

Ex Libris, Libertas: America's Library vs. Anti- Liberalism


[The Geopolitics of Culture: James Billington, the Library of Congress, and the Failed Quest for a New Russia](#), by John Van Oudenaren (Cornell University Press, 2024).

by [Juliana Geran Pilon](#) (September 2025)



Library of Congress Jefferson Building, Interior (Andrew Prokos)

Jerusalem has the Tower of David to recall that good governance is subject to a higher authority; Athens celebrates the Goddess of Reason, its namesake, in the iconic Pantheon; Rome cherishes its huge, erstwhile hugely (if dangerously) popular Colosseum; Paris worships in splendor inside a gargoyled Notre Dame. Embracing them all – divine law, rationality, people’s will, and faith–Washington’s [Library of Congress](#) (LOC) pays tribute to as many books as it can access: a shrine to ideas.

The concept preceded the building. In 1800, as part of the  Congressional plan to relocate the national government from Philadelphia to Washington, \$5,000 was expressly allocated for books to start a national library. It underscored the founders’ unprecedented commitment to education as essential to republican self-government. Not simply a convenient reference library, it reflected an appreciation of its potential strategic significance as an instrument of statecraft. Which is why after his election as president in 1802, Thomas Jefferson made the Librarian of Congress a presidential appointment. The author of America’s covenantal document then had another chance to demonstrate his commitment to the institution in 1814, after the British burned the embryonic library inside the U.S. Capitol, by selling his personal library of 6,487 books to “recommence” the project. It would take a few more decades for it to become the magnificent edifice it is today, a jewel in the heart of America’s capital that inspires the awe its biblical liberal ideals deserve.

Blessed with several fine directors, it fell to the twelfth, University of Chicago professor Daniel J. Boorstin, to name the monumental main building after the erudite founder in 1980. The chronicler of the country’s unique ethos in the bestselling [trilogy](#) *The Americans*, Boorstin understood its symbolism and the crucial role played by Jefferson in its reification, and was equally devoted to its mission. Having

benefited from a huge budgetary increase during both the Ford and Reagan administrations, he used to enhance connections with scholars and influencers throughout America and the world. Upon his retirement in 1987, [*The New York Times*](#) assessed the American Jewish librarian “perhaps the leading intellectual public position in the nation.”

The paper of record showed far less acumen in its [laconic mention](#) of his successor’s appointment on April 17, 1987, when it described Billington, then Director of the Wilson Center for International Scholars who had taught at both Harvard and Princeton, merely as “an expert on the Soviet Union” who had “acted as a consultant to Mr. Reagan.” The editors seem unaware that his popularly acclaimed [*Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*](#) was a masterpiece of comparative analysis, documenting in riveting detail the role of culture in violent upheavals. That he arrived on the scene at the very moment that the Iron Curtain was about to fall seemed almost providential.

For the next 28 years, serving as the nation’s de facto secretary of culture, Billington excelled beyond expectations. He was the right man in the right place, being called upon to advise policymakers on how to respond to rapid changes going on in the Soviet Union. But “[e]ven more important than this advisory role was the way he was to mobilize the human and material resources of the Library of Congress as part of the overall US and Western effort to assist in the positive transformation of Russia following the collapse of communism.” So writes Dr. John Van Oudenaren in his comprehensive account of the LOC’s role in the complex and unprecedented pivot from an adversarial to a cooperative relationship between the two rival powers.

A Russia expert, now Global Fellow at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Dr. Van Oudenaren is ideally suited for this project: he was part of it. As Director of the World Digital Library and LOC’s Chief of the European Division, he

was privy to the delicate negotiations conducted by Billington with his Russian counterparts, and provides exquisitely detailed information regarding acquisitions, setbacks, and rationale. But the book is not meant for scholars alone. By placing the LOC's activities in historical context, it opens a window onto the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in an illiberal world. [The Geopolitics of Culture: James Billington, the Library of Congress, and the Failed Quest for a New Russia](#) thus stands testimony to the extraordinary efforts by public and private actors to help Russia reawaken, only to see it fail at the hands of one man: a sociopathic former KGB officer.

That quest, prompted by the apparent liberalization implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev, inspired America's policy of promoting positive change in Russia as early as 1987. It began with a considerable increase in the exchange of documents and materials traditionally undertaken by libraries, followed by an even more dramatic spike during Boris Yeltsin's presidency (1991-1999). But the most dramatic escalation came after Congress authorized the LOC's Congressional Research Service to expand exchanges, in order to help newly democratic countries build effective parliamentary bodies. Far from seeking to impose an American model on others, this goal reflected America's democratic values and national self-government.

The same attitude underlay the growing number of exhibitions featuring Russia's history and arts and digitalization of archival Russian materials: designed to preserve the nation's precious heritage for all the world. "Billington's distinctive contribution to U.S.-Russian relations was his emphasis on the importance of national identity and self-respect," writes Van Oudenaren. "Culture was for him not just an add-on... [but] the heart of the matter." And since the same went for every other nation, "he sought to apply [the same] principle' on a global scale with the World Digital Library (WDL), the purpose of

which, he stressed, was to encourage each country to showcase what was greatest in its own culture on a high-tech platform developed and managed by the LOC.”

In January 2000, Billington explained his vision in a Congressional hearing: the library could become “the hub of an international [online] network to advance education and understanding.” There followed joint projects with Spain, Brazil, France, the Netherlands. In February 2001, he was approached by Russian billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who had just established his Open Russia Foundation, with the express intent to disseminate educational materials through the Internet. Then came September 11, and Billington saw a new need for “deeper cultural understanding of the three great rising regions on the Eurasian landmass—Confucian East Asia, Hindu South Asia, and the world of Islam.” Congress was busy appropriating gobbles of money to an understaffed USAID barely coordinating with a stale-thinking State and a bureaucratic Defense Department.

Fortunately, there was the private sector. Specifically, Khodorkovsky, who loved both the exchange programs and the WDL, became a donor to LOC’s rule of law programs, writing a personal check for \$1 million payable to the LOC. The relationship ended abruptly in 2003 with his arrest; he would spend the next decade in jail on trumped-up charges. As fate would have it, another Soviet Jew, Google co-founder Sergey Brin, who took up the baton in 2003, approaching Billington about a particularly ambitious, still secret, plan to “digitize every book in the world.” After several more meetings, Brin convinced him to undertake a pilot project in early 2004 to digitize over five thousand books in the General Collection. In 2005, Google signed an agreement with the LOC to begin the WDL, donating \$3 million to jump start it.

Another opportunity came after the George W. Bush administration decided to rejoin UNESCO in 2003, after a twenty-year absence, and appoint Billington as a member of the

commission which interacted with the organization. Two years later, the commission decided to recommend a joint project of LOC, Google, and UNESCO to create a Global Gateway by digitizing the holdings of national libraries. It was formally launched by December. In 2007, the Russian State Library also agreed to cooperate, but ultimately nothing came of it. By then, the newly-appointed prime minister of Russia Vladimir Putin had finally revealed his sinister colors. They were displayed in a chillingly turgid sixty-eight-page [Concept \[Kontseptsiya\]: Strengthening Traditions of Russian Statehood in the Public Consciousness and in the Activity of the National Government,](#) a copy of which was delivered to the LOC. The operative word, whose importance should have been immediately obvious but was not, even to Billington, was “statehood” –*gosudartskvo*.

The pivot from nation to state, focusing centrally on the head of the state, cemented the narrative departure from the nominal internationalism of communist ideology that Stalin had adopted after the Nazi invasion of World War II. In line with this reconfigured *kontseptsiya*, the Putin Presidential Library would be dedicated to spelling out and disseminating the notion of “stateness.” Finally dispensing with the risible Marxist myth of “the dissolution of the state,” it kept the Soviet-era anti-liberal, anti-American and anti-NATO demonology to justify the same expansionism, vividly demonstrated in the occupation of Georgia in 2008. But no longer communist, Putinist imperialism had become openly pan-Russian. Similarly ostentatious was the increasingly routine and brazen practice of killing the dictator’s enemies by barbaric means, imprisoning and torturing dissenters and their families, friends, however distantly related.

Not that Putin disregarded history – on the contrary, he had started rewriting it even before taking power, in 1999. Developing a “usable past” for post-Soviet Russia meant grounding its legitimacy neither in Russia’s pre-Soviet

history nor in anything during communist times but squarely in the Soviet victory over the Nazis. Militarism is a sure staple of collectivist authoritarianism, especially of the fascist variety. So too is denigrating privatization, which Putin does by condemning the horrible nineties, given the unpopularity of the corruption that began during Yeltsin era. Never mind that it increased exponentially under Putin. Lying is the one common denominator of all tyrannies, no matter how they advertise themselves.

Billington was not caught unawares. For as early as the 1980s he had considered it possible for what he called a “crypto-fascist authoritarian nationalism” becoming the ruling ethos after the end of Soviet rule. Yet he couldn’t help giving in to what the dissident writer Nadezhda Mandelstam had called “[Hope Against Hope](#).” Despite his own intimate conversations with Putin, whose content is unfortunately unrecorded, however, he was more sanguine about Russia than either his former mentor, the British Jewish Isaiah Berlin or the Soviet Jewish Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky. Both had been skeptical that an open, democratic future was possible in that vast Eurasian territory containing a multitude of fragmented, and politically inexperienced communities. In the end, he could not have failed to admit his two friends held a far more realistic view of Russian intelligentsia than he did, notwithstanding his encyclopedic knowledge of Russia.

After Billington’s retirement, the WDL’s work ended in 2016, as did most other exchange initiatives. By then, the WDL site contained content in 145 languages and its interface would be accessible in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish, in addition to Russian. Once again it would fall to the LOC and other Western libraries to save the world’s culture and memories. Its website, www.wdl.org, was finally shuttered in November 2021, after nearly 20,000 library items comprising over a million images had been contributed by 158 partners in sixty countries. The exchange program begun in

1987, later renamed Congressional Office for International Leadership, eventually brought more than 40,000 Russian young leaders to the United States before the program with Russia was terminated following Putin's full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But, in what ranks as one of Billington's most enduring achievements, exchanges with other post-Soviet states, above all Ukraine, continue and are aimed at helping to shore up these countries in the face of Russian aggression.

Billington certainly cannot be blamed for not trying to bring about a new Russia. Unfortunately, in abandoning his original suspicion of what he called "a ruthlessly effective self-perpetuating political machine, operated by apparatchiks taught not to think for themselves," Billington succumbed to the classic liberal American penchant for optimism. Van Oudenaren called his hope that Russia could revive its pre-Bolshevik culture and traditions naïve; but he could have said the same of U.S. foreign policy for over a century.

Doubtless, Billington "did not have an answer to the question of how the United States can combine the promotion of democracy and universal human values with respect for civilization and cultural diversity." But "at least he recognized," argues Van Oudenaren, "that this was a key question for the United States – perhaps *the* key question for the future of foreign policy." To do that, however, it is imperative that policymakers be clear-eyed about the facts and not engage either in wishful thinking or suicidal self-flagellation. It also helps to learn history and all the other arts fairly called liberal.

The founders had been right to insist on the primacy of education in a people's genuine, as opposed to a pseudo, republic. All that wisdom lodging inside books and manuscripts, a treasure of the ages, contained right next to the nation's congressional buildings and the Supreme Court, should serve as a reminder of our responsibility to inform ourselves. This is not only as citizens of the still freest

country in the world, but for our own sake and that of our children.

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