

The Zero-Sum Mindset and Efforts to Defund ALA

ANDREW T. SULAVIK

Recently I attended a four-hour public meeting. At its conclusion the Sarasota County Commission promptly voted to defund the county public library system's institutional membership to the American Library Association (ALA). Among the residential population a minority-held view to defund ALA membership defeated the status quo. The County Commission members gave little or no reason for their vote. It was difficult to imagine what mindset shaped such a lopsided outcome. Because this scenario is repeatedly playing out throughout the country at both state and local levels, the rationale behind it needs to be understood before steps to curtail it can be taken.

What precipitated this movement? Ostensibly, it resulted from remarks published on Twitter by the current president of ALA, Emily Drabinski, concerning her identity and political beliefs. Members of Moms for Liberty, a relatively small organization, whose expressed mission is to "stand up for parental rights at all levels of government," seized on her remarks to argue that the county should no longer pay for the public library's ALA membership because Ms. Drabinski is an avowed Marxist lesbian. While we should all support Ms. Drabinski's personal right to express her identity and political beliefs, she should have exercised greater prudence and foresight before publishing them on Twitter. As the elected leader of ALA, she is undoubtedly aware her national office comes with a bully pulpit that can amplify her remarks nationwide. Regrettably and unintentionally, her remarks ignited a firestorm of protest including a campaign to defund ALA. Her words have been attached to justifications to defund ALA memberships at the state level in Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Missouri, Montana and Wyoming. Moves to defund ALA have not been limited to the state level; indeed, they have served as a lightning rod in some national political discourse at least within some Republican controlled districts.

Ms. Drabinski's remarks are being used as a potent argument in the zero-sum mindset of those who wish to defund ALA. Today, the zero-sum mindset pervades both liberal and conservative ideological beliefs. It is described mostly in economic terms: gains by the wealthy few come at the expense of the poor (i.e., many). However, zero-sum thinking is also linked to the political landscape, where it allows both liberals and conservatives to maintain their ideological beliefs. Within the political arena of heated debates over policy decisions, it can be reinterpreted this way: a proposed policy benefits a select few at the expense of the many. In our current fractured political environment, a public or economic policy seldom benefits all citizens equally.

At the public meeting I attended, zero-sum thinking was on full display. A select few

(Moms for Liberty), by defunding ALA, sought to diminish the perceived policy control of ALA over the county public library system. Their intent was to assert their political power and ideology over and against Ms. Drabinski's Marxist ideology, and over the objections of the majority of citizens who advocated for the status quo. For Moms for Liberty and the Sarasota County Commissioners who voted in favor of defunding ALA, it was a pyrrhic victory. While their zero-sum thinking rallied their own (diminutive band of) supporters and bolstered their conservative beliefs in shaping the current state of affairs within their local library system, their challenge to the status quo led to various undesirable outcomes for their library system and their community as a whole. Stripped of the benefits that come with institutional membership to ALA, the county library system must now pay more – and find alternative ways – to recruit new staff, train staff in best practices, and establish new means of professional networking. Moreover, this decision has undermined library staff's confidence in the County Commissioners, who sent a strong message that they are not committed to supporting their professional needs and care little for their ALA affiliated, professional credentials. It also irreparably harmed the national reputation of what was otherwise, by any measure, an exemplary public library system.

What then must we do? As advocates for libraries, we must resist adopting a zero-sum mindset. Rather, we should squarely look at any proposed policy and ask ourselves who stands to win and lose, would a policy benefit some at the expense of others, and would it benefit all citizens? It would likewise behoove state legislators and local leaders to avoid taking the side of policy changes that challenge the status quo as zero-sum. Instead, a better strategy for elected officials would be to seek possibilities for mutually beneficial agreements, embrace advantageous offers proposed by the other side, and always move in favor to reach win-win resolutions. If both sides resist zero-sum thinking, it will increase the likelihood of creating legislation and policies that will serve the public interest of all citizens and every library.

Andrew T. Sulavik, MLIS, ThD
Series Editor