

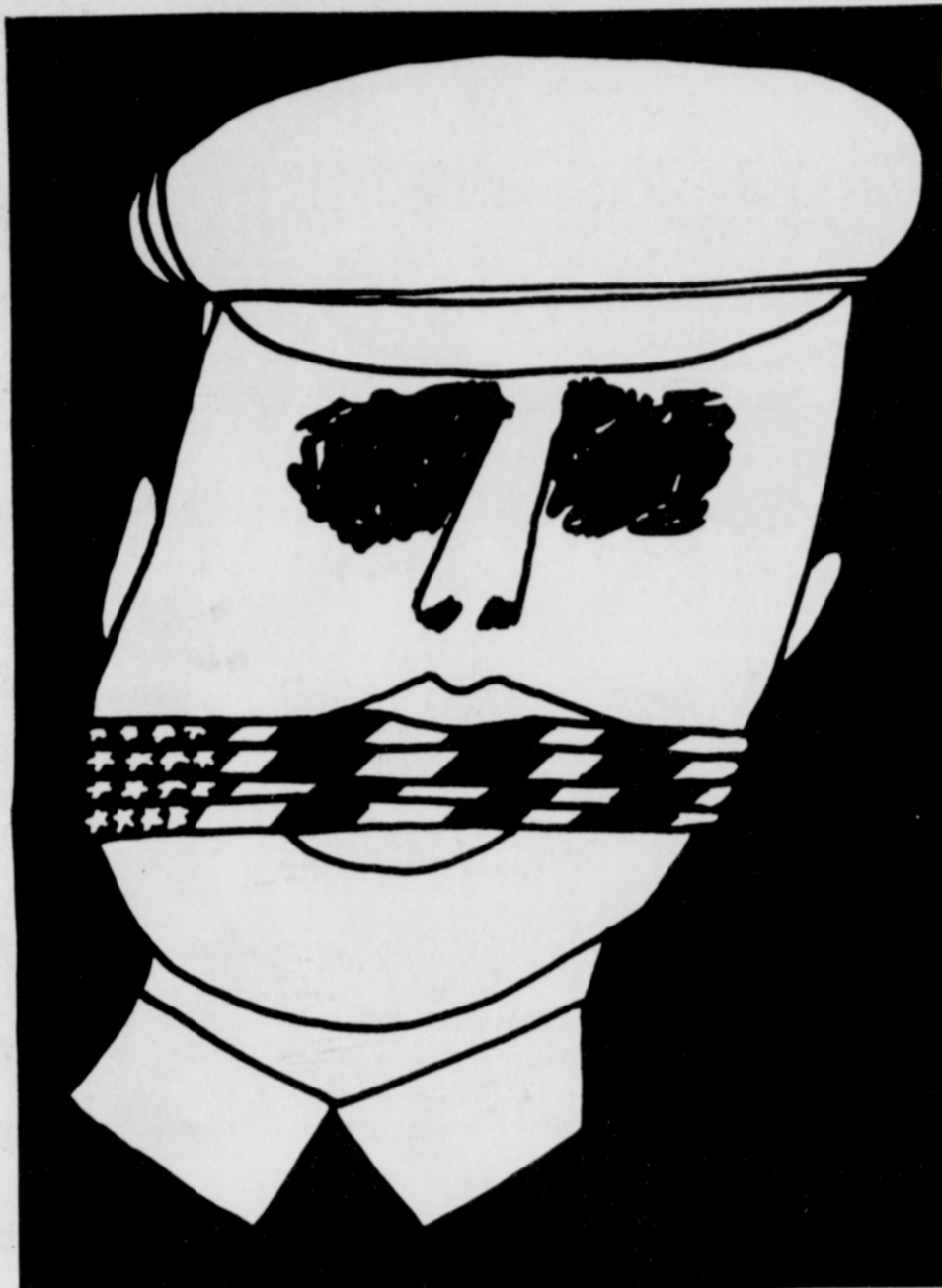
"FREEDOM TO DIFFER IS NOT LIMITED TO THINGS THAT DO NOT MATTER MUCH. THAT WOULD BE A MERE SHADOW OF FREEDOM. THE TEST OF ITS SUBSTANCE IS THE RIGHT TO DIFFER AS TO THINGS THAT TOUCH THE HEART OF THE EXISTING ORDER."

-U.S. SUPREME COURT JUSTICE HARRY A. BLACKMUN

The free exchange of ideas is under assault again. This time the Federal Communications Commission is moving to squelch broadcast freedom with a witch-hunt for evidence of that much abused, imprecisely defined and malevolently interpreted word, obscenity. Independent and noncommercial radio stations all over the country, including KMUN-FM in Astoria, devoted the first week of 1988 fighting back in their own threatened forum — on the air — dissecting and warning about the consequences of this latest attempt to choke airway freedom.

It might be wise to begin this year of a Presidential election to reaffirm the necessity of the First Amendment. 1987 was celebrated as the bicentennial of the Constitution, although most of the observance was on the level of a former chief justice of the Supreme Court co-hosting a ceremony with a person dressed as Mickey Mouse at Disneyworld in Florida. The most important part of the Constitution was actually tacked on four years later, in 1791, almost as an afterthought when the Bill of Rights were added as the first ten amendments, which have ever since been accepted as the most basic rights of the common citizenry. The very first amendment guarantees the freedom of speech and a free press in the assumption that liberty survives only in an atmosphere of free and open expression of thought and opinion, no matter how diverse, uncomfortable, obscene or absurd.

Controversy, that feared word, is the language of democracy — the robust dialectic of conflicting opinions. Without controversy there is no dialogue, only the obedience to command. The appropriate response to controversial or unpopular speech or ideas is public rebuttal, not censorship, yet those who rule in democracy's name, to enlarge



LAWRENCE RATZKIN

considerably. Complex social questions are reduced to a vindictive snarl, and the most clamorously ignorant insist that their vengeful fables become doctrine and rule. In the names of liberty and justice both are sabotaged to benefit a few over the many. Like Ionesco's Romania, it is difficult to resist the inversion that permeates the public skin.

Censorship of opinion and expression did not begin with the administration of Ronald Reagan, nor will it end when Reagan is gone and considered an embarrassing episode in our history. The Reagan administration has, however, been the most persistently virulent in its contempt for political and religious freedom and in withholding essential information to weaken the participation of the nation's population in decisions that affect everyone and which they are entitled to by law. It has denied entrance to foreign speakers into this country if their beliefs differ from its own (although that provision of the McCarran-Walters Act has been recently repealed by Congress). It has denied political respect or support to any ideas in general that are not in agreement with its dangerously parochial and aggressive view of world affairs, and refuses to share scientific or technological research information with the international scientific and intellectual community. It is also probably the most secretive and clandestine administration in our history. It is a product of advertising, or adheres to its principles, that truth is not necessary, only the appearance of truth — or more pertinent, that a lie told often enough and by enough people is accepted as truth: the agreed upon fiction that masquerades as reality to distort and manipulate circumstance, and is eventually recorded as historical truth.

THINGS THAT TOUCH THE HEART

their own powers, continually attempt to limit the range of ideas and information necessary to engage in the argument of opinion indispensable to political and personal freedom.

The assumption of freedom is that the average human being is intelligent and inspired by compassion and that most people will think and act reasonably most of the time. The assumption of government is that the common citizenry is unintelligent, primitive and brutal and must be shielded from its own perfidious nature. The tendency of government is to rule and it is a parasite. It must by the implication or force of its sovereignty feed upon and subtract the political liberties, rights and powers of those it rules. It is the responsibility of the people to always contain the power of their government, which without that restraint will relentlessly take power away from the people. In this century government has taken much power for itself, some of it for the betterment of the people such as civil rights laws, but also much of it against the people such as the rule of terror, secrecy and doubt caused by the nuclear arms race.

The idea of the authority of law is a recognition by most of us that some of us will cheat, rob, murder and otherwise make life uncomfortable for the rest. A majority desires protection from the psychopathy of an avaricious minority. For exactly the same purpose, to protect us from predatory or cruel government, the political freedom and power of the common citizenry has been made the law of this nation. Yet a government of the people is assumed to also be a government for the people, so it is entrusted to act in the people's behalf to prevent or correct the excesses of despotic and unprincipled interests, which is in contrast to the present era of corporate rule and privilege. President Ronald Reagan is wrong when he says that a free government must be free of government. In his savage dismantling of government protections he has simply switched it from acting as a benefactor and protector of civil rights and liberties to its more ominous nature as military policeman.

Ionesco wrote once about living in Romania in the 1930s when the fascists came to power. Everything was saturated with fascist promotion: radio, movies, newspapers, posters and billboards. It was, he wrote, impossible to not be worn down by its ingestion of the society.

Only a few withstood it for long, the usual suspects, offbeat sorts who never quite conformed to cultural assimilation or authority; writers, artists, poets, musicians, a few academics and members of labor unions — most of them liberals, socialists and other left-leaning types. Most of the people, if not in agreement with the grim visions and rule of the fascists, generally accommodated them.

The United States is in a similar position in the 1980s. In a sense the 1950s, a period of political hysteria and repression, are being revived after an interruption of two decades. Our society is in a cycle of reversion, one of private interest that often follows a vigorous and chaotic period of public activism, an inevitable recoil as people become tired, confused and angry at the demands upon their intelligence, compassion and pockets. The problems of meeting the demands of ever larger segments of disenfranchised people and ideas in an incessantly complex and accelerating society create a paradoxical response of hardening hearts and desires for simpler, even repressive solutions. The cultural dialogue narrows

To remain at liberty, or at least preserve what remains of our liberties and eventually venture into a more liberal and compassionate climate, the influx and dissemination of information, ideas and opinions are necessary. The problem is that it has been nearly sacred doctrine that an informed citizenry will act reasonably and with sound judgement. The reality seems to be that the vast bulk of information on virtually every conceivable and esoteric matter from everywhere in the world at all times of the day every day, and the sheer volume of its variety — statistics, fact(oid)s, opinion polls, ideas and reportage of events from births to wars — is incomprehensible. At some point the beleaguered brain overloads and shuts off.

Public apathy is not accidental or the result of not having access to information. It is most usually the opposite, a premeditated response to a society awash in paper and verbiage. We opt out. We do not want to know. We know too much.

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