

# From the President

Ross Holt, President

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In 1976, library scholar Robert Hauptman visited a bunch of libraries and asked reference librarians for information on how to make a bomb. Like Claude Rains in *Casablanca*, he was shocked — shocked! — that librarians would give him relatively unquestioning (if sometimes ineffective) assistance. In the resulting article, he argued that librarians have a responsibility to the safety of the community that outweighs our traditional commitment to protect the individual's right to seek information — in short, that librarians should narc on patrons whose information needs seem dangerous.

It is not my intent here to engage all the ethical issues that Hauptman raises; the literature does that effectively. The confidentiality of patrons' library use is settled both in terms of professional ethics and law; forty-nine states extend some measure of protection to library users and proscribe the bounds within which librarians can breach confidentiality. At the same time, any individual with concrete knowledge of some unlawful plot must examine his or her conscience and decide on a course of action. The problem now is that Hauptman's research — and the discussion it generated — might never take place, or might be squelched in the process, chilled by the post 9/11 surveillance society.

## PATRIOT Games and Patriot Acts

These days — whether a librarian dropped a dime on him or not — Hauptman might find himself in big trouble over his little research effort: he might have to answer to federal agents. If the feds were not to believe his library science defense, he might be declared a terrorist, detained indefinitely, and denied access to an attorney.

Think this is a ridiculously hypothetical scenario? Consider the case of Amy Simpson. In the communal area of her Raleigh apartment complex, Ms. Simpson was observed using a public Internet computer to read an article headlined "Bomb School" on the Web site of Durham's *The Independent Weekly*, an alternative newspaper so widely circulated that it's almost mainstream. The article was an investigative piece about issues related to demolitions training at a military base in eastern North Carolina. As she related the experience in a subsequent edition of the *Independent*, Ms. Simpson some days later received a visit from Raleigh police, who thought she might be a mad bomber. The story, distilled to its essence, is this: an average citizen drew the attention of the government for reading a newspaper in public.

### Welcome to 1984

It is this type of threat to the individual's right to seek information without government interference that so concerns librarians about the current climate of intimidation occasioned by elements of the USA PATRIOT Act. Just as no librarian wants to see obscenity displayed on a public Internet computer screen, no librarian wants terrorists using the library to further a nefarious cause. This does not mean, however, that filtering is an effective way to block obscenity; nor does it mean that government surveillance of library users is an effective way to prevent terrorism.

It is true that some of the 9/11 hijackers used library Internet stations to communicate by e-mail. Nevertheless, according to widely published mainstream media accounts, the government had all the information it needed to prevent the 9/11 attacks without visiting a single library; the various agencies just didn't put the pieces together.

Moreover, the government's long and sometimes bizarre interest about what people do in libraries precedes 9/11. Whether it's McCarthy underboss Roy Cohn surveying U.S. Information Service libraries for supposedly Communist books, or the Federal Bureau of Investigation's creepy Library Awareness Program of the 1970s and '80s (this time, hunting for Soviet spies), there seems to be a school of paranoid thought in some government circles that the free exchange of information as embodied by libraries is a threat to the United States. It's almost as if 9/11 provided "see, I told you so" justification for a surveillance power that the country's security apparatus long has desired.

Ultimately, the issue for libraries is not about preventing terrorism, however laudable that goal is. It's about the larger issue of protecting — indeed promoting — the individual's right to inform him- or herself without interference from the government, without having to explain him- or herself and ultimately without the fear of becoming ensnared in a nightmare of guilt by circumstance. It's this value that makes, and keeps, America free. Protecting the free exchange of information is a true "patriot act."

The seeking and finding of information is not dangerous, although some individuals might use the information they uncover in dangerous ways. True, librarians had no way of knowing if Hauptman was a mad bomber. On the other hand, he might have been an author writing a thriller. It turned out, as one of the rejoinders to his article noted, he was a library scholar, doing research.