

American Library Association calls for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq

By Sandy English
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At its annual conference in Chicago earlier this summer, the 182-member Council of the American Library Association, representing more than 65,000 librarians, passed a resolution calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

The resolution stated: “The justifications for the invasion of Iraq have proven to be completely unfounded and the war already has taken the lives of more than 100,000 Iraqis and more than 1700 U.S. soldiers and these numbers will continue to mount as long as the U.S. remains in Iraq, and during the current occupation, many of Iraq’s cultural treasures, including libraries, archives, manuscripts, and artifacts, have been destroyed, lost, or stolen, and as long as U.S. forces remain in Iraq, the inevitable escalation of fighting threatens further destruction of Iraq’s cultural heritage....”

Since the April 2003 looting of the Baghdad Museum and the burning of the Al-Awqaf library with its collection of precious Islamic manuscripts, American and international scholars, librarians, and museum professionals have followed with increasing disquiet the loss of life in Iraq and the systematic destruction of some of the world’s oldest cultural resources. (It is arguable that libraries were invented in Iraq 5,000 years ago.) The Middle East Library Association recently released a report that details the magnitude of this tragedy.

The ALA has been known in the past for its advocacy of freedom of expression and its opposition to the government monitoring of readership in the United States. In 1988, it opposed the Library Awareness Program in which the FBI lied to librarians and intimidated them into turning over lists of “sensitive” books that individuals had borrowed, especially from university libraries.

Although the ALA has not opposed the entire Patriot Act, it has lobbied for the deletion of sections 215 and 505, which have broadened the powers of the state to criminalize the free flow of information. The ALA has made information available to librarians who opposed government intrusion into the privacy of library patrons.

This year’s ALA convention featured an event called “Intellectual freedom, a casualty of war?” with First Amendment scholar Geoffrey R. Stone.

The ALA has assisted in providing funds for the rebuilding of Iraqi libraries. In January 2003 the ALA opposed the limit on the free exchange of information between Iraqi and US libraries imposed by government sanctions against Iraq, noting that all other countries operating under UN sanctions had provided exemptions for educational materials. An ALA resolution in June 2003 deplored the consequences of the destruction of Iraqi libraries and museums. As the brutality and cultural vandalism of the Iraq war has progressed, the tone of concern by the ALA has become sharper. This summer’s resolution is one of the first resolutions by a major professional organization calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

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