ONLY GOVERNMENT CAN ABRIDGE PRESS FREEDOM

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To the Editor:

In his Sept. 14 letter concerning the decision by Thomas Nelson Inc. not to print books the company found objectionable, books that a subsidiary of the company had desired to

publish, Prof. George Gordon implies that the greatest threat to freedom of the press is from corporate conglomerates. My distinguished colleague is wrong.

The First Amendment does not guarantee any author a right to have a work published. Would that it did so, for then those in the academic profession would be liberated from the necessity to "publish or perish." The right we enjoy is that government may not abridge press freedom.

By any measure it is not the market that today threatens the free expression of ideas. There is a market for practically any pile of printed garbage that tries to pass itself off as literature. The print industry is most responsive to the free market of ideas. It is one of the least concentrated industries in the American economy and it continues to grow. Of the 15 printing or publishing companies that made it into the Fortune 500 last year, the top eight received only about 43 percent of the total market garnered by those 15 companies. Considering the fact that there are thousands of such enterprises that did not break into the Fortune 500, it would seem that there is very little danger to press freedom from any evil monopolists.

The real danger to the press is from the government, and it is this danger that the very sources Professor Gordon referred to feared most. Aside from the fact that the Founders would be indignant at the veiled reference to the First Amendment as a kind of czarist edict, they recognized that commercial publishers ought to be free to print or not print what they saw fit.

Can anyone imagine what Alexander Hamilton's response would be if some aspiring author were to submit for publication to the Gazette of the United States an editorial urging state supremacy over the national government? Surely Hamilton, as owner of the paper, would claim a right to refuse.

To invoke Mill's "On Liberty" and Milton's "Areopagitica" in defense of his argument, Professor Gordon commits a fallacious misapplication of the philosophical heritage of freedom of the press. What he fails to recognize in the Founders, Mill and Milton is that these revered political theorists did not profess liberty as a cloak for license. In fact they had in common a concept of, and respect for, community standards of decency, as well as a high regard for inalienable individual rights. In the modern day rush to invoke the Founders' belief in civil liberties, many have neglected to recall the moral communitarianism of the likes of Mill, Milton, Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton.

We have little to fear from a truly competitive market economy. Certainly as long as there are many successful publishing companies with customers eager to buy whatever suits their personal desires, we need not spend time or effort persecuting publishers for

upholding their own standards of decency. There will unfortunately also be a market for publishers who choose to cater to the baser instincts.

Only the intervention of government into the market would endanger freedom of the press. Thomas Nelson Inc. has the right to print what it damn well pleases, even if it is decent. JAMES A. BLACKWELL JR., Assistant Professor for Politics and Government, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., Sept. 14, 1983