



America's Operating System—It's the Law!

The Library of the U.S.A.—A Public Works Program

In 1935, FDR launched the Works Progress Administration, an employment relief program that changed the face of America, creating some of most enduring buildings, bridges, parks, and schools. A small part of that national effort was the Federal Writers Project, which created 800 books including the American Guide Series, called by many “the most comprehensive encyclopedia of Americana ever published.” The Library of the U.S.A. is a series of books by the Government Printing Office in an effort modeled on the Federal Writers Project.

The High End of Government Printing

The Government Printing Office (GPO) is best known for the plain and utilitarian look we know well from congressional hearings, tax forms, and the official journals of government such as the Congressional Record and the Federal Register. But, GPO has another side, employing some of the best typesetters, master binders, and pressmen in the world, and producing beautiful full-color volumes that rival those of any Japanese or Italian art book publisher.

The books produced are often historic in nature and are often sponsored by government agencies. The Committee on House Administration, for example, produced **Black Americans in Congress**, a gorgeous 803-page book accompanied by an extensive web site. NASA's Johnson Space Center produced **Before This Decade Is Out**, a prize-winning look at the Apollo program. When GPO produces these books, it recovers costs, but releases the materials in the public domain for further use. The NASA book, for example, was subsequently **republished in paperback** by a private publisher, and the seminal **History of the Formation of the Union**, produced in 1941 by GPO is **kept alive today** by W.S. Hein.

Today, volume at GPO declines as the government moves many publications and forms into a digital format. Producing high end books taps into some of the talented resources at the GPO, preserving jobs by shifting printing towards the high end.

Our Cultural and Historical Archives

To liberate the tremendous value in our cultural institutions—the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Archives—there are two complementary strategies to take. First, one can (and indeed must) work in bulk, releasing large numbers of photographs or videos and taking aggressive steps to digitize primary resources such as the Federal Depository Library Program archives at GPO.

A second, complimentary approach is a curated one, using trained writers, artists, historians, and archivists in conjunction with the master printers at GPO to create an archival quality series of books. We propose here a Library of the U.S.A., a series of books produced in conjunction with a jobs program, part of the national effort to create and protect 2.5 million new jobs. An editor-in-chief at GPO would work with an editorial board named by the key stakeholders to define the series, then work with creative workers selected from a national call for participation.

If the books are fundamental in nature, documenting the history of the United States and our national institutions, our national geography and natural resources, and the rich history of our culture and arts, it is likely that the Library of the U.S.A. would be a “must-have” item for libraries and would sell well in bookstores and on-line venues such as Amazon, thus recovering many of the costs of production while providing employment. By posting high-quality PDF files of the finished product as well as full-resolution imagery used in production, we can create an invaluable on-line resource for future generations and for other publishers to build upon.