My Twitter timeline exploded with different variations of “Don’t Mess with Archivists” this week in the aftermath of the FBI raid on 45’s house.¹ Archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) were praised for defending our democracy due to their collaboration with the Department of Justice and FBI in seeking the return of documents that the fascist pig took with him when leaving the white house. That an archive-police collaboration could generate so much professional praise and pride is disturbing, but not surprising. Some people were probably just joyful that 45’s home was raided, but that is support for the same system of policing that disproportionately harms Black people and other people of color. Some felt a deeper pride; that our library and information science (LIS) profession helped protect our democracy. Maybe they saw NARA archivists as fulfilling the role congressperson jamie raskin outlined for librarians at this year’s ALA conference—LIS workers as “the guardians of freedom, democracy, and civilization in our country.”

If “democracy” is read as bourgeois democracy—the actual existing form of democracy in the u.s.—then yes, NARA is a guardian. NARA is there to help ensure the smooth operation of the u.s. government. And as the administrator of records for the empire, NARA is not immune from bad behavior. A previous head of NARA, allen weinstein, is credibly accused of sexually assaulting employees. Last year a judge found that NARA wrongfully gave ICE permission to destroy records related to the latter’s sexual abuse and assault cases. Needless to say, NARA’s effort to obtain documents from 45 is not of much concern to working people in this country. 45 survived two impeachments, and it’s unlikely that much will come of this. NARA’s recommendation that ICE destroy records of sexual assault is consistent with their dogged pursuit of records that 45 stole because they both align with the interests of the established ruling elite (the majority of whom dislike 45).

What is worth noting is the reinvigorated vocational awe both externally imposed and generated among LIS workers.² The dominant narrative that was formed this week supports the notion that NARA, government archives, libraries are inherently good, sacred, and are sustainers of democracy. Archivists were praised mostly by partisans who hardly have a mumbling word to say about the previously mentioned abuses or about the state of LIS labor. It’s cheap and easy to have a feel-good moment. This is quite a turn from the aftermath of the 2001 Patriot Act when some librarians earned praise for resisting FBI power. The latter were angered by librarians’ resistance to their solicitation of user records. An internal FBI email stated they:

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¹ I use libraries and archives and librarians and archivists interchangeably
² My focus is on archives and libraries as institutions and the functions of LIS workers, not a commentary on individuals per se. weinstein being an exception
…should be embarrassed that the FBI has used this valuable tool to fight terrorism exactly ZERO times… The inability of FBI investigators to use this seemingly effective tool has had a direct and clearly adverse impact on our terrorism cases. While radical militant librarians kick us around, true terrorists benefit from OIPR’s failure to let us use the tools given to us.

Celebrating LIS-police collaborations is a dangerous game. Policing will continue to harm the oppressed. The popularizing of abolitionist ideas like defunding and abolishing the police during the 2020 uprising were systematically attacked. The selection of biden, the architect of the 1994 crime bill, and kamala harris, a self-described “top cop”, can be interpreted as a counterrevolutionary move by the Establishment. Consistency, which is all too rare, would require folks who believe that Black Lives Matter to also care about abolition. It would require paying attention to how the FBI has always been a racist organization responsible for much death and harm. It would require paying attention to the fact that COINTELPRO never ended and most recently manifested itself in the FBI’s raid on the African People’s Socialist Party a few weeks ago. Abolition is also self-preservation. Why was a woman training to be a “library police officer” when she was shot dead during training? How will we protect ourselves as prosecutors threaten to criminalize our sharing of LGBT and reproductive health material?

Abolition of policing in its various manifestations, including inside of libraries, is one of the best weapons we have against vocational awe. Policing exists to protect the rich, their property, and to enforce unequal social relations. Anytime LIS institutions participate in this activity is cause for concern.

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