

Dag Hammarskjöld and the United Nations Library as a Library Promoting Peace

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Libraries fulfill today's mission on behalf of tomorrow. While all of us who manage large research libraries, especially large national libraries, know that we have all-consuming responsibilities to acquire, organize and service collections relating to our national patrimonies, I think most of us also realize that we have no more awesome and challenging responsibility than the preservation of that patrimony - so that future generations will know where they came from, and know what mistakes to avoid, or at least have fewer excuses when they repeat the errors of their forebears. Indeed, perhaps the most important function of all libraries is to preserve human memory. And the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has a unique role to play in helping humankind remember, and learn from, the history of the great institution it serves. Thus I have chosen to use the few minutes allotted to each of this morning's panelists to lead us to think about ways in which preserving memory is both a generic mandate for all libraries and a special imperative for the library whose 40th anniversary we celebrate here today.

I'm certain that many of us, in thinking about the special concern and obligation this very special library has for the perpetuation of peace in the world, have been reminded of Santayana's well-known observation that those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it. This well-known concept is true, but what does this truism mean, truly mean, for *libraries*? What pres.tabb.doc

moral and professional obligations are placed on us if we are really the storehouses of human memory?

I want to suggest just two concrete answers to this vexing question this morning.

(1) The first is that we have an obligation not merely to collect and preserve but actively to disseminate the record of humanity. The days are long past when librarians could sit back and wait for users to come to us; we need to be assertive and imaginative in helping overcome the ignorance that Santayana warns us about. This was a basic principle underlying the Library of Congress's substantial investment in the creation of its American Memory website, which now includes more than 8 million original and largely unique items of American history. Sharing our unique treasures with the world was a dream without a realistic means of realization until the wonders of digital technology appeared a decade or so ago. Now we are able to bring the original documents of American history to people of all ages and nationalities so that they can learn from and, most important, draw their own conclusions about our past. Conclusions in the plural is extremely important—for it is not the role of libraries to interpret, to present our tendentious versions of history, but rather to compile the most complete records we can and serve them up conveniently to our patrons to interpret as they will. This is an opportunity the DHL is interested in and needs to approach vigorously in its second half decade, if it is, like its parent organization, to be a real force for peace in the 21st century; and I hope the DHL and LC can be partners in this enterprise.

(2) Second, libraries or their agents will be expected in the 21st century not only to use digital technology to make existing collections and records widely available, but also to capture and preserve the newest form of expression in which our history is being embodied. I refer pres.tabb.doc

specifically to the web. This is a somewhat terrifying additional requirement for under-resourced libraries, but one that we have to face up to. The Library of Congress, for example, has undertaken a series of web-capture projects designed to document comprehensively recent important events in US history—such as the 2001 Presidential election, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the winter Olympics, and the 2003 Congressional elections--not because it is fun or trendy, but because the web is the largest and most pervasive publishing medium we have today. To ignore it, or declare it outside our purview, would be analogous to our predecessors having decided that photographs or sound recordings or moving images were not worthy of preservation - as we all know, many of them were thus short-sighted, which is one reason 80% of the motion pictures created in the US before 1920 are lost forever. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library should be as assiduous in documenting the UN on the web as it has been through its printed publications.

It is most tempting on a celebratory occasion such as this only to look backward to past accomplishments. And it is fitting to do so. Let us rejoice that the United Nations, this organization with noble aspirations and immensely important accomplishments, saw the need for and has supported its library nearly from the beginning. But we would not do proper service to this organization, its library and dedicated staff, or our own professional ideals if we did not also challenge the DHL and its parent to honor its past by focusing on what it must do now to ensure that when our successors gather here in 2061 they will be able to toast a full centennial of accomplishments, a second half century in which the leaders of the DHL were alert to and took full advantage of every opportunity to document, preserve and make accessible throughout the world the record of the United Nations' unceasing efforts to sustain lasting peace throughout the

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world.