

Are we keeping peace or fanning flames

It was not long ago that we carried on here about this business of cancel culture and censorship and addressing the grievances of the aggrieved and the rampant iconoclasm that leads to tearing down statues and all the excesses on all fronts.

Now it is Dr. Seuss’s books that offend. What next? Who knows? What then? Is it censorship or editing? Are we keeping the peace or feeding the flames of discontent?

Nations, people, institutions go through these spasms from time to time. They are unpleasant. Art and artists are destroyed. Consider the collapse of author and humorist Garrison Keillor’s career a few years ago. In a matter of hours and with neither trial nor conviction his imaginary and gloriously American town of Lake Wobegon was overrun by zealots and reduced to rubble. We shall never again visit the Sidetrack Tap or pray at the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.

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A MOMENT
Ed Breen



Oh, I know why this happened. And the disappearance of actor Kevin Spacey and Sen. Al Franken and Matt Lauer and Charlie Rose. Some of them did despicable things. Others did stupid things. But in this age in which we live we do not separate the stupid from the despicable. Off with their heads. Now. Kill them all and let God sort them.

It is all so reminiscent of the buckets of blood flowing in the streets of Paris in the days of ex-

cess after the French Revolution. I wasn’t there, you understand, but I think the past couple of years in our United States have given us all a feel for the kinds of excess that went on in those days. Then it was the aristocrats who must die. All of them. Starting with the king. Off with their heads. Now.

We need more efficient ways of killing them. So, the guillotine was invented. Swift, sure, certain death. Heads rolled, 17,000 of them in the year after June of 1793. Guilty? Innocent? Who knows? Who cares? Off with their heads. Now.

I exaggerate with purpose here. We are not severing heads, but we are destroying careers and creating the kinds of fears that cause what courts like to call a “chilling effect.” Who shall be the first to step into the public square and denounce the guillotine? Or denounce the swift hysteria of the “me too” mob? Or denounce

those who shout down free speech on campus or on the internet?

There is little reason here to recite the litany again. The willy-nilly renaming of schools. The removal of statues, even though many were erected for all the wrong reasons.

At least Harvey Weinstein was given a trial, confronted by his accusers and convicted by a jury before he was packed off to prison for the rest of his life. And, no, I am in no way defending his conduct. Please do not interpret this otherwise.

Equally noxious, but a more knotty issue to sort: Who, exactly, if anyone, has the right and the authority to pull the plug on my social media? Do you and I have the right of unfettered speech on a soapbox that is privately owned? Can we say what we want to – and the truth be damned – or is there some burden of speaking demonstrable truth?

And no, this is not a

First Amendment issue. That precious document protects us from the government intervention and allows us to speak in a public place. But Facebook and Twitter and all those other high tech havens are not – repeat, not – public places nor are they a part of the government. They are privately owned creatures not unlike the editorial page of the local newspaper. Every adult newspaper editor or broadcast journalist will tell you flat out, right of up front that he or she holds the hammer. That editor has both the right and the responsibility to pass judgment and set standards for what shall be written and said on its pages and airwaves.

If this is not so in social media – and we are still, as a society, trying to define the perimeter of social media. If it is not so, if we find that each has the right to spread slander and incite riot, then there is a yet larger and unresolved issue.

And that brings us

back to kindly old Dr. Seuss. Theodore Geisel, who was Dr. Seuss, died 30 years ago. He left a legacy of more than 60 titles, mainly for children, but amused all of us. Now, the trustees of his estate, after a two-year and thoughtful examination of his work, have determined that six of his vast shelf of books do not properly reflect the changed world in which we now live and have said they will remove them from his available work. This is not censorship; it is responsible exercise of their duty.

No, President Biden did not do this. No, Amazon.com and that evil Mr. Bezos did not do this. It is not a part of a vast conspiracy of the right or the left. It was an informed judgment by those charged forming the literary legacy of a man who gave us much.

Now, please tell me why we can’t remove the guillotine from the public square and return to acting as adults.

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