Celebrating the Career of a Law Librarian and the Law:
Robert L. Oakley  (November 6, 1945 - September 29, 2007)

Alluding to a Biblical passage, President-elect John F. Kennedy, speaking shortly before his inauguration to a joint convention of the general court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at the state house in Boston, said, “. . . of those to whom much is given, much is required.” Robert Oakley surely heard the Kennedy message and, like many of his generation, was inspired to do great things, as evidenced in both his earliest endeavors and his later work within AALL. He was an idealist who proved idealism can become realism, quite in contrast with the cynicism of someone like the highly regarded U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan, with whom Oakley’s path intersected in the late 1960s.

Though technically not quite a baby boomer, he can surely be considered part of that generation. He was born in New York City in the late fall of 1945 and grew up in Utah and New York. Oakley stayed in New York to attend Cornell as an undergraduate (Item 1). Majoring in government, Oakley had an early brush with fame that began with the dedication of the Swarthmore library in December 1967. As recounted by colleague Jim Feinerman in the Georgetown memorial Web page Remembrances of Bob Oakley (2007), Ambassador George F. Kennan, the early Cold Warrior who basically invented the policy on containment, was asked to give the speech, and Kennan used the occasion to bemoan the protestations of the college youth of that era, arguing that they should stay in their ivory tower. His speech was subsequently published in the New York Times Sunday Magazine on January 21, 1968, and no sooner had it run than it received an avalanche of response, among which was a letter from a young Robert Oakley, then still an undergraduate at Cornell; the letter contained a reply both heartfelt and cogent. Oakley explained to Kennan the need for student engagement in the “real” world, especially at that time. Later in 1968, Kennan’s original message and selected replies were published in book form to reflect the phenomenon of what had occurred, and Oakley’s was among the chosen letters in Democracy and the Student Left (Item 2).

After receiving his undergraduate degree in government from Cornell in 1968, Oakley began working at Cornell University Law Library in January of 1969. Inspired by Lorraine Kulpa, the law librarian who first hired him, and Harry Bitner (Item 3), then director of the Cornell Law Library, Oakley himself attended library school at Syracuse, and he was awarded his MLS in 1972. Then it was on to law school at Cornell, assisted by an AALL Type II scholarship (for those with library school degrees who enter law school) in 1975. Oakley obtained his JD in 1976, and a later Law Library Journal article by James E. Duggan duly recognized Oakley as a former scholarship recipient who went on to become a leader in the field (83 Law. Libr. J. 363, 1991).

Early on, Oakley showed the qualities that would culminate in his successes at Georgetown. Oakley knew a good role model when he saw one, and he maintained, for example, his connection with Lorraine Kulpa even after she had moved on to the General Motors Legal Staff Library in Detroit. He and his then-wife continued to help her with her popular “Questions and Answers” column in Law Library Journal. This was the ideal mentoring relationship, the epitome of the sponsorship and collegiality that have always been goals of AALL.

Even before attending law school, Oakley had already attended his first AALL annual meeting. West Publishing Company had allowed him a grant to attend, so Oakley made it a point to attend every session, and this first meeting resulted in his very first appearance in Law Library Journal as a member of AALL’s Automation and Scientific Development Committee in 1972 (65 Law Libr. J. 327-328). Oakley himself later recalled how this had come about: “At my first AALL meeting, I attended a meeting of the Automation and Scientific Development Committee, chaired by Betty Taylor. When Betty asked for volunteers to create a newsletter for the committee, I foolishly raised my hand . . .” (Houdek, 98 Law Libr. J. 339, 2006). However, he went on to put out the newsletter for the next several years (Item 4).
Soon other accomplishments begin appearing in *Law Library Journal*: for example, “Robert L. Oakley of the Cornell University Law Library has put together a basic checklist for prisons in New York” (Poe, 66 *Law Libr. J.* 59, 1973). In addition, his technical acumen was becoming evident – by 1974 Oakley had become involved with the American National Standards Institute Z-39 committee on what was then called “Library Work, Documentation, and Related Publishing Practices” (Items 5a, 5b). It should be noted that all this occurred before he had even obtained his JD in 1976. Once in possession of the law degree, however, he was able to continue his employment at Cornell at a more professional level.

*AALL Newsletter* duly recorded announcements of each of his new ventures, noting his move from Cornell to Boston University in 1979 (Item 6) and his move from there to Georgetown in 1982. As Roger Jacobs noted in *Remembrances of Bob Oakley* (2007), Georgetown “envisioned a law school that would stand with the most prestigious law schools in the nation. They chose Bob to forge the development of a library to support the school's immense vision.” Oakley was clearly up to the challenge and “recruited and developed outstanding librarians and staff, many of whom have followed his lead in providing superior law library services throughout the land. He expanded the collection with such vigor that twice during his tenure library facilities had to be expanded to respond to the growth of Georgetown legal scholarship” (Jacobs). (Item 7)

Not surprisingly, a want ad in the *AALL Newsletter* from the late 1980s (Item 8) revealed Oakley was seeking an individual who could “[provide] leadership in improving present public service programs and in developing new methods of serving . . .” (20 *AALL Newsl.* 2, Special Issue, January, 1989). Oakley oversaw the building of and move into the Edward Bennett Williams law library (Items 9, 10), and he was eventually able to preside over a special event held to celebrate that law library’s acquisition of its one millionth volume in 2001 (Item 20). From 1982 till his death in 2007, Georgetown was his professional home.

Oakley’s involvement and leadership in AALL greatly expanded in the 1980s once he was able to stay at one institution for an extended period of time. By 1982 he was Chair of the Constitution and Bylaws Committee, and the business meeting for that annual meeting in Detroit revealed his understanding that the AALL needed to be changing with the times, evidenced by the rationale he presented for opening up AALL student membership: “. . . an increasing number of students are pursuing postgraduate degrees in fields other than law and librarianship, e.g., business and computer science, with a view to working as law librarians . . .” (75 *Law Libr. J.* 578, 1982).

He subsequently served on the 1983-84 AALL Nominations Committee, and by 1991 he was on the AALL Executive Board himself. In trying to introduce him at the 84th Annual Meeting in New Orleans, President Penny Hazelton made an affectionate but quite revealing comment: “. . . and Bob Oakley, new member of the Executive Board – where is Bob? He’s probably out lobbying some legislature [emphasis added]. There he is, in the back. Thank you” (83 *Law Libr. J.* 807, 1991).

It was during the mid-1980s that Oakley, having by then lived in Washington, D.C., for several years, made some key observations about the need for AALL to have an increased presence and an ability to be heard in Washington. In “AALL History through the Eyes of Its Presidents,” Oakley described this evolution: “Eventually, President Margaret Leary asked me to chair a committee to figure out how to develop a public policy voice for AALL. The committee reported at the Reno Annual Meeting in 1989, and incoming President Dick Danner asked me if I would take on the role of Washington Affairs Representative. I said ‘yes,’ and thus began a lifetime commitment to work in the public policy arena” (Houdek).

Characteristically this was a modest assessment. Oakley’s committee published an extensive interim report and ultimately a final report (Item 11) that included, among other things, the recommendation for Washington Affairs representatives who could speak for the Association. As this altered the existing chain
of command, the authors of the *Special Committee on National Information Policy Final Report* made a strong argument in defense of this new entity:

First, the Special Committee had been advised by ALA and SLA that a regular presence in Washington was critical to the success of their programs. There is an informal network in Washington that includes many public interest organizations, among them, the various library associations that have Washington offices. To be part of that network, AALL needed to be sure there was a regular Washington contact for those groups. Second, congressional representatives and staff rely on the existence of library representatives for advice and input on library-related matters. Again, the ability to reach those people by a local phone call or lunch meeting is invaluable. Third, meetings frequently occur in Washington with little or no notice. If AALL is to participate actively in the meetings and discussions, there must be someone nearby who is able to attend on relatively short notice. (83 *Law Libr. J.* 184, 1991)

The carefully crafted tone in the final report clearly reflects Oakley’s view as an insider. He had been at the vanguard of this movement and was uniquely positioned to perform in this capacity. He earned a reputation as someone who was both visionary and balanced, and he could work both sides of the fence, so to speak; he was able to develop quite delicately nuanced positions (Item 12). Oakley remained Washington Affairs Representative from 1989-2007, taking leave of that position only for the year he was AALL President in 2000-01, and for the duration he was a tireless advocate for public access to government information. Such efforts were often collaborative, as illustrated by an exchange with Cheryl Nyberg in 1992 regarding testimony on the recommendations of the White House Conference on Library and Information Services (Item 13). Eventually, Oakley saw to it that a dedicated full-time staff member was engaged for the Washington Affairs office, as he announced in his 1995 report:

The Association recruited a talented new Assistant Washington Affairs Representative in 1994-95. Mary Alice Baish began work in February 1995, and in a few short months she has established a presence in Washington and has become a leader in the effort to rethink some important aspects of government information policy. (87 *Law Libr. J.* 800)

Finally, at that point, the Washington Affairs office could move away from a crisis management approach and begin to develop a more coordinated, ongoing legislative program.

In his Legislative and Regulatory Update in 1996, Oakley expressed serious concern about *The Report of the Working Group on Intellectual Property Rights*, the infamous “White Paper,” in which “[a]lmost no attention was given to the need of researchers – students, scholars, and small business people – to have access to the information” and which “lacked the kind of balance we have generally had in the United States between the rights of copyright owners and the needs of information users.” As he additionally noted in his 1996 Update, reaction to the report led to the founding of the Digital Future Coalition (DFC) and, ultimately, Oakley’s realization

that it was not going to be good enough just to express reservations about the legislation. Congressional staff wanted answers, and criticisms without fixes were seen as obstructionist and not helpful. As a result, the DFC began to identify solutions to the various problems.

His clarity in communicating those solutions and speaking for those he represented was evident in his 1996 testimony regarding the "NII Copyright Protection Act of 1995.” Addressing the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary on behalf of the DFC, he averred:

We agree that copyright is at root about promoting creativity. As creators ourselves, however, we understand that creativity results not just from the financial incentive for
authors and inventors codified in Title 17 of the U.S. Code, but from that same statute's
guarantee of access to copyrighted information. The truest and best measure of our
copyright law's success is whether it succeeds in fairly balancing those equal priorities in
the service of the Framer's [sic] commitment to the broad dissemination of knowledge and
information in a Democracy. (Item 14)

Always ready to serve, Oakley ultimately assumed the AALL presidency in 2000-01 (Items 15, 16, 17),
taking a leave of absence from his Washington Affairs role in order to do so. Oakley felt his presidential
tenure had yielded progress in publisher relations, financial planning, and minority recruitment, the latter
effort particularly fueled by the receipt of a significant contribution to fund minority scholarships
(Houdek). (Item 18)

Life, of course, still went on at Georgetown (Items 19, 20), and Oakley additionally served on the planning
committee for the “Preserving Legal Information for the 21st Century” conference held at Georgetown in
2003. Thus, just as it was becoming clear that digital material was in great danger of being lost, Oakley
was instrumental in the founding of the Legal Information Preservation Alliance (LIPA), a development
that came out of the conference.

Well before this it had become quite clear to Oakley that transnational negotiation and collaboration would
be in order. While addressing some of the pervasive attempts to extend and expand copyright protection in
his 1996 Legislative and Regulatory Update, Oakley referred to a then-current piece of legislation as

   very broad. In fact, many fear that it is so broad it will swallow up most of copyright.
   Again, it has developed rapidly in the international arena, and it comes to the U.S.
   Congress with all that momentum and a certain presumption behind it. Those who have
   doubts about the policy behind this bill . . . have an uphill fight ahead.

Thus, toward what turned out to be the end of his life, Oakley was characteristically engaged on yet
another new frontier, branching out as he was into global efforts. The 2005 annual report of the
Committee on Copyright and Other Legal Matters of the International Federation of Library Associations,
for example, referred to his presentation of the “Library-related Principles” used in negotiations with the
World Intellectual Property Organization (Item 21).

With a reputation for astute perception combined with a bottomless wealth of experience and an
indefatigable level of energy, is it any wonder that Robert Oakley was considered such a valuable
resource? In fact, his last appearance in Volume 99, Number 4, of Law Library Journal (2007) reveals the
level of activity that was characteristic of his involvement: He not only provided the Washington Affairs
Office report, but also had membership on the Joint Study Institute 2008 planning committee and was
representative to the National Information Standards Organization. These entities will now have to go on
about their work without him, but his presence – and his prescience – will surely be missed.