate biographies, the local party accounts -- are on acid paper. And much of the material is reaching the end of its shelf life. I will bring some examples to the hearing.

This era is crucial for understanding our current political process. The changes that took place from the Civil War through the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the changes associated with the Progressive era, created the modern American state and the modern American party system. We cannot lose our knowledge of that period -- even if it is on paper laced with acid. The NEH program will prevent that from happening.

Conclusion

If what differentiates humans from other species is the ability to use language, and if what differentiates civilization from pre-civilized forms of life is the ability to record that language by written words, then it follows that our essence as humans is contained in the written words we pass from generation to generation. These written words, entrusted to library collections, are turning to dust -- and with that part of our lives is going as well.

The small illustration I have given from my own research area shows but a corner of the problem. The record of scientific discoveries, the writings of scholars about their own age and the past, the recordings of lives, the descriptions of society, the products of creative imagination expressed in poetry and prose all will disappear unless we persevere in our efforts. The Congress must offer continuing support.