

In celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday tomorrow (February 12, 2025), I share with you a short piece I was asked to write on the freedoms that Americans are losing day by day. I focus on the banning of books, given my career, but it can easily extend to women's health, voting rights, citizenship, and the list goes on and on. As author Stephen Marc shares in his recent books, including his award-winning AMERICAN/TRUE COLORS, the American journey continues but to where?

LET FREEDOM RING

by George F. Thompson

Given the circumstances that now confront the majority of citizens throughout the nation, I have been thinking a great deal about freedom and keep returning to a childhood memory of singing, along with the entire student body at weekly assembly, the patriotic song "America" (1831) by Samuel Francis Smith and its famous opening lines:

My country 'tis
This wee sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside
Let freedom ring.

And later, in high school and again in college, I learned that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. used these very same lines in his passionate call for the end of racial inequality and injustice in America and for the immediate acceleration of liberty, equal opportunities, and justice for ALL Americans (of every race, creed, background, origin of country, and religion or lack thereof) during his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the Washington Mall (August 28, 1963), more than a century after President Abraham Lincoln issued the seminal document in U.S. history, the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves on January 1, 1863.

So where are we today as Americans continue to define/redefine and expand/limit the meanings, context, and extent of our personal and public freedoms? How do we reconcile the recent banning of more than 10,000 books in the United States during 2023-2024 alone, even as the vast majority who oppose book banning and the minority who ban the books may together sing "My country 'tis/Thee sweet land of liberty...?"

For an answer, I offer the following observation about the banning of books by Joe Wood, an old friend, Vietnam vet, author of THE NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE, and a distinguished professor of geography who ended his career as Provost at the University of Southern Maine and then the University of Baltimore:

“Supporting libraries financially and with donations of books is an important form of non-violent resistance these days, especially here in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where several townships and boroughs have taken the political move to cut their usual annual financial contributions to the Lancaster County Library (over drag-queen storytelling), even as the library continues to serve ALL residents, including especially people who are marginalized, need access to the Internet, have inadequate incomes, are homeless, do not speak English as a first language, or seek information about their legal status in the country.”

As Joe conveys in his new role in retirement as a 78-year-old member of the “Non-Violent Resistance Force” in Lancaster, the one thing citizens cannot do is lack courage and be silent or inactive. Otherwise we will be subject to additional restrictions on our personal and public freedoms beyond the ones already forced upon us by those in positions of power: from local library and school boards to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Personally, there are too many days when it feels as if episodes from “Star Trek” may be coming true, that we are in the 24th Century on the Starship Enterprise under the command of Captain Jean-Luc Picard trying our best to survive and outwit the collective Borg (“Resistance is futile.”), which increasingly feels like one political party—the former party of Abraham Lincoln—in which any dissent (and even the freedom to dissent) is disallowed and disqualifying and occasionally life-threatening.

But whenever I get the feeling that resistance might be futile, I consider the rise of book banning in America by an intolerant and zealous minority and the multiple threats such bans are to all of our personal and public freedoms. I also remember my reaction to seeing for the first time the original film, “Fahrenheit 451” (November 14, 1966), and how scary human behavior can be. You may remember that 451 degrees Fahrenheit is the temperature at which a book burns. Shudder at the thought that this could be our America and the America of our grandchildren if we do nothing but ride quietly into the good night and allow the Borg to rule and reign like an autocratic collective bully.