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## Poet Laureate Stands By Words Against Israel and Won't Step Down

By MARIA NEWMAN

**NEWARK, Oct. 2**— Amiri Baraka, the state's poet laureate, stood on the podium at a literary festival here today to say that he would not heed Gov. James E. McGreevey's demand that he step down for writing a poem that implied that Israel knew in advance about the attack on the World Trade Center.

Before a mostly supportive crowd of about 200 in a stately hall of the Newark Public Library, Mr. Baraka said his critics were attempting to "repress and stigmatize independent thinkers everywhere."

"I will not apologize, I will not resign," Mr. Baraka said, causing most in attendance to applaud. Others, however, sat silently.

On Friday, Governor McGreevey called for Mr. Baraka to step down because of some passages in his poem "Somebody Blew Up America," which Mr. Baraka wrote in October 2001 and which has been widely disseminated. Mr. Baraka was appointed poet laureate this summer, and the governor has acknowledged that he probably does not have the power to force him to resign.

"We wholeheartedly disagree with what Mr. Baraka is saying," Kevin Davitt, the governor's press spokesman, said today. "Unfortunately, our political hands are tied on this one. The most we can do right now is to continue to urge Mr. Baraka to resign and to explore any legislative possibilities to prevent any such future misfortunes like this."

The poet laureate is chosen by a six-member selection committee appointed by the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. State law makes no provision for removing someone from the post.

After the event at the library, Shai Goldstein, the New Jersey regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the Newark poet had "added insult to injury" by perpetuating what Mr. Goldstein called a "big lie" that had circulated through many parts of the world that somehow Jews were responsible for the attack on the trade center.

"When you repeat any part of the big lie, you're not part of the solution of getting to the truth, but of perpetuating that lie," he said. "He has disgraced the position and himself."

Mr. Baraka was the keynote speaker for an event marking the library's designation as a literary

landmark by the New Jersey Center for the Book. In his address, he spent almost 45 minutes going over his poem almost line by line, and insisting that it had been distorted and subject to "trash propaganda."

"It is a poem that aims to probe and disturb, but there is not any evidence of anti-Semitism," he said.

One part reads:

Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed

Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers

To stay home that day

Why did Sharon stay away?

Mr. Baraka insisted that Israel and its prime minister, Ariel Sharon, as well as President Bush, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and many United States allies, knew of the pending terrorist attacks, citing various reports in the news media in the Middle East. Such accounts, however, have been widely discredited.

He noted that the poem also pointed out atrocities committed against many groups, including the Jews.

Mr. Baraka's appearance attracted many supporters. Some said they supported the poet's right to talk about oppression in the world.

The principal of the Morton Street Middle School in Newark, Carl Gregory, brought about 20 of his students and teachers to hear Mr. Baraka.

"His is definitely a poem that gets people to start asking questions at a time when people in power don't want us to ask questions," Mr. Gregory said. "I want our children to be exposed to great literature, and he is a great poet."

Library officials said that while some invited guests canceled their attendance, they did not consider asking Mr. Baraka to call off his speech.

"We know Mr. Baraka, we know the kinds of things he has written," said Charles E. Cummings, a Newark historian who is on the library's staff. "That's what the library is about, the First Amendment. We are totally a bastion of free speech."

Catherine Boback-Kinsella, a former librarian in nearby Harrison, N.J., who now works for a museum in Harrison, said she did not believe Mr. Baraka should have written the poem, but she listened to him politely. "Very, very liberal," she said afterward, shaking her head. "I don't know that there's much truth in it. You could say a person has a right to free speech, but when it comes to times of threatened national security, he should have been more sensitive himself about what he was saying."

**Photo: Amiri Baraka, New Jersey's poet laureate, answered questions in Newark yesterday, shortly after telling an audience that he would not resign. (Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times)**

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