



FREE SPEECH - IN CHAINS

by Guy Arseneau

“I believe not a word you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it.” This famous quote, although wrongly attributed to the French writer/philosophe Voltaire, aptly sums up his signature beliefs and way of life. Initially used by the English writer Beatrice Hail in her 1906 work, *The Friends of Voltaire*, a biography about his role as an iconoclastic thorn in the side of French society, this epigrammatic declaration nonetheless encapsulates his legacy and philosophy. While Voltaire’s life can be seen as a response to the zeitgeist of 18th century French provincialism, the dynamics of his independent thinking mirrored the spirit of America—up until now, that is.

Over the course of a single generation, the group think mindset contained in George Orwell’s prophetic novel, *1984*, has eroded the expression of analytical thought or discourse in contemporary American society. Under the ever-growing umbrage of Political Correctness, perspectives, viewpoints and opinions undergo censorship, modifications and outright suppression on a daily basis in an on-going bid to prevent “offending” anyone. Hiding beneath the veneer of civility, pseudo courtesy trumps honest candor in public forums. The results are readily apparent, but even more importantly are the on-going implications.

Underscoring this assault on a dissent of conscience and free expression, a recent news wire article told the story of 9-year-old Logan Autry, a third grader at the Powers-Ginsburg Elementary School in Fresno, California. Over a three-day period, the school’s vice-principal continually tried to bully him into removing a cap he wore because it contained the Donald Trump campaign slogan, “Making America Great Again.” With all the earnestness of any 9-year-old, Logan stated that the vice-principal told him that his cap was drawing “negative attention” from his classmates. In Logan’s defense his legal guardian, Angela Hoffnecht, freely admits, “He knows more about this election than I do,” It’s kind of

embarrassing, much like ‘are you smarter than a third grader?’

Logan’s right to dissent and express opinions and viewpoints contrary to the prevailing social winds is a fundamental liberty that is uniquely American in spirit, a sought after goal in human history and a rapidly disappearing concept in a technology-oriented universe driven by computer-based acronyms, abbreviations and alphanumeric techno jargon. Can George Orwell’s thought shrinking vocabulary of Newspeak be far behind, or worse yet, does it already underscore and animate the undeniable reality of a language undergoing a continual reduction to the level of picture graphs? Perhaps the answer to that issue can be found in a third grade civics textbook—or the experience of a third grader.

In a more serious and troubling vein, the monkey business associated with grade school monkey bars takes on an even more ominous note when applied in and to the venue of Revisionist History. Amateur history buff Kevin Smith, a resident of Lafayette, Georgia set up life size displays of Civil War soldiers on his own property. Using Confederate flags and mannequins in military regalia to depict soldiers of that era, this North Georgia resident sought to recreate the tragic but critical impact the Civil War played in the history of the United States.

In this particular case, the famous quotation, “History is written by the victors,” spoken by the late English Prime Minister, Winston Churchill served not only as an observation but also a threat from the local Housing Authority. Citing no specific complaints, and without naming any individuals who objected to the display, Smith was told he would have to remove this historical display from his own private property. Even more troubling, no safety codes or city ordinance violations were cited. “I’m standing my ground, this is part of our history,” Smith said in response to the anonymous complaints. “My display is not fostering hate,” he noted, “It is part of our history.” The implications of this type

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of thinking are not only obvious but also chilling. If the leaders of public education in Germany decided that the 12-year period of 1933 to 1945 was too “embarrassing” or “inconvenient” to remember and pass on to future generations, does that mean that the political and social atrocities of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party should be glossed over, ignored or forgotten about? As an academic discipline and science of perspectives, history is indeed written by the victors, but does that require that the consequences and legacy of it must be ignored by the descendants of history?

Closer to home, can the shame inducing tragedy of America in the sixties be swept under the rug? Will the next generation of Americans forget that there was a time when blacks were beaten, shot, lynched, fire hosed and attached by police dogs because they wanted the right to vote, use a public water fountain and sit at a lunch counter? Will the racist sins of Bull Connor, the infamous “Commissioner of Public Safety” in Birmingham, Alabama, one day be casually dismissed as bullshit by generations as yet unborn?

By definition, expressions of dissent represents a challenge to and rebuttal of prevailing public opinions. They are the hallmark of learning, the spirit of change and the driving force of human potential and growth.

Galileo and Copernicus knew this when they espoused the idea that the earth revolved around the sun. Einstein demonstrated the importance of dissent when he rejected commonly held beliefs about physics and developed his Theory of Relativity. In a more pragmatic but dramatic rebuttal to the wisdom of “experts,” twentieth century President Harry Truman upset the political apple cart of his day in the iconic photograph of him holding a copy of the Chicago Daily Tribune newspaper containing the banner headline DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN. Political pundits, pollsters and virtually everyone “in the know” were sure that he would soon be vacating the White House. Two generations later, Harry Truman, who ended World War II, desegregated the armed forces and implemented the now famous Marshall Plan, is considered one of America’s greatest and most influential presidents. “The little man from Missouri,” with almost no political clout over his elite East Coast colleagues and a neophyte on the international political stage, reshaped the world. Like so many individuals before him, Harry Truman proved that opinions count and convictions matter if we have the commitment to recognize them and the courage to give them a voice.

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