



The right to tell people what they do not want to hear...

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“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Most readers are no doubt aware of the Bill of Rights, the first ten Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in December 1791. And although some Second Amendment enthusiasts obviously feel the right to bear arms is more imperative, the First Amendment is considered the most important by most serious students of American history.

The rights granted under the First Amendment form the foundation for most of the freedoms we enjoy in this country. The freedom to say what we want has historically made us relatively unique among our global counterparts.

Try telling Putin or Xi what you really think of them in their respective countries and see how far it gets you in.

Lately, however, I’m seeing evidence of this same mindset here. The First Amendment seems to be perpetually under assault by those more interested in controlling the narrative than pursuing the truth. As such, I thought it would be a good idea to pause for a moment and consider just how “free” we are to express ourselves these days.

As noted in the text of the Amendment, Congress is prohibited from passing any laws “abridging” freedom of speech or of the press. But does that mean we’re free to say anything we want, at any time, and be immune from the repercussions?

Let’s look at how this works in actual practice.

It has long been the case we are not free to endanger the lives of others through our free speech. In an oft cited example, you still can’t yell “Fire!” in a crowded theater. Nor can you defame or threaten others, incite a riot, commit fraud, or distribute child pornography.

And it is important to remember that the First Amendment only applies to governmental restrictions on speech. Private companies, agencies, schools, social platforms, religious organizations, etc., are still free to put restrictions on what they allow under their auspices.

Facebook is free to delete any content they find objectionable, just as I can delete any posts from my private Facebook page I don’t like. The First Amendment doesn’t restrict my right to control what is mine.

Where the line gets fuzzy, however, is when anyone in the government - or any other comparable entity - attempts to restrict my free speech simply because they don’t like what I have to say.

And this is where we should be most concerned.

As a private citizen, I have the absolute right to express my views regardless of whether anyone – including my employer – agrees with or condones what I have to say.

The place where I work only has control over my speech when I am acting as a representative of that particular organization. They don't own my soul; I am still entitled to my personal 'take' on the various issues and concerns of the day.

When I am not acting in an official capacity, management has no control over me. And I am NOT always acting in an official capacity

This is where the First Amendment rights of some folks are most at risk, especially in the current politically charged environment. Over and over, I hear about employees who have been let go because somebody didn't like what they had to say and complained about them to someone in a position of authority who decided to act based on the criticism.

Fear is a very powerful motivator.

This should be unacceptable - and deeply disturbing - to anyone genuinely concerned about preserving the rights granted to everyone by the First Amendment. Nowhere in the Constitution does it say I have to avoid offending you or be sensitive to how you feel about my opinion.

On the one hand, as a follower of Jesus, I try to be empathetic and understanding of how my words and actions affect others. And I'm not naïve to the fact that words and actions have consequences. On the other hand, I also believe any reputable definition of adulthood should include the development of a fairly thick skin.

As George Orwell famously - and correctly, I think - cautioned, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

So stop being offended every time someone says something you don't like and get on with your life. Or as my parents used to say: "Mind your own business!" (mom) and "Grow up!" (dad).



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