

LA OPINION

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OP-ED

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Riordan Library?

By CALVIN NAITO

Our pristine Los Angeles Central Library, one of our most treasured depositories of everything that is our home – in terms real and symbolic – is on the verge of being corrupted by Mayor Richard J. Riordan, who has allowed his self-appointed Library Commission to change the building's name from us to him. While the April 19th vote by the Commission is disturbing, Riordan still has the opportunity to decline the material honor and thereby demonstrate a magnanimity that will cement a positive and timeless legacy for himself more than his great wealth, mayoral policy initiatives, or a nameplate ever could.

He should be concerned about his legacy, as his mayoral administration is in its final months, and he is in the last one-fourth of his life. His eight years of political authority is expiring, and, with the economy in decline, a police force scandalized and smaller and less effective than promised, and a city bureaucracy perhaps only incrementally more efficient, his record is mixed. He still has his hundreds of millions of dollars, but, as the cliché goes, he can't take it with him to you know where.

What he can take with him is his honor. Real power is moral not political. He had the short-term political power to mobilize his prominent allies and sway his Library Commission to quickly call a vote without seeking public comment. He has the long-term moral power to inspire all Angelenos that he is a person committed to their collective well being, so committed that he can decline vanity and permanent material self-advertisement.

No one should have such a major building named after them while still in power, especially by the person's own appointees. Time must pass so history can be allowed to analyze the official's record of performance. Through such due process, we then responsibly name a building, such as the Lincoln Center after President Abraham Lincoln, for an individual that exercised invaluable leadership on behalf of the people.

In all fairness, Riordan deserves his due. I have met him and observed him at events. I have no doubt that he truly cares about children. He has demonstrated a strong commitment to education, literacy, and libraries. But the form of recognition must be appropriate in its setting and scope. It would be apt for the mayor to be recognized with a plaque or other physical award for his commitment to things library-related. For example, the Los Angeles Times' sponsored Festival of Books did that last Saturday, and this seemed perfectly fitting.

The man who owns over 40,000 books has read a lot, although one has to wonder: Has Riordan been a good student of life? Great people are cognizant that we are all mortal and that having one's name plastered on a building does not necessarily inspire our youth and future generations to live a noble life. Riordan showed he had major missing values early in his term when he proposed selling the Central Library to a subsidiary of tobacco giant Philip Morris and also offered to rename any of the city's

libraries after anyone who donated \$1-million to the city. Thank God the public pressured the City Council to reject such insensitive ideas!

Let us pray that such tendencies have not simply been in remission but that the mayor has acquired greater wisdom over the last eight years. The great irony is that Riordan stands to throw away the very virtues that the Commission ostensibly aims to honor him for. If there is anything that great books and libraries of knowledge teach us, it is that the most compelling and inspiring human examples in our civilization come from individuals and societies that courageously prove their steadfast idealism and exemplify generous human and civic values.

Eight years ago, Riordan campaigned on the theme that he was "tough enough to turn L.A. around." He now has the opportunity to demonstrate that he is tough and selfless enough to decline (i.e., turn around) the Commission's decision and ensure that the Central Library's nameplate is all of us -- Los Angeles -- not one person. Declining the library's nameplate would ensure Riordan a wonderful timeless legacy.

Calvin Naito is a native of Los Angeles who partakes in the wonders of the Los Angeles Central Library like hundreds of thousands of other Angelenos. He lives and works in Los Angeles.