

Censorship in America: A historical Perspective



by Caren Besner

“As long as I don’t write about the government, religion, politics, and other institutions, I am free to print anything.” Beaumarchais

In 1982, seventy years after the fall of Saigon, General William Westmoreland, the former US Commander in SE Asia declared: “Vietnam was the first war fought without censorship. Without censorship, things can get terribly confused in the public mind.”

Censorship in America is not a modern phenomenon. During the early days of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln shut down all pro-secession newspapers in the state of Maryland and even had known pro-Southern state legislators thrown in prison. Had Lincoln not acted as he did, Maryland would have joined the Confederacy and the position of the nation’s capital at Washington DC would have become untenable. The history of the US would have been very different.

Censorship really came of age during WWII when military censors routinely opened and read letters sent by US servicemen to loved ones back home. Some of this mail survives to this very day, their blackened or cut out sections attesting to the effectiveness of the military censor.

During the first and second Gulf Wars, information was disseminated to the media through controlled briefings. The lesson of Vietnam had been learned: images of dead and mangled

bodies are not conducive to maintaining public support during wartime. The lesson yet to be learned is that censorship can be used, but only in times of war and even then, only on a very limited basis.

Some two and a half centuries ago, the great English poet and critic Samuel Johnson wrote: "Every society has a right to preserve public peace and order, and therefore has a good right to prohibit the propagation of opinions which have a dangerous tendency ... No member of a society has a right to teach any doctrine contrary to what the society holds to be true." This argument is inherently flawed. It presumes that the ideas held by the controlling elites are always correct. Every single totalitarian ruler from Hitler and Stalin to Mao and Saddam Hussein would agree. So too, would religious extremist groups such as ISIS and the Taliban, who not only executed anyone who disagreed with them, but in the process, also destroyed priceless historical artifacts all in the name of religious and ideological purity.

During the early days of the Third Reich, the Nazis made a very public spectacle of the burning of books; heaping on the flaming pyre any writings which did not conform to their ideals. Among them was the works of the great 19th century German philosopher Heinrich Heine who wrote: "Wherever books will be burned, men also, in the end, are burned." History has proven how prophetic those words were. The Communists achieved their goals not through a display of arson, but by sentencing to prison or exile anyone who did not conform, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote of these times in "The Gulag Archipelago."

Make no mistake; censorship of thought, ideas, and speech are the hallmarks of a totalitarian state and will inevitably lead to tyranny and oppression. Given the growing power of mainstream media and especially big tech, our ability to access accurate information, our freedoms and ultimately our democratic institutions, are all in peril.

In today's age of information, more people get their news from the Internet than from newspapers/periodicals. The situation becomes even more acute given the anonymity of the Internet executives and their algorithm writers. This concentrates enormous power in the hands of big tech, who use censorship as a means to advance an ideological and political agenda. Defenders of these practices claim that they are protecting the public from harmful ideas; yet the censorship is invariably one-sided. It is always Republican or Conservative voices who are silenced or deleted. This is reverse McCarthyism and is nothing less than the weaponization of the means to access and disseminate information. It is an abrogation of the right of free speech in order to advance a radical agenda, and thanks to Section 230, they have complete immunity to do exactly as they wish. This is a far more insidious form of censorship than anything previously because it is silent and unseen. There is no public display of burning books and no Gulag Archipelago (as of yet), to which dissidents can be exiled. The burning book has been replaced by the deleted post as the weapon of choice for the ideological censor of today.

Years ago, the late Hubert Humphrey once stated: "Freedom is hammered out on the anvil of dissension, discussion and debate." It is sad to note how far we have strayed from this simple rule.

In the light of history, one cannot help but wonder what Heinrich Heine would say if he were alive today. Although one cannot say with absolute certainty, it might be something like this: "Wherever posts will be deleted, people also, in the end, are deleted." A long time ago, Thomas Jefferson warned the American people: "When government fears the people, there is liberty. When the people fear the government, there is tyranny." As of this writing, more and more Americans are beginning to fear their own government.

[BIO: Caren Besner is a retired teacher who has written

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