



EDUCATIONAL LIBERTY ALLIANCE

"Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist. That, of all rights, is the dread of tyrants. It is the right which they first of all strike down. They know its power."

-Frederick Douglass

A WEAPON OF JUSTICE

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In the early 1890s, the Black author Ida B. Wells published an explosive set of articles about the lynching of African-Americans. The real goal of lynching was to prevent Black people from "acquiring wealth and property," Wells wrote. But whites justified it by claiming that Black men were sexually assaulting white women, which Wells flatly called a "threadbare lie."

As if to prove her right, a white mob destroyed the offices of the Black-owned journal that had published Wells' work. Its name told the whole story: The Free Speech.

That's also the story that our young people need to hear, especially right now. More than a century after Ida B. Wells' courageous campaign, free speech has been tagged as a "conservative" or even "racist" principle in many circles. White men (like me) have weaponized speech to demean and harm racial and sexual minorities, or so the argument goes. To create a truly just society, then, America needs to limit what people can say.

Tell that to Ida B. Wells. Or Susan B. Anthony. Or Martin Luther King, Jr. All of these great warriors for justice were also ironclad supporters of free speech, which they needed to critique oppression in America.

And the oppressors knew it, too, which is why they tried to censor speech at every turn. Anti-slavery publications were prohibited in many Southern states, and even in the halls of Congress. Women campaigning for suffrage rights were jailed. So were antiwar demonstrators, whose speech supposedly aided and abetted the enemy. Federal authorities confiscated gay and lesbian magazines, which were deemed "deviant" or "obscene." And into the 1960s, Black students were barred from wearing civil-rights buttons to school.

The courts eventually ruled that the Black students could display the buttons. That decision provided the key precedent for Tinker v. Des Moines, the 1969 Supreme Court ruling allowing students to wear armbands in protest of the Vietnam War. As the court declared, neither students nor teachers “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”

Alas, too many of our young people today seem willing to do exactly that. A few years ago, I hosted Mary Beth Tinker—one of the plaintiffs in Tinker v. Des Moines—to my class at the University of Pennsylvania. My students happily endorsed her right to raise her voice against war, but recoiled at the idea of racists and sexists exercising the same right. After all, the students said, such speech hurts others.

So did I, Tinker replied. At her middle school in Iowa, there were students who had fathers and brothers fighting in Vietnam. Surely they were offended by a 13-year-old girl wearing a symbol suggesting that their loved ones were risking everything for a lie.

Speech hurts. But if you censor it on those grounds, the people with the least power—minorities, women, and children—will get hurt the most. It is our first and most fundamental right, as Frederick Douglass declared, because we cannot right our wrongs without it. Tyrants know its power, all too well. That’s why the rest of us need to defend it, over and over again, until America fulfills its promise of liberty and justice for all.

Jonathan Zimmerman teaches education and history at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the co-author (with cartoonist Signe Wilkinson) of *Free Speech And Why You Should Give a Damn*, which was published in April 2021 by City of Light Press.