

### Administrative action lands Library of Congress in “immigration” imbroglio

Until recently, it might have been hard to imagine any matter that could conceivably be taken up in Washington less likely to spark political controversy than the choice of subject headings used by the Library of Congress (LC) in cataloging materials. That all changed in late March of this year when LC routinely proposed updating nearly 100 outmoded subject headings. Two such changes would replace the subject heading *aliens* with *noncitizens* and *illegal aliens* with two headings: *noncitizens* or *unauthorized immigration*.

Within weeks, Representative Diane Black (R-TN6) introduced a bill that would bar LC from making those specific changes. No reason was given, but the bill’s title provided a clue. H.R. 4926, the “Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act,” had 20 cosponsors upon introduction and 35 at this writing, all members of the majority.

The bill also has the backing of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which described LC’s heading change proposals as “blatant capitulation to political correctness” and “pandering to pro-amnesty groups.” (Similar, but not identical, changes previously had been requested by Dartmouth College and were endorsed formally by ALA early in 2016.)

On April 17, four days after H.R. 4926’s introduction, the Legislative Branch Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee adopted this language in the official report accompanying the bill in effect countermanding LC’s professional judgments: “To the extent practicable, the Committee

instructs the Library to maintain certain subject headings that reflect terminology used in title 8, United States Code.” In other words, *illegal aliens* and other disputed headings stay on the books unless LC opts to ignore the express wishes of its funders.

On April 28, the presidents of ALA and ALCTS (ALA’s division of members expert in cataloging and classification) wrote jointly to the members of the full House Appropriations Committee asking that they remove the Subcommittee report’s instruction to LC from the bill when they consider it. Specifically, they argued:

- LC’s process in this case was rigorous, transparent, and consistent with the highest standards of professional cataloging practice;

- decisions to update a subject heading are based on many considerations, including *literary warrant*: the frequency with which a term is or is not used in print and other dynamic resources that, by their nature, change with and reflect current social structures and norms (citing, for example, the Associated Press’ recent decision to cease using the phrase *illegal alien*);

- LC reasonably and properly concluded in this instance that, when used in reference to people, the long-used terms *illegal* and *alien* have in recent decades acquired derogatory connotations, become pejorative, and been associated with nativist and racist sentiments; and

- LC’s proposed changes are fully consistent with accepted professional cataloging standards and practices. In fact, they concluded, a compelling case can be made that the proposed changes are required by them.

Whether these scholarly arguments prevail in the current political climate remains to be seen. We will continue to monitor action on the bill. ♪

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