March 31, 1955

Mr. Anton Niemeyer, Chairman
Legislative Committee
Board of Aldermen
City Hall
St. Louis 3, Missouri

Dear Mr. Niemeyer:

Board Bill Number 553, of which you are co-author, and which is being considered by your legislative committee, would establish in St. Louis an official Board of Censorship, backed by police power, authorized to determine the reading matter offered for sale, or circulated in our city. Its intended purpose is to suppress the sale of crime comic books, as well as other publications featuring illustrated accounts of crime, and salacious literature. Since the distribution of obscene materials has been adequately controlled for years by Ordinance 45462, it is evident that the real motivation for Bill 553 is the supression, by means of censorship, of the sale of crime comic books.

This solution for a problem of admitted legitimate concern to the community must have seemed a desirable one to you, or you would not have acted as a sponsor for the bill. Yet, as you drafted it, did it not occur to you that the method you have selected is more in keeping with the methods used for solving such problems in the Soviet Union than it is with the methods we have traditionally employed in the United States. Now, in the Soviet Union the State determines what is, and what is not, desirable for the people to read, and it enforces its decision by censorship and by the exercise of police power. These are precisely the methods you propose for St. Louis in Board Bill Number 553.

For 177 years in this country we have left the selection of what to read, and what not to read, up to each individual. In the case of minor children, that determination has been the prerogative of their parents or their guardians. We have not needed an agency of the state, not even a distinguished committee of citizens selected by our mayor, to tell us what we should read, or what we should permit our children to read. I will admit we have run risks by doing this. Whenever there is a choice between good and bad, or between better and worse, there is always an element of risk in permitting anyone to make that choice. After all, he might make the wrong one. Taking this risk, however, has paid off. Our country and our city have certainly prospered by letting their citizens determine for themselves what they consider worthy and good. And there are excellent reasons for this. For it is by the process of arriving at a decision that a person learns what is better and what is worse. It is by our mistakes, as well as by our successes, that we grow in wisdom and understanding. If America, in the future, is to have the same able, self-reliant citizenship we have had in the past, we must continue to let our people choose for themselves. We can not shift that responsibility to an agency of government.
Of course, crime comics, and those depicting brutality and sadism, are a problem for our community. But is it a problem parents, acting in the American tradition, can solve for themselves. And there are tried and tested democratic methods for them to use.

Most effective of all is a good, old-fashioned inspection by parents of what their children are reading. Are crime and horror comics a part of their reading fare? If so, a family conference would be in order to define what is, and what is not, acceptable reading material, and why. Parents who have never tried this will be pleasantly surprised at the understanding their children will show, and their willingness to cooperate, if they are permitted a voice in determining what constitutes acceptable literature.

Next, each individual parent who feels concern about comic books can stop for a few moments at the cartoon book display in his neighborhood drug store or newsstand and examine the offerings. If he finds issues that transgress the limits of his tolerance, he can tell and show the proprietor, telling him why the publication in question should not be offered for sale to minors. Even a few complaints from regular customers will effectively encourage more careful screening and selection on the part of the news vendor.

Thirdly, parents are organized in many groups -- P. T. A.'s, Church organizations, service clubs -- which can and do legitimately concern themselves with child welfare. These groups can quickly and effectively act to encourage careful screening of comics placed on sale in their immediate neighborhood. A group of mothers, calling on a local merchant, is even more effective than a policeman, for the merchant is wholly dependent on the good will of his customers.

Last, parents can encourage the comic book publisher's own attempts at self-imposed restraint. They can encourage their children to purchase only those comics bearing the industry seal of approval, and can encourage local news vendors to offer for sale only those comics whose publishers have accepted the industry's self-restraining code.

Now, this is, of course, the difficult way to control the sale and distribution of comics. It is hard because each citizen must himself bear some burden of responsibility for its success. But it is also the democratic way, which is always the difficult way.

There is not substitute for it if we are to keep faith with our tradition of freedom, if we are not to copy the methods of the totalitarian state.

Sincerely yours,

W. Mac Lean Johnson
Vice-Chairman,
St. Louis Civil Liberties Committee