

Swastikas and liberty

The Illinois Supreme Court again has advanced the cause of liberty by upholding the power of the First Amendment — though again the cause for which the ruling was made is one that dismays decent people.

In its ruling last week, the high court struck down a lower court ban on Nazis wearing swastika armbands in parades. The decision said such armbands are symbols of speech and — like peaceful assembly — they are protected by the First Amendment.

For the justices to have reached an opposite decision would have damaged a fundamental safeguard of freedom.

Yet the decision clearly strains human sensibilities in this particular case, for the Chicago-based Nazi group wants to march in suburban Skokie. Some 40,500 of that community's 70,000 residents are Jewish — including several thousand survivors of Nazi Germany's programs to exterminate Jews.

The outrage, horror and revulsion of Skokie residents at the idea of men in storm trooper uniforms with swastikas marching through their streets is, we believe, shared by

most people. As the court itself noted:

"We do not doubt that the sight of this symbol is abhorrent to the Jewish citizens of Skokie . . ." At his press conference Monday, President Carter called Nazism "abhorrent," too. It is.

Yet as the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented the Nazis, said, "These are terrible ideas we're defending, but we had no choice . . . because if the First Amendment is abridged we would have a very different democracy, and maybe no democracy at all."

Indeed. And Skokie in the 1970s is not Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. These ragtag Nazis can — and should — be ignored.

If the Nazis march in Skokie (another Supreme Court ruling Monday still left one legal barrier), it will be a day of shame. But the shame won't be Skokie's or Illinois' or America's. It will be the shame of bigots who abuse a cherished right solely to cause more mental pain and suffering.

So let the Nazis exercise their right; their dark wrongness — clear for all to see — cannot flourish in freedom's sunlight: