

Jim Harris

Smut-sniffers blew one in Macon arrest

The smut-sniffers are at it again. Their latest victim is Macon florist Lawrence Mayer, who was recently collared by vice squad cops for the heinous crime of—get this—selling mildly naughty greeting cards.

Don't laugh. It's true.

Was this preposterous arrest merely an overreaction by some lone, half-witted and too-zealous vice squad goon? Not at all. Mayer was pinched only after the Bibb County magistrate himself had carefully examined the offending cards and solemnly declared them a grave menace to public morality.

Amazingly, Mayer's arrest, though unquestionably idiotic, was not based on some wild misinterpretation of Georgia law.



It was, in fact, fully consistent with Georgia's 1984 obscenity statute. That law, currently being challenged in court by the American Booksellers' Association, is so vague and all-encompassing that it would prohibit biology texts, art books, most modern novels, and even the Bible itself from being sold anywhere except adult bookstores, if construed literally.

Mayer's arrest was shameful and should be deplored. However, some good has come out of it.

For one thing, the Macon vice squad and others involved in this low affair have utterly discredited themselves.

This is a good thing, because "vice squads" are unneeded and

sordid outfits that **should** be discredited. It is absurd to dole out tax dollars to cops so they can spend their days watching dirty movies, ogling hoochie-coochie dancers, uprooting marijuana

plants and dictating personal morality.

Vice squads are relics of the days of witch hunters and saloon smashers, and we would be much better off if they were abolished altogether.

Mayer's arrest also demonstrates the danger of giving great discretionary power to government. Clearly, if selling even mildly off-color greeting cards is grounds for arrest under current obscenity laws, then no bookseller, theater owner, or artist in Georgia is safe.

Thus, by graphically showing the foolishness and tyranny of these government policies, Mayer's arrest, ironically, helps the cause of freedom.

There is, however, an annoying flip-side to this. The Mayer buffoonery will allow a lot of half-hearted defenders of the First Amendment to indulge in an orgy of smug, self-serving breast-beating. Editorial writers will

snicker at the Bibb County bluenoses. Statewide, people will shake their heads and denounce Mayer's arrest as an invasion of free speech and personal liberty.

They are right, of course. But—and this is what annoys me—they are fighting a straw man. Mayer's arrest is plainly indefensible. Condemning it is no more daring than cheering for Mom, apple pie, and Old Glory.

Wishy-washy, luke-warm defenders of free speech love this kind of incident, because it offers them a risk-free opportunity to loudly proclaim how liberal and

open-minded they are. They put on the same performance whenever some crackpot tries to ban **Huckleberry Finn** on grounds it is "racist," or whenever some brainwashed moral majoritarian tries to yank a Judy Blume book out of school libraries.

Yet these sunshine defenders of free speech melt away when confronted with the real, nitty-gritty censorship battles in our state. How many newspapers have denounced the widespread government suppression of magazines and films in Georgia? Where are freedom-loving citizens when their local governments raid newsstands, convenience stores, video shops, and adult bookstores and theaters?

Why haven't writers' groups, businesses, and concerned citizens rallied against the oppressive, ongoing censorship in our state?

The real First Amendment battles in Georgia are not being fought over such obvious absurdities as the Mayer arrest or attacks on **Huck Finn**. Genuine support for free speech today often means defending some pretty unsavory characters. It means risking controversy, ridicule, and disapproval.

Why bother, then? First, because simple justice demands it.

Second, because—as the Mayer incident clearly shows—laws designed to rob any segment of our society of their First Amendment rights can, and eventually will, be used against all of us.

Editor's Note: The State of Georgia has been for sixteen months enjoined by a federal law from enforcing the law under which Mr. Mayer was arrested.