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New and Noteworthy

Developing a Strategic Mindset: Librarians as Politicians

Jennifer A. Bartlett

“For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” -- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

As the 2016 U.S. presidential race begins, it is an ideal time to reflect on how we, as librarians and managers, participate in political activities. Many librarians are deeply involved in local and national initiatives involving social justice, poverty, civil rights, diversity, and the role of government. Many are active in library-related interest groups including the Social Responsibilities Round Table and the Progressive Librarians Guild.¹

Even for those of us not as immediately involved in the political debate, however, we are all politicians to some extent. The famous phrase “all politics is local” might have been written about librarians, who are constantly in the process of fighting for scarce resources and deciding how best to allocate them in the face of widely varying demands and expectations from their user communities. Definitely not a job for the faint-hearted! As long-time *Library Journal* editor John Berry states in a recent column in that publication,² “The politics of every type of library requires the constant work of building relationships and trust with local elected officials and leaders, campus administrators, deans, faculty, and often student leaders or user groups such as the library Friends...every great librarian is and must be a participating citizen and a good politician.”

Elective politics is generally not a field generally associated with librarians, either in the public eye or among those in the profession.³ But an awareness of how the library serves its community and a working relationship with key players in that community is necessary to a library’s success. Douglas G. Birdsall, writing in 1997’s *Restructuring Academic Libraries: Organizational Development in the Wake of Technological Change*,⁴ focuses on the organizational politics of strategic planning and emphasizes the need for academic library administrators to embrace the political climate of their institutions rather than depend on a “rational’ order of organizational goals, objectives, and strategies” (254). The strategic planning

process is offered as a situation which calls on library leaders to not only consider their own internal constituents, but to negotiate with competing campus organizations, all of which have their own agendas. It is vital, says Birdsall, to build on stakeholder interests, form alliances that support the library, and develop and market a persuasive strategic planning document. Although his examples are of course somewhat dated at this point, Birdsall's observations about the strategic planning process remain relevant nearly 20 years after this essay's publication.

A popular analogy when talking about politics in any profession, particularly in business, is to invoke Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *The Discourses* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Librarianship is no exception. *The Machiavellian Librarian: Winning Allies, Combating Budget Cuts, and Influencing Stakeholders* is a 2013 collection of 26 essays organized in an entertaining, thoughtful way.⁵ Niccolo Machiavelli, of course, was a Florentine politician, and writer who fell out of favor upon the rise of the Medici family to rule in 1512; his masterpiece, *The Prince*, was written in exile.⁶ Editors Melissa K. Aho and Erika Bennett have artfully organized their authors' topics into sections reminiscent of Machiavelli's original work: "Character and Behavior for Princes" (chapter include topics such as people skills, networking, strategic planning and playing to one's strengths), "New Principalities" (areas of possible influence), "Types of Armies" (staff, accreditation, certification, user-centered planning), and "Political Situation" (organizational climate). Most of the articles are focused on academic librarians, but the real-world examples and case studies offered are certainly applicable to other library environments as well.

Aho and Bennett acknowledge a common discomfort among librarians when thinking about organizational politics: a disconnect between librarianship's ideals and values and the often down-and-dirty, backstabbing world of fighting others for resources. "At the surface," they note, "the misanthropic stereotype of Machiavellianism seems like an ill fit, professionally. However, librarians who deeply read Machiavelli's work may be surprised at certain synergies...His goal was not the whims of the Prince, but civic virtue, preserving civilization from disruption. He sought a place where rules were followed and civility ultimately reigned. Librarians can appreciate this mindset" (3). Thus, the authors retreat from the darker aspect of Machiavellianism, one that espouses a certain duplicity in dealing with others and unconcern with conventional morality, all in service of achieving a larger goal (and anyone who has worked in any field for very long has no doubt encountered people like this). Nonetheless, the Machiavellian analogy is a useful one, and perhaps overdue in library literature.

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¹ The Social Responsibilities Round Table is a group within the American Library Association that “works to make ALA more democratic and to establish progressive priorities not only for the Association, but also for the entire profession...SRRT has provided a home within ALA for progressive librarians, library workers, and supporters who agree to promote social responsibility as a core value of librarianship” (<http://www.ala.org/srrt/home>). The Progressive Librarians Guild (<http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org>) “recognizes that librarians are situated as information workers, communications workers, and education workers, as well as technical workers. Like workers in every sector, our work brings us up against both economic and political issues. Cataloging, indexing, acquisitions policy and collection development, the character of reference services, library automation, library management, and virtually every other library issue embody political value choices. PLG members aim to make these choices explicit, and to draw their political conclusions” (*PLG Statement of Purpose*, <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/content/purpose.shtml>).

² Berry, John N. III. 12 Sept. 2014. “Every Great Librarian is a Politician.” *Library Journal*, Available at <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/09/opinion/john-berry/politics-libraries-every-great-librarian-is-a-politician-blatant-berry/#>.

³ However, in 2007’s *Casanova Was a Librarian: A Light-hearted Look at the Profession*, author Kathleen Low points out that the traits that make for a good librarian, being “analytical, inquisitive, and some of the some of the most intelligent people in the world” (64), have served some of our colleagues well as they ventured into elective office in Congress, state, and local governments (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.).

⁴ Birdsall, Douglas G. “Strategic Planning in Academic Libraries: A Political Perspective.” In Schwartz, Charles A. 1997. *Restructuring Academic Libraries: Organizational Development in*

the Wake of Technological Change, pp. 253-261. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. An online version of the book is also available online at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/booksanddigitalresources/booksmonographs/pil/pil49/pil49restructuring>.

⁵ Aho, Melissa K., and Erika Bennett. 2013. *The Machiavellian Librarian: Winning Allies, Combating Budget Cuts, and Influencing Stakeholders*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing.

⁶ A brief yet thorough introduction to Machiavelli's life, thoughts and major works may be found at Nederman, Cary, "Niccolò Machiavelli", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/machiavelli>. Several editions of his work, including *The Prince*, are also freely available online.