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History Shows How Rare and Valuable Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press Are



by [George Washington](#)

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The Founding Fathers protected freedom of speech and freedom of the press as the most important liberties. They are protected in the *First* Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. And as discussed below, the Founders recognized that the ability to speak freely was the foundation for *all other* freedoms.

Thousands of years of history shows how rare and valuable such freedoms really are ...

Socrates

Socrates was killed in 399 BC for “[failing to acknowledge the gods that the \[government\] acknowledges](#)”.

Using the Printing Press

Before the invention of the movable type printing press by Gutenberg, the church controlled the production of books.

Gutenberg’s invention allowed cheap production of books. This challenged the monopoly on books by the church, and thus allowed different viewpoints to be heard.

For example, when Martin Luther posted his "95 Theses" on a church door in Germany criticizing the corrupt Catholic practice of selling "indulgences" - paying the church in return for a reduction of your time in purgatory - the printing press [spread his writings](#) throughout all of Germany in 2 weeks, and throughout "all of Christendom" within a month. This launched the Protestant Reformation, and challenged the power of the Catholic church.

So Pope Alexander VI [issued an edict](#) against unlicensed printing in 1501.

And in 1535, Francis I of France [prohibited – under penalty of death](#) – the printing of *any* books.

William Tyndale

William Tyndale was killed in 1536 for [translating the Bible into English](#) so that *everyone* could read it for themselves, and no longer had to rely on the clergy to tell them what it said.

Unlicensed Printing

In 1585, the Star Chamber [assumed the right](#) to confine printing to London, Oxford and Cambridge, to limit the number of printers and presses, to prohibit all publications issued without proper license, and to enter houses to search for unlicensed presses and publications. The search for unlicensed presses or publications was entrusted to an officer called the "messenger of the press."

In 1557, Henry II made the collecting of prohibited books [punishable by death or imprisonment](#). And in 1559, he made it [punishable by death](#) to print without royal authority.

Galileo

In 1616 and 1633, Galileo was tried for [saying](#) that the Earth revolves around the Sun, instead of agreeing with the church’s “mainstream” view that the Sun revolves around the Earth.

Heretics and Critics

Many people have been killed over the centuries for [saying anything](#) that the church authorities of the day disliked.

And the British monarchy punished anyone caught with materials criticizing the monarchy, which they labeled as [“libelous” or “scandalous”](#), even if what was written was true.

(Indeed, the ransacking of houses by authorities searching for “heretical” and “libelous” material was [so common](#) that it was the main reason the Founding Fathers wrote the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting unreasonable “search and seizure”).

Benjamin Franklin

In 1773, Ben Franklin was fired as colonial Postmaster General for [informing the American Colonists](#) about what the British were *really* doing.

Strongmen

Strongmen of all stripes have cracked down anyone who [insults the strongman or](#) criticizes his policies.

Book Burnings

In 1933, the Nazis carried out numerous book burnings of authors such as Einstein, Freud, Kafka, Hellen Keller, Jack London, Thomas Mann, Proust, Upon Sinclair and H.G. Wells [because](#) their writing book “acts subversively on our future or strikes at the root of German thought, the German home and the driving forces of our people...”

There have been [many other](#) book burnings throughout history.

Mussolini

Mussolini had around 2,000 people killed because they [challenged the dictator](#).

Stalin and the Soviet Union

Stalin [murdered or through into insane asylums](#) countless people who criticized the Soviet government or Communism.

Other Communist Regimes

China’s Mao and other Communist leaders [killed people](#) who failed to sign the Great Leaders’ praise.

CIA

In 1972, CIA director Richard Helms [relabeled dissenters as “terrorists”](#).

Reporters

The extremely popular tv personality Phil Donahue’s show – the most popular on MSNBC – was canceled [for questioning](#) the wisdom of the Iraq war.

Indeed, many reporters have been [fired, harassed, spied upon and even accused of terrorism](#) for reporting stories critical of government actions or policies.

Protect What Makes Us American

Those in power are always tempted to censor and punish critical speech and reporting. George W. Bush said “You’re either with us or your against us”, and cracked down on criticism and protest.

Some powerful Democrats now want to suppress right-wing speech.

But freedom of speech and of the press – no matter how much we may disagree with and even hate what someone else says – is the bedrock of America.

"If freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter."
- George Washington

"Freedom of speech is a principal pillar of a free government: When this support is taken away, the constitution of a free society is dissolved, and tyranny is erected on its ruins."
- Ben Franklin

"Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom; and no such thing as public liberty, without freedom of speech."
- Ben Franklin

"Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech."
- Ben Franklin

"The liberty of the press is essential to the security of the state."
- John Adams

"Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost."
-Thomas Jefferson

"I am ... for freedom of the press, and against all violations of the Constitution to silence by force and not by reason the complaints or criticisms, just or unjust, of our citizens against the conduct of their agents."
-Thomas Jefferson

"The freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments."
-George Mason

"[The] power [to censor,] more than any other, ought to produce universal alarm, because it is levelled against that right of freely examining public characters and measures, and of free communication among the people thereon, which has ever been justly deemed, the only effectual guardian of every other right."
-James Madison

"If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other it is the principle of free thought — not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."
- U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

"Freedom of expression is the matrix, the indispensable condition, of nearly every other form of freedom."
- U.S. Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo

"The framers of the constitution knew human nature as well as we do. They too had lived in dangerous days; they too knew the suffocating influence of orthodoxy and standardized thought. They weighed the compulsions for restrained speech and thought against the abuses of liberty. They chose liberty."
-U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Douglass

"If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence."
-U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis