

Hi, Chief,

What a disgrace! What shame! What ignominy!

Banished to the basement. Me, the First Cat. And all because I got a little sick one day. I couldn't help it if I threw up on a White House carpet.

Us cats just get sick now and then. No different from everyone else. But do other unfortunates get thrown into the basement like *The Prisoner of Zenda*?

Ronald Coleman, I'm not. Most likely it had something to do with all those 22 Christmas trees they put up for the seasonal visitors. And there was a gingerbread house that must have weighed a ton that the chefs made just for me. Because I was banned, I hardly got to even look at it, let alone lick it. I heard it took 150 hours to make. Complete with white icing and little candy kitties that looked like me all made out of marzipan: Socks as Secret Service agent; Socks as Socksaphonist; Socks as Santa. But banished just as I was going to entertain some of the other Washington cats, too. Where's the special prosecutor? Call Janet Reno! Call the SPCA!

It was so much easier in Little Rock when I could go as I pleased. Back in Arkansas I was like that old English guy Robinson Crusoe. You know, the one who was shipwrecked and marooned all alone on a desert island. Now, that was a pretty good deal for a while. Completely able to do whatever he pleased, say what he pleased, eat what he pleased. Lived like that for years. Suddenly, one day he found a footprint on the beach. But it wasn't his footprint; **he** wore shoes. So, that barefoot discovery changed his life forever. Friday! He had found Friday, another human being. Now, what was Crusoe to do?

Sort of like a conversation I overheard in the computer room the other day. These guys were arguing about "Free Speech" and whether that principle applies to all these BBSes everywhere—information superhighway, you know. Seems some people who use those BBSes are yelling about censorship and unfair restraint and First Amendment free speech if they get criticized. One group says you can speak or write whatever you please, even if it's disgusting, obscene, or illiterate; some say no because you have to realize there will be readers out there who'll be offended or shocked.

Well, I don't know what Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and all those Constitution guys would have said about it, but John Stuart Mill, an Englishman who did a lot of thinking about politics and government wrote an essay "On Liberty." In that essay, among many provocative views about the relationship of government and the individual, he writes on the issues of "thought and discussion." Pretty tough guy, that Mr. Mill; and pretty tough reading, too. His father began teaching him Greek and arithmetic when the kid was only three. Long before "Sesame Street," huh? Mill certainly was opposed to censorship and unnecessary government messing around in people's affairs; but he does raise an important idea in that essay: he calls it "the real morality of public discussion." He seems to be all for it, However, he thinks striving towards some self-restraint and responsibility for how we say something is pretty important, too. In fact, he says that when we're by ourselves we can avoid regulation, but, when there is

an issue or enterprise that concerns people jointly, we need some kind of mutual agreement.

One of those guys in this discussion claimed that even with technology today and its new electronic messages and conversations we still come right back to what Mill was writing about. He said the Crusoe/Friday/Mill comments might be good to look at right now. if we want to talk about Free Speech, "joint concern," and "morality in public discussion."

In fact, chief, when Crusoe was by all himself with no one else around on that island, he had what I would call "liberty," as in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nobody to tell him when to get up, go to bed, eat his broccoli, brush his teeth. However, when he found that guy Friday, that changed it all: Kitty, bar the door. He had to accommodate his liberty with a sense of responsibility for someone else. When that fellow Crusoe discovered Friday, he lost his aloneness and found a companion; he lost his "liberty" and found his "freedom." He chose some restraints on his behavior because he wanted Friday to stick around.

I think maybe that Crusoe and Friday example on the desert island is similar to what Mill was writing about. And look at all this debate over free speech online? Don't we have some moral responsibility to be considerate of others once we join an electronic community? Worth a thought, don't you think? If we don't want to be alone in cyberspace, must we respect the rights of others on our "cyberisland"?

You know, chief, the more I think about it, I guess I'm a bit like that desert island Crusoe guy, too, and his finding Friday. He had to change his ways to live with Friday; maybe I can't be the Little Kitty from Little Rock any more, doing whatever I want like it's some desert island here in Washington.

Oh, well. I got to stay upstairs in the family quarters for Christmas. Lots of love there along with my own tree. But someone carelessly left me and Chelsea out of the photo on this year's White House Christmas card.

By the way, Chief, did you know that Friday was a cannibal?

Yours,

**Socks Online**