

BARACK OBAMA

July 17, 2023

To the dedicated and hardworking librarians of America:

In any democracy, the free exchange of ideas is an important part of making sure that citizens are informed, engaged and feel like their perspectives matter.

It's so important, in fact, that here in America, the First Amendment of our Constitution states that freedom begins with our capacity to share and access ideas – even, and maybe especially, the ones we disagree with.

More often than not, someone decides to write those ideas down in a book.

Books have always shaped how I experience the world. Writers like Mark Twain and Toni Morrison, Walt Whitman and James Baldwin taught me something essential about our country's character. Reading about people whose lives were very different from mine showed me how to step into someone else's shoes. And the simple act of writing helped me develop my own identity — all of which would prove vital as a citizen, as a community organizer, and as president.

Today, some of the books that shaped my life — and the lives of so many others — are being challenged by people who disagree with certain ideas or perspectives. It's no coincidence that these “banned books” are often written by or feature people of color, indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community – though there have also been unfortunate instances in which books by conservative authors or books containing “triggering” words or scenes have been targets for removal. Either way, the impulse seems to be to silence, rather than engage, rebut, learn from or seek to understand views that don't fit our own.

I believe such an approach is profoundly misguided, and contrary to what has made this country great. As I've said before, not only is it important for young people from all walks of life to see themselves represented in the pages of books, but it's also important for all of us to engage with different ideas and points of view.

It's also important to understand that the world is watching. If America – a nation built on freedom of expression – allows certain voices and ideas to be silenced, why should other countries go out of their way to protect them? Ironically, it is Christian and other religious texts – the sacred texts that some calling for book bannings in this country claim to want to defend – that have often been the first target of censorship and book banning efforts in authoritarian countries.

Nobody understands that more than you, our nation's librarians. In a very real sense, you're on the front lines – fighting every day to make the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas available to everyone. Your dedication and professional expertise allow us to freely read and consider information and ideas, and decide for ourselves which ones we agree with.

That's why I want to take a moment to thank all of you for the work you do every day — work that is helping us understand each other and embrace our shared humanity.

And it's not just about books. You also provide spaces where people can come together, share ideas, participate in community programs, and access essential civic and educational resources. Together, you help people become informed and active citizens, capable of making this country what they want it to be.

And you do it all in a harsh political climate where, all too often, you're attacked by people who either cannot or will not understand the vital – and uniquely American – role you play in the life of our nation.

So whether you just started working at a school or public library, or you've been there your entire career, Michelle and I want to thank you for your unwavering commitment to the freedom to read. All of us owe you a debt of gratitude for making sure readers across the country have access to a wide range of books, and all the ideas they contain.

Finally, to every citizen reading this, I hope you'll join me in reminding anyone who will listen — and even some people you think might not — that the free, robust exchange of ideas has always been at the heart of American democracy. Together, we can make that true for generations to come.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be Barack Obama's signature, written in a cursive style.