

# A letter from Rip Von Winkle in Florida



## Your Turn

Robert Hilliard  
Guest columnist

I recently received the following letter to share with you:

Dear Floridians,

My name is Rip Von Winkle. You may have heard of my Dutch-American cousin, Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep in New York and woke up 20 years later to a different world. The same thing happened to me, except that my sleep hiatus began in my native Germany in the 1930s and I awoke to a world that was startlingly similar.

I was fortunate to escape the authoritarian — we called them fascist — leaders who had taken over our country's government. And I was delighted to wake up in Florida in America in 2022, a land that I had thought of as a bastion of freedom and democracy.

Imagine my surprise when I found that I was grossly mistaken. Unlike my cousin Rip Van Winkle, I am confounded by finding striking similarity between Florida and the world I left almost 90 years ago. Of course, there are many differences in the progress of technology and infrastructure, especially with regard to energy, communications and transportation, but there are many parallels in government and politics.

I grew up during Germany's Weimar Republic, which had excellent health and medical systems. Healthcare professionals made decisions based on scientific fact. But after our authoritarian regime was elected, medical and health services became political. Politicians destroyed the excellence of the system.

Imagine my surprise when I found a similar situation in Florida, with political ideology governing healthcare. When COVID was at its height, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis rejected world-proven methods to combat the virus, rejecting the advice of medical experts and, on at least three occasions, setting aside minimum protections. This caused an increase in infections and, as has been doc-

umented, the unnecessary deaths of thousands of Floridians. Even as I write this, DeSantis' appointed surgeon general is advising young adult men to avoid taking new COVID vaccines, advice that, if followed, will lead to more infections and deaths.

In Nazi Germany, a woman could be compelled to have an abortion or compelled not to have an abortion. When I awoke in democratic America, I understood that women had the freedom to choose. But I now understand that Gov. DeSantis has adopted a key part of the Nazi philosophy concerning abortion and has thrust his political hand into the uteruses of Florida women, depriving them of control of their own bodies.

Don't women vote in Florida? How can they possibly vote for DeSantis.

I thought that Florida honored American ideals such as freedom of speech and thought. In the 1930s, Germany banned and ultimately burned books to prevent people from discussing ideas and facts not approved by the regime of thought control and censorship. I am horrified to find the citizens of Florida have allowed their governor to secure passage of a law that mandates banning books and discussions of concepts disapproved by the controlling authoritarian politicians.

I found even greater parallels with my old country. The Germany that turned its back on freedom of speech and thought mandated what teachers could teach and what students were permitted to learn. It appears that Florida now has the same practice, even prohibiting discussion of topics that might make students uncomfortable, for example on America's history of racial injustice. This is the ultimate in brainwashing. Putting political mind control over academic freedom. Do the citizens of Florida really vote for politicians who do this?

Another shock is the similarity with the hate and prejudice that ultimately led to concentration camps in Germany — the demonizing of certain groups, a slippery slope that ended in genocide. In 1930s Germany, one the principal targets were gay people. Can you believe that Floridians support a governor who champi-

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ons such prejudice against LGBTQ people, even prohibiting discussion in the classroom?

What is most striking is the similarity of the German voters in the early 1930s to the voters in Florida today. Voters in Germany turned a blind eye to what was occurring -- until it was too late. Will Florida voters do the same? Will voters look beyond the political ads that bom-

bard their TV screen and reject authoritarian leaders?

As I write this, I have a hope for my new country and state: that the voters will not be fooled as were the German voters and refuse to vote for authoritarian politicians such as DeSantis -- before it's too late.

Sincerely (and fearfully),  
Rip Von Winkle

Letter forwarded by Robert Hilliard

*Robert Hilliard is an author, playwright, and Purple Heart veteran of World War II. He is a resident of Sanibel.*