

The Assault on Campus Free Speech Threatens Our Republic

It's no secret that free speech is increasingly under threat on U.S. college campuses.

A number of University of Chicago activist groups, including U of C Resist and UChicago Socialists, demanded that the university rescind its offer for Corey Lewandowski to speak on campus.

In a letter sent to campus officials, students said they feel any dialogue with the former Trump campaign manager would "normalize bigotry" and that "nothing about a firm commitment to free speeches obliges us to open our doors to those who incite hatred."

Couple this with violent protests at the University of California, Berkeley, where protesters and masked agitators tore through the campus smashing windows, hurling Molotov cocktails and attacking bystanders to disrupt a conservative speaker's planned event, and you can see a growing problem: Campuses are becoming anti-free speech zones.

A peaceful protest descending into chaotic anarchy is by no means a new phenomenon, and college students exercising their right to protest is arguably just as commonplace. The history of higher education in America is full of instances where students exercised their right to free speech and assembly, often at great personal risk, to bring awareness and change.

Some of the protests have been peaceful, while others devolved into violence and destruction. Many of these protests were held for important and heroic causes, and perhaps some causes that were not as worthy.

However, the rhetoric of these young activists—whether they

engaged in the violence and destruction or not—is new in the sense that it reflects a larger and rapidly growing anti-free speech movement. These protesters were demanding not only that their voices be heard, but also that the opposing viewpoint be completely suppressed.

This misinterpretation of one of our country's fundamental rights reveals the importance of teaching the next generation why free speech matters.

People used to stand up for free speech. They used to fight for our unabridged right to express opinions without fear of censorship or violent retribution. They used to live by the old adage, "I don't agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Times have definitely changed. Free speech is under attack, and ground zero appears to be our university and college campuses.

Across the nation, colleges have compromised their fundamental mission and given in to safe space activism and P.C. culture. Students have become significantly less tolerant of dissenting viewpoints.

University of California, Los Angeles students created a "healing space" in order to recover from a speech they did not even attend. At educational events, I have witnessed increasing levels of pushback when speakers express views that challenge the prevailing campus orthodoxy. Even more telling, students take offense when speakers voice strong opinions on sensitive subjects.

For example, my organization, the Fund for American Studies, hosted renowned journalist George Will as a speaker this past summer. In response to a question about political correctness and trigger warnings, Will said that students should be willing to be confronted with ideas that make them uncomfortable.

To defend this point, Will used Mark Twain's satire of slave and Southern culture, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, arguing that despite the appearance of the "n" word more than 225 times, it is still one of the greatest American novels and should be read.

Twain, a man vehemently opposed to slavery in his personal life, used satire to tear down entrenched social and political norms that were wrong. Still, many students reacted with utter shock to Will's point, with some calling his remarks offensive.

None of this negates the importance of listening to the next generation. Student voices are powerful, and student activists can be effective agents for change and progress.

But it is equally important that our schools encourage students to be critical thinkers who are able to consider many different arguments and to form intelligent conclusions about the strengths and weakness of the alternatives.

More than two centuries after freedom of speech was enshrined in the First Amendment, it remains inseparable from the mission of higher education. Every great university in the world should have a deep commitment to free expression.

One of the cornerstones of education is engaging with the unfamiliar and exploring different viewpoints. We must reject this new anti-free speech movement for what it is: a dangerous withdrawal from academic discourse and a threat to American democracy. {eoa}

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