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Alan Barth's Wisdom

For nearly 30 years, the late Alan Barth, a writer on The Washington Post editorial page staff, set new and influential journalistic standards for covering the civil liberties beat. (He retired in 1972.) I often refer to his 1984 book, "The Rights of Free Men: An Essential Guide to Civil Liberties," a collection of his editorials and articles and selections from books and lectures.

At one point, he quoted Sen. William Borah: "The safeguards of our liberty are not so much in danger from those who openly oppose them as from those who, professing to believe in them, are willing to ignore them for their purposes. . . . The latter undermine the very first principles of our government and are far the more dangerous."

As of March of this year, when the Town Commission of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Fla., passed a Decorum Ordinance requiring that any person who, in the course of a town meeting, makes "personal, impertinent or slanderous remarks" or "becomes boisterous while addressing the Town Commission . . . shall be removed from the meeting and shall be barred from further attendance at such meetings."

This is in the un-American tradition of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, passed by President John Adams and the Federalist-dominated Congress. Accordingly, journalists and lay citizens were imprisoned for any

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"seditious speech" that brought the president or Congress into "contempt or disrepute."

On becoming president, Thomas Jefferson pardoned everyone convicted under that law. Perhaps Florida Gov. Jeb Bush will liberate impertinent citizens of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea.