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CULTURE

Censorship of the Left: A History

BY GABE MCCOY ON OCTOBER 18, 2019 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



Americans take great pride in the rights guaranteed to them by the US Constitution; it's what makes us the "land of the free." Arguments about the nature of these rights pervade our culture, but one idea, in particular, has spread all over the internet. A group of **influential media personalities** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x8UYjFXvMA>), mostly on the right, have declared

that the Left hates free speech and is coming to bring down the hammer of censorship.

However, history tells a different story. The most egregious forms of censorship in US history were imposed on left-wing activists, and these activists suffered heavy penalties for their refusal to give up their rights. When free speech was really under attack, it was the Socialist Left who had the courage to stand up and defend human liberty, even in the face of harsh repression.

In the spring of 1917, the United States officially entered WW1 and would eventually send 5 million soldiers over the Atlantic to fight. The already controversial nature of the war had led to increasing opposition among many people in both Europe and America, so the news of US intervention sparked an anti-war movement that advocated peaceful protest. This movement was especially strong among the Socialist Left, who had no hesitation in voicing their criticism. **Since 1915** (<https://www.infoplease.com/primary-sources/government/presidential-speeches/state-union-address-woodrow-wilson-december-7-1915>), President Woodrow Wilson had been demanding legislation to curtail the “poison of disloyalty” and deal with those “who have sought to bring the authority and good name of our government into contempt.” He was undoubtedly referring to the radical elements of American society, such as anarchists and socialists, and now with the war in full swing, he had the justification he needed to root them out.

In June, Congress passed the **Espionage Act of 1917** (<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1045/espionage-act-of-1917>), which outlawed people from making “false statements” about US military operations or encouraging “insubordination” and “disloyalty.” A year later the act was amended with the **Sedition Act of 1918** (<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-congress-passes-sedition-act>), no longer in effect, but at the time used to punish any speech which insulted the US military, the constitution, the flag, or US foreign policy. Anyone charged could be subject to up to 20 years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, and deportation.

The stage was set for a full-scale crackdown; a wave of dogmatic nationalism fueled authoritarian sentiments while the government had all the tools necessary to make those sentiments a reality. The leadership of the Left was targeted, famous socialist and feminist **Emma Goldman** (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Emma-Goldman>) was tried and imprisoned for two years before being deported. At her trial, she made an **impassioned speech** (<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/goldman/pdfs/Speeches-AddresstotheJury.pdf>) attacking the hypocrisy of US censorship:

“We say that if America has entered the war to make the world safe for democracy, she must first make democracy safe in America. How else is the

world to take America seriously, when democracy at home is daily being outraged, free speech suppressed, peaceable assemblies broken up by overbearing and brutal gangsters in uniform; when free press is curtailed and every independent opinion gagged? Verily, poor as we are in democracy, how can we give of it to the world?”

As the state mobilized to crush dissent, those on the Left made their final stand. Refusing to be silenced by coercion, they continued to criticize the war and advocate for peaceful resistance to the draft, saying it violated the 13th Amendment which prohibits involuntary servitude. Charles Schenck, the General Secretary of the Socialist Party in Philadelphia, printed thousands of pamphlets arguing that the draft was a violation of constitutional rights and thus could be legally protested. He was tried by the Supreme Court in the landmark case **Schenck v. United States** (<https://www.oyez.org/cases/1900-1940/249us47>), and, in a unanimous decision, the Court ruled that Schenck’s writing was not protected by the First Amendment because it represented a “clear and present danger” to the US military effort. Thus, Schenck’s conviction was upheld, and the authority of the court backed the censorship effort.

The ruling in this case is famous for the phrase “you can’t shout fire in a crowded theatre,” which was spoken by Justice Oliver Holmes in delivering the verdict. This intuitively makes sense as a general principle regarding the limits of Free speech, but applied to this specific case it’s completely ridiculous. This isn’t even a question of resisting the draft, but just saying you should resist the draft, simply making the argument. Advocating peaceful protests is well within the bounds of Free Speech, and if we aren’t allowed to question the government when it comes to matters of war and peace, then we have no way of keeping it accountable. If our rights are invalid in the most important matters of policy making, then they are not valid at all! The ruling was, on the face of it, absurd and only enhanced the opportunity to enforce unfreedom.

Now, there was no hope of safety; it was either be quiet or be imprisoned. Even with their backs against the wall, the radicals stood their ground. In June of 1918, **Eugene Victor Debs** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w82pFvUq3o8>), one of the most important union leaders in the US, made a speech condemning WW1 and US involvement. He was brought before the Supreme Court in **Debs v. United States** (<https://www.oyez.org/cases/1900-1940/249us211>), and the court used the precedent from Schenck to sentence him to 10 years in prison. While his sentence was later commuted by President Warren G Harding in 1921, his health declined in prison, and he died a few years later. Debs never renounced his views and served his sentence with dignity. Overall, about 1,000 people were convicted using the Espionage Act, but the Left was severely crippled due to the suppression of its leadership, which of course was the intention to begin with.

The witch hunt against dissenting speakers during WW1 remains one of the

most shameful periods in modern American history, and its legacy stays with us today. The precedent set by this event allowed for the **Red Scare**

(<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.history.com/.amp/topics/cold-war/red-scare>),

COINTELPRO (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/COINTELPRO>), the suppression of Vietnam protestors, and, most recently, the effort to imprison whistleblowers. Remembering who was targeted, and who resisted, allows us to dismiss stereotypes about left-wing politics that are propagated in our digital era.

When state power was used to crush dissent, the Left was willing to face repression in order to defend these rights. No conservative has been imprisoned for saying the wrong pronoun; they're not the victims they portray themselves to be. The point is that by comparing the extent of oppression faced by the Right and the Left, and observing how they responded, we can have a better understanding of how to view the values of these movements in a broad sense. The Left has a far greater claim to be the defenders of the First Amendment given an accurate analysis of American history. This should inform the nature of our discourse on this issue, and in my view, that isn't happening.

Allow me to give an example, the popular right-wing YouTube channel PragerU uploaded a video saying how the treatment of conservatives on social media is **comparable to George Orwell's 1984** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA6pazfxkxw>).

The Big Tech companies are becoming the Big Brother Orwell foresaw, according to them. Compared to what happened to the Left, this analogy can be viewed as nothing more than an absurd exaggeration. The irony here is unavoidable, *1984* is about an authoritarian government that ruthlessly punishes opposition and uses a network of surveillance cameras to control its citizens. George Orwell, the author, **was a socialist**

(http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw). The Espionage Act was used to

imprison socialists who criticized the government and is actually being used right now to go after Edward Snowden. What did Edward Snowden do?

Exposed the government for using **high tech surveillance systems to spy on US citizens** (<https://www.eff.org/nsa-spying>), all the time, in clear violation of the Fifth Amendment. Also, **he likes Bernie**

(<https://twitter.com/snowden/status/1179510505708359681?lang=en>).

The important thing is the perspective, the context, and the understanding that history gives us. If you care about the freedom to think and expressing yourself, if you value the Enlightenment principles our country was founded on, then you must learn how these ideas have been realized throughout American history. Left-wing politics has a rich past, full of different ideas, people, and movements. If we wish to make an accurate claim about what it is and what it stands for, we must look at how it has influenced human beings throughout the centuries. When civil liberties were really being infringed, it was the Left that had the courage to rebel. The actions taken during crucial moments such as these should play a greater role in defining us more than any

other, so it is imperative we tell the story of those activists who struggled to overcome authoritarianism in the land of the free.



Published by Gabe McCoy

Gabe McCoy is a freshman Biology major from Dallas, Texas. His interests include history, philosophy, and social movements, being influenced by thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Condorcet. He is interested in how to expand and protect democracy in an increasingly complex and polarized world. He enjoys reading and exploring the city of Austin. **View all posts by Gabe McCoy** (<https://thetexasorator.com/author/gdmorator/>)

