



# Speech and Consequences

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**T**his issue begins with the moving story of intellectual freedom champion Gordon Conable. The drama plays out like this: a principled and outspoken defender of First Amendment rights stands up for a controversial book in accordance with library policy and federal law. Then, his community vilifies, harasses, and punishes him for this defense until his death. One lesson is the inescapable truth that although we have the right to free speech, there can be consequences, whether in Michigan, or in Russia (see this issue's review of *Garden of Broken Statues*).

Another lesson is that we don't do enough to support the bravest among us. One purpose of the LeRoy C. Merritt Fund is just that: to provide some financial support for those who literally lose their jobs over an intellectual freedom (IF) challenge. But that's a little late in the game.

One can't help but be struck by the churning anger and hypocrisy of many IF battles. Defenders of morality (there's too much sex in the library!) move quickly to an eagerness not just to silence the champion but to urge the burning of books, to issue anonymous death threats, or promise to harm children. Really? In the name of virtue?

To be fair, this dynamic works in the opposite direction, too, as people who protested the insensitivity of Milo Yiannopoulos's hate speech themselves seem to have initiated violence in Berkeley. It's hard to accept someone as an advocate of "safe spaces" when he is throwing a brick at you. All too often, we move from protesting speech to promising or delivering destruction, thereby undermining not only the Constitution, but our own humanity.

But it's clear that Conable's experience is not unique. Today, in an age of doxing and internet stalking, the public annihilation of individuals with unpopular views just moves a little faster.

Conable's story, and Cooper and Bevan-Cavallaro's probing look at Florida and the eroding intellectual freedom rights of minors, also underscore today's upsurge of attempts by nervous parents to try to erase any mention of sexuality from our culture. As is clear from this issue's many news items (so insightfully summarized and framed by Hank Reichman), some parents are convinced that their seventeen-year-old children, just a year or so away from all the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, dare not be exposed even to acknowledged classics if those classics contain a single sexual scene.



But why? What's going to happen, exactly? Teenagers will suddenly get interested in sex? They're already interested in sex, which predates not only the internet, but the alphabet. Will they be encouraged to emulate the worst behavior they read about, but not the best?

The suppression of human experience, the failure to talk about it, doesn't make the underlying realities disappear. Silence just makes it harder to acknowledge the facts and to deal with their aftermath. Conable was right to view Madonna's *Sex* as a teachable moment for the

community. Teachers are right to offer *Beloved* as a way to understand some of the root causes of racial conflict and to listen, respectfully, to some of the American voices that have been suppressed for too long.

Ultimately, the vision of the Founders is that our democracy depends on not only the freedom to speak and express, but also the right to access the speech and expressions of others. This is also true for simple human learning. If we are ever to be more than we are, we must understand what we do not.