

# Keep an eye on the gang under the golden dome

It will be interesting this year to see if the Georgia General Assembly continues to hack away at free speech and the First Amendment.

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If they don't, it will certainly be a dramatic change. For years, the Assembly has proposed—and sometimes passed—numerous bills aimed at stamping out forms of speech that some legislators find objectionable.

Take, for example, the preposterous and unconstitutional pornography laws that are inflicted almost yearly upon Georgians.

The kooky 1984 porn law is typical. Currently being challenged in court by the American Booksellers Association, it is so incredibly restrictive that, as **Atlanta Journal-Constitution** columnist Bill Shipp described it,

“even a dictionary, displayed in plain sight, might be enough to inspire arrest of the book merchant.”

No doubt this law, like earlier ones, will soon be declared unconstitutional. However, odds are the Assembly will keep on trying to tell adults what they can and cannot read.

Unquestionably the most ludicrous censorship proposal of 1985 was Rep. Rudolph Johnson (D-Morrow)'s stupefying call for a **statewide ban** on liquor advertising. Billboards, television, radio, newspapers, magazines—Johnson would have forbidden them all to carry ads for Demon Rum.

Here were several repressive ideas in one neat package: media censorship, restraints on commercial speech, interference in the marketplace, and discrimination against Georgia publishing and broadcasting.

Happily, this numbskull scheme was quickly buried. Be warned, though: Johnson has vowed to bring it back.

Not all recent censorship attempts are so obviously loony. In 1984, Sen. Wayne Garner (D-Douglasville) proposed that newspapers be forbidden to print the names of felony victims under age 17. Last year, Tom Buck (D-

Columbus) wanted to prohibit papers from disclosing the names of juvenile victims or witnesses of sexual offenses.

Both bills enjoyed wide support in the Assembly, perhaps because they addressed legitimate concerns. However, such concerns are properly handled by persuasion and pressure from concerned citizens—not by government censorship of newspapers.

Also last year, House Speaker Tom Murphy proposed to ban all electrical recording devices from Georgia courtrooms—a move the Georgia Press Association said would put trial coverage back in the dark ages. After loud complaints from newspapers and citizens, Murphy—who is, incidentally, a practicing lawyer—grudgingly abandoned the idea.

If you're still not convinced that many Georgia legislators feel indifferent—if not downright hostile—towards the ideal of the First Amendment, consider perhaps the most chilling episode of last year's Assembly. It began when Rep. David Lucas (D-Macon)—apparently carrying a grudge against a local paper—proposed to make it a criminal offense for a newspaper to publish unsigned editorials.

It's bad enough that even one legislator would show such obvious contempt for freedom of the press. What was truly shocking, though, was that the House—instead of denouncing the idea as tyrannical and unconstitutional—actually passed the proposal overwhelmingly by voice vote!

Thus one of the most basic American freedoms was cheerfully trampled upon. Thankfully, the Senate refused to go along, and the proposal was dropped.

Some say the House vote was merely a joke, a way of ribbing the newspapers. That hardly excuses such behavior, though. If the House, as a “joke,” had voted to re-instate slavery, or to confiscate all guns in the state, no one would laugh and applaud their wit. It was similarly not funny when they attacked one of our country's most precious liberties.

And if they were actually serious—as, I suspect, more than a few were—they proved themselves utterly unfit to hold their offices.

As we follow the Assembly this year, let us keep these episodes in mind—particularly that picture of the House roaring, like some hooched-up lynch mob, for suppression of the press.