

'Live free or die' must apply even to things we find distasteful

What a great country we live in.

I recently returned from a trip to New England, which turned out to be a re-education in the principles underlying the freedoms we enjoy today. I was struck by how New Hampshire, replete with a healthy dose of Volvo-driving, tree-hugging intellectuals, happily thrived under a state motto like "Live free or die."

Somehow liberals were co-existing with some of the most unrestricted gun laws in the nation, and a tax burden that ranks 49th of our 50 states. I was impressed by a small restaurant that had the conviction for free expression to hire a completely tattooed young man sporting 2-inch mirrored ear grommets among his collection of piercings.

We are a nation in which our decision to "live free or die" means we must occasionally tolerate behaviors and opinions that offend our sensibilities. Freedom does that sometimes. Lady Gaga could not scantily clothe herself in raw meat and appear on broadcast television in most parts of the world. But in the U.S. we know that restricting harmless expressions (no matter how distasteful) is a slippery slope.

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**DAN
LINSSEN**
Commentary



Quran, if someone wants to wear his pants hanging low over his boxer shorts, or another wants to hold a meg rally at the Lincoln Memorial on Martin Luther King Day, we should be thankful for our freedoms to do so. As long as that action does not directly harm someone, damage property or obstruct someone else's freedoms, why not celebrate our freedom of expression?

We like to "talk the talk" of diversity when it's politically correct, but it's much tougher to "walk the walk" when diversity means tolerating a behavior or opinion we find distasteful. And yet, exploring the rationale behind that behavior might help us better understand the box in which we choose to constrain ourselves. Freedom means we accept diversity in many forms. Sometimes it's the most radical notions that define our freedom.

While listening to a park ranger's program at North Bridge in Concord, Mass., I was reminded that the minute-men, whom we idolize as the

patriotic vanguard of our freedom movement, were actually armed anarchists who had been stealing and stockpiling military weapons — including cannons — from their government.

When government troops tried to reclaim those weapons, things got out of control. But the event further fueled the lust for freedom among many colonials and morphed into a full-out insurgency that lasted more than a year before gaining legitimacy from a continental congress. Would we tolerate those actions today?

Our degree of freedom is the most iconic trait distinguishing America from any other place on earth. Many cultures disrespect or despise us for our free expression and lack of restraint. Even some other Western nations would prefer to see us corral our "cowboy" disposition and become more like them.

But our heritage is unique — and worth preserving. So the next time you disagree with someone, or observe a behavior you consider disgusting, remind yourself that the price of freedom is tolerance. Perhaps we should all adopt the motto: "Live free or die." Dan Linszen of Green Bay is author of the book "Who's to Blame?" to be released later this year. You can follow his blog at www.whos-to-blame.blogspot.com.