White House Conference on School Libraries
Keynote Address

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Mrs. Laura Bush, the First Lady of our Nation, distinguished guests, fellow educators, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, I would like to thank Mrs. Bush, on behalf of all of us, in particular the parents, educators, and children, who are our future, for her commitment to education, her championship of the cause of teachers, her support for literacy and libraries, and now for highlighting the importance of school libraries. We are all grateful to you!

When Charles Dickens moved into Tavistock House, the home of his dreams, he took special care with the arrangement of his study. To insure his privacy he installed a special hidden door, made to look exactly like part of an unbroken wall of bookshelves, complete with dummy books. Dickens had no difficulty in coming up with ingenious titles for his artificial books. One was called *Cat's Lives* (nine volumes), *The History of a Short Chancery Suit* (twenty-one volumes), a seven-volume magnum opus, *The Wisdom of our Ancestors* which included the individual titles *Ignorance, Superstition, Dirt, Disease, The Block,* and *The Stake*. *The Virtues of Our Ancestors*, on the other hand, was so slender that the title had to be printed on the spine sideways. Then there was a three-volume work entitled *Five Minutes in China.* … This morning, however, I would like to speak in praise of real libraries, real books and the act of reading.

Libraries are as old as civilization—the object of pride, envy and sometimes senseless destruction. From the clay tablets of Babylon to the computers of a modern library stretch more than five thousand years of man's and woman's insatiable desire to establish written immortality and to insure the continuity of culture and civilization, to share their memory, their wisdom, their strivings, their fantasies, their longings, and their experiences with mankind and with future generations.

Libraries have always occupied a central role in our culture. They contain our nation's heritage, the heritage of humanity, the record of its triumphs and failures, the record of mankind's intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements. They are the diaries of the human race. They contain humanity's collective memory. They are not repositories of human endeavor alone. They are instruments of civilization. They provide tools for learning, understanding and progress. They are a source of information, a source of knowledge, a source of wisdom; hence they are a source of action. They are a laboratory of human endeavor. They are a window to the future. They are a source of hope. They are a course of self-renewal. They represent the link between the solitary individual and mankind, which is our community. The library is the university of universities, for it contains the source and the unity of knowledge. The library is the only true and free university. There are no entrance examinations, no subsequent examinations, no diplomas, no graduations, for no one can graduate—or ever needs to!—from a library.

Above all else, libraries represent and embody the spirit of humanity, a spirit that has been extolled throughout history by countless writers, artists, scholars, philosophers, theologians, scientists, teachers and ordinary men and women in a myriad of tongues and dialects.

The library, in my opinion, is the only tolerant historical institution, for it is the mirror of our society, the record of mankind. It is an institution in which the left and the right, the Devil and God, human achievements, human endeavors and human failures all are retained and classified in order to teach mankind what not to repeat and what to emulate.

The library also marks an act of faith in the continuity of humanity. The library contains a society's collective but discriminating memory. It is an act of honor to the past, a witness to the future, hence a visible judgment on both.

The existence and the welfare of the library are of paramount importance in the life of a society, in the life of a community, the life of a university, the life of a school and a college, the life of a city, and the life of a nation.

Indeed, the library is a central part of our society. It is a critical component in the free exchange of information, which is at the heart of our democracy. In both an actual and symbolic sense, the library is the guardian of freedom of thought and freedom of choice; hence it constitutes the best symbol of the First Amendment to our Constitution. For what will be the result of a political system when a majority of the people are ignorant of their past, their legacy, and the ideals, traditions and purposes of our democracy. "A nation that expects to be ignorant and free," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "expects what never was and never will be."

Through the development and spread of the academic and private libraries, and the central role that our public libraries and school libraries have assumed, we have come to view the library not only as a source of scholarship, knowledge and learning, but also as a medium for self-education, progress, self-help, autonomy, liberation, empowerment, self-determination and "moral salvation;" as a source of power. That is why the library was dubbed the "People's University" by Emerson, and the "True University" or the "House of Intellect" by Carlyle.

Libraries are not ossified institutions or historical relics. Libraries and museums are the DNA of our culture. Cemeteries do not provide earthly immortality to men and women; libraries, museums, universities, and schools do.

The library is the center of the book. The library embodies and symbolizes the book—one of mankind's most imaginative and extraordinary inventions. When the late Jorge Luis Borges, one of the great contemporary writers and a former librarian, became blind, he imagined paradise in the form of a library. In an introductory essay of the catalogue of the New York Public Library's exhibition, *Treasures of Spain*, he provided a moving tribute to the book:

> *There are people who cannot imagine a world without water. As for myself, I am unable to imagine a world without books. Down through the ages, man has imagined and forged countless tools.*
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> *Of all of mankind's diverse tools, undoubtedly the most astonishing are his books. All the others are extensions of the body. The telephone is an extension of his voice; the telescope and microscope extensions of his sight, the sword and the plow are extensions of his arms.*
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> *…[Man] has created the book, however, as the worldly extension of his imagination and his memory. Humanity's vigils have generated infinite pages of infinite books. Mankind owes all that we are to the written word. Books are the great memory [and imagination] of the centuries.*

"I believe," he concluded, "that books will never disappear. It is impossible for it to happen. If books were to disappear, history would disappear. So would men." And I would add, so would women.

For, ladies and gentlemen, books are fragile and at the same time powerful objects. They not only permit us to share the imagination of the world but they grant us, at once, the right word. Recognizing ourselves in that word, we desire it for everyone. For thanks to books, we understand that words must belong to everyone. That is why John Milton wrote that "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are."

"They [books] never hide their secrets from me," Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote, "but they are extremely discreet about what you confide to them; they come if they are invited, if not they try to impose themselves."

Books themselves need no defense. Their spokesmen come and go. Their readers live and die: they remain constant. They provide knowledge and power, distraction, delight, strength and solace. Books determine, have determined, and will determine our lives, for the act of reading is universal, transcending time and space. But books need readers. A book lives by being read. Only through the knowledge from books can men and women live in the past, albeit vicariously. We must remember the old dictum of Sir Francis Bacon who wrote around 1600 that "Reading makes a full man. Conversation makes a reading man and writing makes an exact man."

Reading provides renewal. What is renewed is the imagination. Its active independence is able to take the measure of everyday events from a point just beyond their reach. That point, the act of reading provides. Reading constitutes a self-renewal, an imaginative act and a human act. It forces us to see how we would be poorer, what kind of experience we would be missing and what strengths we would lack if we did not read. Because what we do when we read is indeed very much more complex than the getting of new facts. The qualities we would miss by not reading (active, imaginative collaboration and critical distance) have implications for what a library *is* and ought to *be* and ought to *do*. The library is not an information center alone; it is a center for knowledge and learning. The library always has provided, and always will provide, a place elsewhere, an imaginative retreat, an imaginative re-creation and in imaginative rebirth.

For, ladies and gentlemen, reading and writing are not merely cosmetic skills comparable to good manners. Literacy, reading, and writing are the essence of thinking.

Since language, according to many anthropologists, defines man and organizes his or her activities, reading appears as an unarguable necessity. Literacy presupposes the ability to negotiate linguistic forms. Reading enhances that ability. Today, the desirability and prevalence of books seem to guarantee, to some degree, the persistence of reading. Throughout history the relationship between the book, as container of information, knowledge and insight, and the reader, the receiver, has been a dialectical

and collaborative one. This relationship has always assumed a process, understanding and digestion. The process has never been a passive one. That is why Rabelais, during the epoch of the Renaissance, advised the reader of his *Pantagruel* to eat the book. For books cannot nourish or even be said to exist until they are digested. The reader completes a job only begun by an author. This is still often true, even at a time when consumption has replaced digestion. There are modern authors who take great pains to recall our original responsibility as readers. For we make the book as the book makes us.

The other aspect of the above collaboration between the book and the reader is its intimacy, its privacy. We must not forget that pleasure, discretion, silence and creative solitude are the primary aspects of a life of reading, its most tangible justification, and most immediate reward. This solitude may appear now as an unaffordable luxury, and yet any book creates for its reader a place elsewhere. A person reading is a person suspended between the immediate and the timeless. This suspension serves a purpose that has little to do with escape from "the real world," the sin avid readers are most commonly accused of. Being able to transcend the limitations of time and space oneself is one of the primary pleasures of the act of reading. For it allows not only the renewal of one's imagination but also the development of one's mind.

Whether a work of fiction or a work of science, a book appeals, first of all, to the mind. Reading provides the mind with materials of knowledge and thinking and makes what we read ours: "We are of the ruminating kind, and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections. Unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment." John Locke was right when he wrote the above lines in 1706. To really grasp the knowledge in a book, one cannot read it but once; a book demands to be reread.

A good reader, an active reader, a creative reader, is a re-reader. In a fragmented culture, in which we seem to rely more and more on the specialist, the reader remains as the only autonomous unit. Each reader is unique, and reading is dialectical. Reading is always, at once, the effort to comprehend and the effort to incorporate. Reading is a

constructive activity, a kind of writing. Like any art, craft, or sport, reading becomes more rewarding as we master its intricacies to higher degrees.

Our skill, our learning and our commitment to the book or the text have determined, and always will determine, for each of us, the kind of experience the book or the text provides.

You may remember that, not long after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, he founded the city of Alexandria. There, around 300 B.C., he built an Academy to serve the Muses known as the Museum. It gave poets, historians, musicians, mathematicians, astronomers, and scientists an opportunity to live and work under royal patronage. The results were awesome. At Alexandria, Euclid worked out the elements of geometry; Ptolemy mapped the heavens; another scholar and poet, Eratosthenes, determined the circumference of the earth; another, Herophilius, recognized the connection between a heartbeat and a pulse and articulated the difference between arteries and veins; yet another invented a water-clock and built the first keyboard instrument; someone else (mathematician Diophantus) formulated the algebraic method; Archimedes refined his theory that explained the weight and displacement of liquids and gases; yet another developed a systematic method of cataloging and shelving books.

In order for this kind of creativity to flourish, books were essential. About 295 B.C., King Ptolemy I embarked upon a project to "collect all the books in the inhabited world." Agents were sent out to scout all the cities of Asia, North Africa and Europe. They either bought or copied many an original text. With Ptolemy's royal backing, seventy-two scholars were recruited to produce what tradition holds to be the first translations of the Old Testament into Greek. The library's total holdings exceeded 700,000 volumes.

The library of Alexandria became the first institution based on the premise that all the world's knowledge could be gathered under one roof. For nine luminous centuries,

from around 300 B.C. to the seventh century A.D., Alexandria was a place of inspiration, a symbol to the limitless potential of human advancement.

During the past twenty years, with the advent of the computer age, we have been undergoing another historical revolutionary shift equal to that of previous revolutionary changes; the importance of the computer—its gain in portability, capability, ease, orderliness, accuracy, reliability and information storage capacity—supersedes anything achievable by pen scribbling, typewriting and cabinet filing, and is recognized by all.

The new information technologies are the driving force behind the explosion of information and the fragmentation of knowledge that we witness today. We are told that all available information doubles every three years and yet, we are able only to use less than ten percent of the available information. The information technologies have shrunk the traditional barriers of time and space, giving us the ability to record, organize and quickly communicate vast amounts of information. For example, today the entire corpus of Greek and Latin literature can fit on a CD-ROM and be carried inconspicuously in a jacket pocket. We face, for the first time in history of mankind, the ability of providing each and every individual his or her own Library of Alexandria.

The greatest challenge facing us today is how to organize information into structured knowledge. We must rise above the obsession with quantity of information and the speed of transmission, and focus on the fact that the key issue for us is our ability to organize the information once it has been amassed, to assimilate it, to find meaning in it and to assure its survival. And that cannot be done without reading and literacy.

In the decade ahead, our democracy and our society will be facing a major challenge. Many, in our society, will have access to information, to knowledge, hence to power; power of autonomy, power of enlightenment, power of self-improvement and self-assertion, power over their lives and their families' future, and there will be others who will have no access to information. Such a cleavage will have tremendous consequences on the future of our nation. Our nation cannot afford the "luxury" of

having one-fifth of its population to be illiterate. For reading is a means to education; education is a means to knowledge; knowledge is a means to power and a bright future. Those who undergo the test of learning to read and write do so not only for themselves and their families but our nation as well. They learn in order to become good citizens and good ancestors. That is why reading and the love of libraries and books has to begin in the earliest stages of education. School libraries constitute an indispensable introduction to literacy and learning about the world and the universe. They are pathways to self-discovery. They are instruments for progress and autonomy.

I would like to conclude by reminding all of us that today, even in this age of the computer and information revolution, microchips, laser, fiber optics, and other technological elaborations, the raw input is still human speech, human idiosyncrasy, and literacy. Reading and libraries are still indispensable tools. They provide pleasure, discretion, silence, creative solitude, and privacy. Transcending the limitations of time and space is one of the primary pleasures of the act of reading for it allows not only the renewal of one's imagination, but also the development of one's mind. Reading universalizes us, especially now when the computer has brought us the death of distance. It would be a waste, indeed, a tragedy, to deny our nation's children the joys of reading and learning. If we do not provide them with the opportunity and tools—the books and libraries—to participate in this wonderful transcendence, they will never be exposed to the wondrous joys of being and becoming.