

## Books and Democracy

The American Library Association has spoken about literacy and democracy in an extensive 2001 compilation by Nancy Kranich, entitled “Quotes about Libraries and Democracies.” It is a wonderful collection from various writers and speakers, accessible at <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/officers/past/kranich/demo/quotes>. A seminal example, from Thomas Jefferson: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy.”

Within the very condensed library story I have been telling you recently about Thomas Jefferson, based on Dumas Malone’s “Jefferson and His Time,” there is this larger history about America’s birth and democracy itself. Biography can be a larger story whether the subject served history well or otherwise, as can be autobiography or memoir. I have two complementary case examples; both are part of the WLN collection.

First, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s “Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln,” Simon & Schuster, New York (2005). The title is self-explanatory about the central subject matter, Lincoln’s skillful political maneuver to bring his political opponents into his Cabinet. One-time Whig, Lincoln was the first Republican President. He brought political opponents, respected leaders in their own right, under his fold and showed us how our democracy works at its best. He did this as he faced certainly one of the most difficult trials of American governance in history, the American Civil War, with Lincoln trying to save an emancipated Union and its democratic ideals. He had a greater good in mind.

The second book is the memoir of Albert Speer, “Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs,” The MacMillan Company, New York (1970), translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston. He didn’t have a greater democratic good in mind. Speer was Hitler’s architect first, perhaps being hand-held mirror to Hitler’s earliest career goal, and after that his all too proficient Minister for Armaments and War Production (1942–45). Speer wrote the memoir in Spandau Prison where he served a relatively light 20-year sentence from the Nuremberg Court Trials for his part in the Nazi conflagration. Speer was no innocent obviously; in Spandau he does finally reflect on what went wrong with him, at one point suggesting that he, like others of his rigid society, lacked a broader viewpoint about life.

“As an intellectual I might have been expected to collect documentation with the same thoroughness and to examine various points of view with the same lack of bias that I had learned to apply to my preliminary architectural studies. This failure was rooted in my inadequate political schooling. As I result, I remained uncritical, unable to deal with the arguments of my student friends, who were predominately indoctrinated with the National Socialist ideology.” “Not to have read books, magazines, and newspapers of various viewpoints; .....” He says that he compartmentalized his professional work and his political acumen or lack thereof. That’s what he says.

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Speer goes on to soul search, but who knows. Unlike Lincoln who acted with purpose for democracy when he had the power to do so, Speer did not. He seems to have submerged whatever power he had to other selfish instincts. Not uncommon at all.

Taken together, Goodwin's biography and Speer's memoir are library shelf bookends to mind-stretching reading about literacy and democracy. I recommend them highly.

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