

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

★

SPEAKING OF AMERICA

★

GREAT CONVERSATIONS AT
THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Speaking of America



BUY

Speaking of America

Great Conversations at the
Library of Congress

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN

DUKE

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Foreword

Having spent much of my career working in the Congressional Research Service (CRS), which provides confidential, objective, and authoritative research and analysis to lawmakers, I especially value the Library of Congress's mission of service to Congress. Since its founding in 1800 as a small reference library for lawmakers, the Library has expanded its collections and efforts to support Members of Congress and their staff through lending books, informing the legislative debate through the CRS, and hosting tours and other events for Members and their guests.

Beginning in 2013, the Congressional Dialogues program has brought Members together for nonpartisan, off-the-record receptions during which David M. Rubenstein—the chair of the Library's premier philanthropy organization, the Madison Council—interviews a prominent author, usually a historian or biographer, about a timely subject of interest to Congress. Complementing the interview, our unparalleled collections are highlighted by Library of Congress staff in displays of historic books, letters, maps, photographs, and other treasures that bring to life each interview's theme. These displays showcase how the Library serves as a universal and enduring source of knowledge and creativity.

We are greatly indebted to the generosity of Mr. Rubenstein for sponsoring these events. He has supported major exhibitions at the

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FIGURE F.1 The Great Hall in the Library of Congress's Thomas Jefferson Building, where Congressional Dialogues events are held.

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Library over the years and was the sole benefactor of the David M. Rubenstein Treasures Gallery, which opened in 2024. His commitment to promoting literacy inspired his support of two signature programs at the Library: the National Book Festival—one of the most prominent literary events in the nation—and the Library of Congress Literacy Awards, which honor organizations that work to expand literacy and foster a love of reading. David is a standard-bearer for the American spirit of generosity, creativity, and leadership, and we deeply appreciate all he has done for the Library of Congress.

Featuring new introductions by David, this volume of nineteen interviews from the Congressional Dialogues series spans thousands of years of history, from ancient Greek warfare to the Renaissance masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci, to key moments in US history, including the American Revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the Cold War. Topics such as military leadership, the drive for athletic greatness, happiness, and the future of artificial intelligence shape the conversations. The wide range of issues recalls Thomas Jefferson’s sentiment from an 1814 letter that “there is, in fact, no subject to which a member [of Congress] may not have occasion to refer.”

Although the Congressional Dialogues series is exclusively for Members of Congress, there are myriad opportunities for visitors to experience the Library and its collections. As part of its commitment to preserve and share the nation’s treasures, the Library hosts a variety of scholarly initiatives, world-class performances, and engaging programs, including a weekly “Live! At the Library” series where visitors can experience the Great Hall—the same location where the Congressional Dialogues are held. I encourage you to explore the Library’s offerings in person in Washington, DC, or online, at www.loc.gov, to find what inspires your curiosity.

—ROBERT R. NEWLEN, *Acting Librarian of Congress*



Introduction

In 1987, the Librarian of Congress was Dr. James Billington, a Princeton-educated Rhodes Scholar who had been appointed by President Reagan (and later confirmed by the Senate) to the then-lifetime position. Like most of his predecessors, Jim (as he was known to all) Billington was less of a librarian than a scholar—his specialty was Russia and the Soviet Union.

At the time of his appointment, the Library received essentially all of its funding from congressional appropriations, and that funding process had worked well for most of the Library's long history.

The idea of a Library of Congress had first been suggested by James Madison in 1783, when he was serving in the Congress created by the Articles of Confederation. Madison saw a library as a resource that could be very helpful to Congress. Even then, the legislative process moved slowly, and Congress (later operating under the Constitution) finally approved the idea in 1800, with President John Adams signing the legislation that authorized the new Library to spend \$5,000 to purchase the appropriate materials necessary to help respond to inquiries from Members of Congress. That sum was used to purchase more than 700 books and three maps.

Over the years, the Library grew incrementally but suffered a major blow in 1814 when the British burned the Capitol Building (where the Library of Congress was then located). The entire collection burned.

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To deal with this existential challenge, Thomas Jefferson offered to sell his personal library, then the largest private collection in the country, to the Library of Congress.

In time, after concluding that Jefferson's collection did not have any anti-Christian books, Congress accepted the offer and paid \$23,950 for approximately 6,500 books. These became the heart of the Library's collection until 1851, when a fire destroyed nearly two-thirds of the Jefferson books. (The Library, in time, replaced most of those with other same-era copies of these books.)

Eventually, the collection grew dramatically and became the world's largest. Today, the Library holds more than 184 million items, including at least 40 million catalogued books and other printed materials.

From its inception, the Library was designed to respond to inquiries from Members of Congress and to acquire materials that could assist them in performing their legislative duties. But as the collections grew, the mission grew as well. In 1870, the Library was given the responsibility of operating the United States Copyright Office. That office ultimately required an author to submit two copies of any publication for which a copyright was sought, and that process helped to increase the collections. The Library also made large acquisitions of valuable books, maps, and letter collections and was also given large collections by Americans who wanted their items or papers to be catalogued and kept as resources for future scholars.

Funding some of these purchases often required the Library to seek funds beyond what Congress appropriated to it. In 2000, Jim Billington helped to persuade John Kluge, one of America's wealthiest individuals, to provide the Library with its largest gift—\$60 million. That gift was used to create the John W. Kluge Center, which was designed to support scholarly research and to fund additional acquisitions.

As part of this process, the Library created the Madison Council, which was designed as a nongovernmental support group for the institution. Kluge became its first chair, a position that I have now been honored to hold for the last ten-plus years.

When I was first invited by Jim Billington to join the Madison Council, I began to learn more about the Library and its many

different functions, including making its vast collections available to scholars as well as to anyone who would like to use some part of these extensive resources.

In time, I suggested to Dr. Billington that we might initiate a way to bring Members of Congress—from both houses and both parties—together in a social setting that would be educational for them. The Library would host a reception and dinner in the Great Hall of the Library (perhaps Washington's most ornate interior setting), and the dinner would be followed by an interview that I would conduct about an author's book, typically related to American history and leaders. But other subjects likely to be of interest to the Members in fulfilling their legislative responsibilities would also be included from time to time.

Dr. Billington liked the idea. Educating Members of Congress about American history and other important subjects relevant to Congress's responsibilities would seem to be a worthwhile goal. I agreed to bear all of the costs to avoid complaints that taxpayer funds were being used to provide elected representatives with an enjoyable evening. (I do not engage in any personal lobbying of them on any issue.)

But would anyone actually attend? We were not sure.

The first dinner was held on June 18, 2013, with Jon Meacham as the guest interviewee. Meacham is a leading expert on many presidential and history-related subjects; this dinner focused on his book about Thomas Jefferson (fittingly, the Library's great supporter), and Jon did his usual excellent job in the interview. And the Members seemed to enjoy the whole evening—but for two reasons we had not initially anticipated.

First, at the cocktail hour prior to the dinner and interview, the Library placed on display for the Members and their guests some of the Library's historic manuscripts, letters, and other documents written or edited by Jefferson. Because of the fragile nature of many of these documents, they are rarely displayed publicly.

For all the subsequent Dialogues, the Library has continued to display, prior to the dinner, historic documents and other materials relating to the featured guest's writings or subjects. And this display

has proven to be an invaluable part of the evening for the Members and their guests.

Second, the Members really welcomed the opportunity to socialize with those from the opposite party, which rarely happens any longer in increasingly partisan Washington. (No press is permitted at the dinners, and they are strictly nonpartisan.) Members also welcomed a chance to meet people from the other chamber of Congress. Because there is relatively little major legislation passed these days, there are fewer conference committees where key leaders from the House and Senate get to know each other while negotiating the terms of a bill that both chambers can pass.

After the first dinner, word spread among Members of Congress, and greater numbers came to the second and following dinner interview evenings, which were called Congressional Dialogues.

There have now been more than seventy Congressional Dialogues over ten-plus years. Among those who have been interviewed are historians David McCullough, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Danielle Allen, Walter Isaacson, Doug Brinkley, and Michael Beschloss; business leaders Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt; and even Chief Justice John Roberts.

The Congressional Dialogues are naturally dependent on Congress's always-changing schedule, but there are typically about six to eight every year, with about 250 attendees on average. (Each representative or senator can bring a guest; they typically bring a spouse, a staff member, or a constituent.)

Jim Billington retired as Librarian of Congress in 2015 and was succeeded by President Obama's appointee, Dr. Carla Hayden, who had served the previous two decades and longer as the head of the public library organization, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, located in my hometown of Baltimore.

Dr. Hayden was the first woman, the first African American, and only the third trained librarian to hold the Librarian of Congress position. She earned a doctorate in library science from the University of Chicago (coincidentally the same university where I went to law school). She became an enthusiastic supporter of the Dialogues and hosted more than forty after Billington's departure.

President Trump removed Dr. Hayden as the Librarian in May 2025. Her deputy, Robert Newlen, as Acting Librarian of Congress, has continued the decade-long tradition of the Dialogues. Given the popularity of these events, they are likely to continue for quite some time.

I thought that the public would enjoy reading what has been said at a number of the Dialogues that featured some of the best-known interviewees, and Robert Newlen agreed. The result is this book, published by the Library of Congress and Duke University Press. In previous books that I have authored, I included a number of the Dialogues. However, there are a good many that have never appeared in print, and a cross section of these are included in this book. (The conversations have been lightly edited and updated in consultation with the interviewees.) I think these interviews not only enable the reader to learn what the Members heard but also provide a wide-ranging look at history (mostly American) and many leading figures who made that history.

A question frequently asked in Washington by scholars at the growing number of think tanks in the city, by organizers of policy conferences, by authors of books directly related to subjects being addressed by Congress, by writers of op-ed articles, and even by congressional staff members is simply this: “What impact does what I am doing have on what Congress ultimately does?”

The same question might be fairly asked about the Congressional Dialogues.

The answer for all of those individuals and organizations and gatherings, including the Dialogues, is difficult to know with precision. Members of Congress absorb information from many places, and they are not often precise—in floor or committee debates, or in the official legislative record that typically is drafted in support of legislation—about what has influenced them.

But, based on anecdotal evidence and conversations with Members, prior to and after Congressional Dialogues events, the Members routinely talk about the impact the dinners have on their thinking and perspectives. Indeed, more than a few have regularly commented that those evenings—the cocktail conversations, the

historic documents on display, the interviews, the chance to talk with other Members in a frank, unfiltered, and private way—are among the most enjoyable and valuable parts of being a Member of Congress.

—DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN, *May 2026*

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