

The Metro Section

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New Jersey Laureate Refuses to Resign Over Poem

By MATTHEW PURDY

15 A month after Amiri Baraka became the poet laureate of New Jersey, Gov. James E. McGreevey asked the writer and political activist to resign yesterday because a poem he read at a recent poetry festival implies that Israel knew about the Sept. 11 attack in advance.

But Mr. Baraka said he would not resign, creating an unusual political quandary. Aides to the governor said he did not have the power to remove Mr. Baraka because Mr. McGreevey had not directly selected him. And a member of the committee of poets and cultural officials who chose Mr. Baraka said that group had no power to remove him either.

"I'm not resigning," Mr. Baraka said at his home in Newark, vowing to fight removal. "Let's see if they can do that."

The governor asked for the resignation

because of a poem titled "Somebody Blew Up America," which Mr. Baraka recited a week ago at the renowned Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo, N.J. Most of the poem concerns massacres, murders and oppression by the powerful against blacks, Jews and others, but it also asks:

Who knew the World Trade Center was
gonna get bombed
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin
Towers
To stay home that day
Why did Sharon stay away?

Mr. Baraka's poem repeats a persistent yet widely discredited story that has circulated on the Internet since the terror attacks. "Everything said about Israel in the poem is easily researched," Mr. Baraka said. "If you criticize Israel, they hide be-

hind the religion and call you anti-Semitic."

Mr. Baraka, 67, whose original name was LeRoi Jones, was a central figure in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960's, and has been an outspoken critic of both white and black leaders of Newark. His writing has won him many awards and fellowships, but some of his early work has been criticized as anti-white and anti-Semitic.

Shai Goldstein, the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the poem "was not only anti-Semitic, but it was also insulting to members of families who had to suffer the death of relatives on 9/11." He said it was particularly painful because of Mr. Baraka's position as "an alleged representative of the state."

Mr. Baraka was briefly booed when he read his poem at the festival on Sept. 20,

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Amiri Baraka read some of his work at a poetry festival in December.

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9/1/ according to several people present. The festival director, Jim Haba, said Mr. Baraka apologized to him and cut the lines when he recited the poem again later that day. "He knew he did something ugly," Mr. Haba said.

Marc West, a college student who wrote about Mr. Baraka's performance yesterday in *The Jewish Standard*, a North Jersey paper, said about 2,000 people heard Mr. Baraka's performance. "He was saying it as if it was an absolute truth," Mr. West

said.

Mr. Baraka was selected by a committee convened by the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and the State Council on the Arts. His name was forwarded to the governor, who signed a proclamation on Aug. 28 giving him a two-year, \$10,000 appointment "to promote and encourage poetry."

An aide to Mr. McGreevey said the state attorney general's office had told the governor that he could not remove Mr. Baraka. And a member of the selection committee said it, too, had a legal opinion that the matter was out of its hands.

Even before the governor acted, Mr. Baraka's poem had sparked a debate about censorship. Gerald Stern, the state's first laureate and a member of the selection committee, said he pushed for Mr. Baraka partly because "I thought it was important for the black community to get recognition."

When he heard Mr. Baraka's poem, he said, "I was shocked at the stupidity of it." But the proper response is difficult to figure out, he said.

"We don't censor poets," Mr. Stern said, but "lies never serve good, and there was hate in it."